



Andrew Feenberg

THE PHILOSOPHY OF

Marx, Lukács and the Frankfurt School

The Philosophy of Praxis

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MARX, LUKÁCS, AND THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

Andrew Feenberg


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Preface

The rational foundations of modernity are in crisis. After World War II, the liberal and communist blocs each espoused a version of rationalistic universalism, based on Enlightenment values variously interpreted. These universalisms overshadowed ethnic, national, and religious differences, and as universal each claimed to be the true path. The final triumph of liberalism seemed to many to signal the end of history, the ultimate resolution of conflicting ideologies in a rational framework of rights and values served by science, technology, and administrative expertise. But instead a rising tide of particularisms has placed liberalism on the defensive. The universalistic claim has itself been reduced to a particular in this new context. It is under attack from two quarters, from fundamentalist religious ideology and from post-modern skepticism. The latter attack has no armies but it is effective in a different way, challenging overconfidence in science and progress in the advanced countries and among global elites, just as much of the developing world seems poised to modernize in imitation of the West.

In this context, what has Marxist philosophy to offer? Clearly, one cannot simply return to the thoroughly discredited positions of Soviet ideology, nor adopt a so-called “orthodoxy” based on the works of a nineteenth-century thinker of genius. Something fundamental has changed since 1989, not to mention 1847. But the question can be refined. Marxist thought is far from unified. In the period following World War I, a new interpretation of Marxism emerged in the West, enriched by the philosophy and sociology of the time. Throughout much of the last century this so-called “Western Marxism” played a significant role in philosophical debates. It has been eclipsed since the fall of the Soviet Union, but paradoxically so, since it elaborated some of the most trenchant criticisms of Soviet communism from an original Marxist standpoint. In this book I return to this tradition for a second look. I believe it has resources for

addressing the crisis of rationality that have been overlooked. I hope to show this in the pages that follow.

This book is a thoroughly revised version of my first book, *Lukács, Marx and the Sources of Critical Theory*.¹ The original was published over thirty years ago in 1981. The book grew out of a doctoral dissertation on Lukács prepared for Herbert Marcuse at the University of California, San Diego. In the original version I attempted to treat Lukács not only as a major Marxist theorist but also as an important continental philosopher. In this revised version I still pursue the same goals, but I hope with more success.

Over the years I have looked back on that first book with a mixture of pride and dismay. I have always believed there were good things in it, and this belief is occasionally confirmed by people who recall finding it helpful in navigating the flow of Lukács's complicated argument in *History and Class Consciousness*. On the other hand, there are many problems with this first attempt. I have often thought about how I would write such a book "today," my plans changing from year to year, decade to decade. The reading of Lukács's recently published *Defence of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic* encouraged me to set to work by confirming many of my own interpretations.²

The early Lukács and the principal members of the Frankfurt School—Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse—are the major figures in Western Marxism. Marx's early *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* were immediately adopted as a founding text of this tradition after their publication in 1932. I describe the underlying doctrine of this whole tradition as "philosophy of praxis" for reasons I explain in the first chapter. The essential claim of this philosophy is the significance of revolution, not just for political and social theory but for the ultimate questions of epistemology and ontology. The early Marx and Lukács argue that the basic "demands of reason" that emerge from classical German philosophy are fulfilled not by speculation but by revolution. This is the famous "realization of philosophy" for which Marx calls for in his early writings, and most notably in the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach. [Chapter 5](#) of this new version of the book presents the argument in its most elaborate form in Lukács. Soon after completing my thesis I was able to show a similar logic at work in Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844. Like

Lukács, Marx carries out a socially based “metacritique” of philosophy that I explain in the first two chapters.

The pivotal text of philosophy of praxis is *History and Class Consciousness*, published in 1923. The key to understanding this text is the concept of reification. With this concept Lukács signified the limits of a modern culture based on the model of scientific-technical rationality. The usual technocratic understanding of modern society is reified in precisely Lukács’s sense of the term. Bureaucratic administrations, markets, and technologies are all products of our scientific age; like science they are thought to be morally neutral tools beneficial to humanity as a whole when properly used.

But in reality these institutions are social products, shaped by social forces and shaping the behavior of their users. They more nearly resemble legislation than mathematics or science. Thus their claim to universality is flawed at its basis. Like legislation, they are either good or bad, never neutral. Lukács argued that when societies become conscious of the social contingency of the rational institutions under which they live, they can then judge and change them. This implication of the theory of reification distinguishes society, including its technology, from the nature of natural science. Lukács believed that a revolution from below would overthrow reification and create a socialist alternative to capitalist modernity. That revolution would not reject reason and its fruits but would reconfigure rational institutions in response to the needs of the oppressed.

The Frankfurt School applied the concept of reification in a very different time. Writing under the influence of the post–World War I revolutions, Lukács optimistically assumed that the working class would always retain an oppositional consciousness on the basis of the gap between its daily experience and needs and the rationalized economic and administrative forms imposed on it. Marcuse’s theory of the “one-dimensional society” is the culmination of the Frankfurt School’s critique of this optimistic assessment of revolutionary prospects. He recognized the extension of reification into the depths of social life. In advanced capitalism the working class is no longer even partially exempt as media propaganda and consumerism colonize everyday life and consciousness.

Yet Marcuse did not give up hope in the emergence of a countertendency, first visible in the New Left. In his view, a “rational” organization of society through capitalist markets and administrations

produced such irrational consequences—wars, economic and environmental crises, social pathologies—that new forms of opposition would emerge. With the decline of traditional forms of working-class revolutionary struggle, these new forms of opposition are increasingly focused on the irrationality of capitalism, the absurdity of its pretension to organize all of social life through the market, and the catastrophic environmental consequences of its frenetic pursuit of profit with the gigantic resources of modern technology.

The philosophy of praxis placed questions of rationality and irrationality at the center of its political vision. In this respect it still has something to teach us. The concluding chapters of this book will explore the philosophical basis in the Frankfurt School of the new politics of resistance to reified rationality.

Revising this early book was important to me for the light it sheds on my later work on the critical theory of technology.³ The philosophers discussed in this book stood on the verge of a theory of technical politics but did not quite manage to develop it, no doubt because technology had not yet become an object of effective movements for change. This lacuna is of great significance. They are continually brought up against the problem of the status of science, technology, and nature in their attempts to develop an all-encompassing philosophy of praxis. No adequate resolution is possible without understanding the ways in which technology both mediates the human relation to nature and is itself mediated by political and social forces. Progress in insight into technology can be traced in the history of philosophy of praxis culminating, I argue, in Marcuse's late work. The critical theory of technology I developed in later books starts where he left off and attempts to complete the project these philosophers initiated.

This version of the book differs considerably from the original. I have retained the principal theoretical concepts, but I have added two entirely new chapters on the Frankfurt School ([Chapters 7 and 8](#)) that provide a far better account of the relation of critical theory to the philosophy of praxis than the rather sketchy conclusion of the earlier edition. [Chapter 4](#) presents a much-revised evaluation of Lukács's theory of reification. I have also been able to update my understanding of Lukács's concept of nature from study of his *Defence of History and Class Consciousness*. This text is the background to new discussions in [Chapter 6](#) that address Lukács's critique of science and technology. The later chapters also draw on my research in

philosophy of technology to solve problems left in suspense in the earlier version of the book.

The earlier version emphasized the Weberian and Hegelian influences on Lukács. My research on Heidegger for my book *Heidegger and Marcuse* made me aware also of the neo-Kantian roots of the critique of reification in both Heidegger and Lukács.⁴ This was an influence I had previously underestimated. It is important because it orients the interpretation toward the ontological significance of meaning in the constitution of worlds. This phenomenological theme, reinterpreted in social terms, clarifies basic concepts of philosophy of praxis such as Marx's early theory of sensation, Lukács's concept of "form of objectivity," and the Frankfurt School's critique of experience.

Finally, I have condensed and placed in an appendix two chapters on historical materialism and class consciousness that interrupted the flow of the main argument in the earlier version of the book.

Vancouver, August 2012

¹ Andrew Feenberg, *Lukács, Marx and the Sources of Critical Theory* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1981). A paperback edition was published by Oxford University Press in 1986.

² Georg Lukács, *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic*, trans. E. Leslie (London: Verso, 2000).

³ My most recent contribution is Andrew Feenberg, *Between Reason and Experience: Essays in Technology and Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010). For applications, see Andrew Feenberg and Norm Friesen, *(Re)Inventing the Internet: Critical Case Studies* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2012).

⁴ Andrew Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History* (London: Routledge, 2005).

Introduction to the New Edition

It is one of the great ironies of intellectual history that Marx and Lukács failed to appreciate the significance of their own early works. Marx's *Manuscripts* were written in 1844 but had to wait nearly 100 years to see the light of day. Since its publication this unfinished early work has come to rival *Capital* as the text of reference for Marxists and others interested in Marxism. During the first half-century after the publication of *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács's book became an underground classic, rejected by its author and known only to a few European scholars, among them the philosophers of the Frankfurt School.

Marx and Lukács's critical self-interpretation is only partially warranted. It is true that their early works reflect a "messianic moment" to which they responded with an implausible revolutionary eschatology. But the authority of their self-interpretation has misled commentators into projecting far too much unity and consistency on the early works. In reality, the theoretical resources deployed by these philosophers are not entirely congruent with their political program.

Philosophy resembles art in that the tools and materials have their own logic. The interpreter must uncover the tensions between the creator's ends and means, not simply assume the ends to be realized in the work. This is especially true of Lukács, whose text is full of contradictions between his Hegelian framework and his politics. In Marx's case the consequences appear later in his suppression of his own most interesting philosophical writings, the *Manuscripts* and the *Grundrisse*, published long after his death. Thus arose a whole tradition of interpretation according to which the later Marx abandoned philosophy as a youthful error.

The seminal importance of the early works was not widely recognized until the 1960s and 1970s. At that time the influence of thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School contributed significantly to the receptiveness of a youthful audience to what might be called "early Marxism." Marcuse, in particular, lived through a second messianic moment in old age in response

to the New Left. In his case too there is a tension between his theoretical resources and his politics. Nevertheless, his writings from *Eros and Civilization* on excited unprecedented interest in philosophy of praxis.

The long eclipse of both Marx's *Manuscripts* and Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, left to what Engels once called "the nibbling of the mice," can be explained by their transitional position in the intellectual biographies of their authors. Both were trained as philosophers and steeped in romantic revolutionism. Their early works were written at similar turning points in their spiritual trajectories, at times when they felt the need to move beyond these intellectual origins and believed they could do so without violent rupture through a dialectical transcendence. Later, they judged this transcendence inadequate, still internal to positions they uncompromisingly rejected in elaborating their mature outlook. There is little doubt that after the break their judgment on their early work was too harsh, that it contains more of value and had more impact on the later work than the authors were willing to admit.

The romantic influence is undoubtedly present in these early writings. By romanticism is usually meant that trend in modern culture that exalts subjectivity against objectivity, life against rationality, concreteness against abstraction, traditional values against capitalist mercantilism. Certainly these philosophers' antagonism toward capitalism, analyzed and condemned in parallel critiques of "alienation" and "reification," is to some degree tributary of that trend. And yet it would grossly distort the theories of alienation and reification to reduce them to a romantic protest against reason as is frequently suggested by contemporary critics.

While Marx and Lukács were influenced by the romantic critique of capitalism, they were still more profoundly influenced by the Hegelian critique of that critique. For Hegel, as for a number of other major figures in modern thought, romanticism has the value of a transcended moment. It plays a propaedeutic role in the development of a rational outlook on the world that is not merely philistine and complacent but critical and rich in inwardness. It was Hegel who first systematically elaborated this "post-romantic" reconciliation with rational necessity and human finitude.

Marx and Lukács aimed to preserve the moment of revolt in romanticism without recapitulating the subjectivist errors so effectively criticized by Hegel. I will show that they are only partially successful in this task, but also that the task itself was well chosen and indeed is still relevant

to critical theory and practice.¹ They approached this task with a similar method, which I will call “cultural” because of its orientation toward the most general patterns of meaning and practice, institutions and artifacts, of entire societies. Just such a pattern is signified by the concepts of alienation and reification that they employ to analyze capitalist society. At the same time, these concepts are derived from reflection on the philosophical tradition and function in the context of the authors’ discussion of fundamental philosophical problems. This unity of culture, philosophy, and politics is the distinctive trait of their early method.

They consider philosophy to be the discipline in which the operative horizon of everyday life is raised to consciousness and subjected to rational criticism. On this basis they argue that the conceptual dilemmas or “antinomies” of philosophy are symptomatic of deep contradictions in social life. Their most challenging conclusion is the demand for a “realization” of philosophy through the practical resolution of these contradictions. This is perhaps the least understood aspect of the early philosophy of praxis of Marx and Lukács, and the study of it will be a major theme uniting the various investigations making up this book.

Despite their critical relation to the philosophical tradition, both the early Marx and Lukács adhere to the fundamental Enlightenment values of freedom and equality. They depart from the tradition by arguing that under capitalism these values cannot be achieved by isolated individuals subject to the laws of the market. This argument is the bridge between philosophy and social theory. They not only dismiss the agency of the individual, they argue that subjectivity can no longer be identified with a version of the Cartesian *cogito* or transcendental ego. Only a collective, social subject can realize the values of philosophy. But a social subject is an object in the world, a phenomenon among others. And yet, this subject is still bound to the philosophical tradition by basic aspects of its logical structure, which Marx and Lukács rethink in social terms.

This hybrid approach leads to complications. The abstract individual subject of pure knowledge transcends nature and need. The freedom of a social subject is limited by both these determinations. The transcendental subject is purified of its materiality and enabled thereby to know the truth and even, in an idealistic framework, to constitute reality. But such a transcendence is unthinkable for a social group. A social subject cannot be purified of materiality since it is only through material ties of one sort or

another that it can form from out of the relations of the individuals who make it up. Abstracted from geography, race, language, and technology, and nothing remains to hold the individuals together in a group. But include those factors in its definition and it is inescapably earthbound. The objectivity of the social subject situates it squarely within the real world.

Both common sense and the philosophical tradition would therefore argue that social subjects, should they exist at all, have no ontological significance. They are simply contingent assemblages of separate individuals with political powers and rights, perhaps, but no fundamental reality. If they had accepted this view, Marx and Lukács would have made a contribution to political philosophy but beyond that they would have had to rely on one or another traditional philosophical approach. But neither Marx nor Lukács accepted this view. Rather, they argue that the social subject must take over all the same powers that individual subjects enjoyed in the old philosophy. Somehow reality is to be understood in an essential relation to a subject situated within it and dependent on it. Is this not a vicious circle? Why adopt such an improbable position? I will argue that they brave the paradoxes that result from that move out of fidelity to the ambition of idealism to explain being starting out from human being, for example, from the forms and categories of transcendental subjectivity. These traditional explanatory schemes depend on an individual contemplative subject. But Marx and Lukács argue that the individual is derivative of one or another community in which it necessarily has its roots. The transcendental subject is an abstraction from the social being that grounds it. It cannot therefore resolve the ultimate problems of philosophy and the attempt to do so produces speculative myths. Only a social subject can provide the key to a resolution of the antinomies in practical life and philosophical theory.

The fact that Marx and Lukács share this conclusion is all the more remarkable since Lukács was unaware of the existence of Marx's *Manuscripts* when he wrote *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács found traces of Marx's early philosophy of praxis in *The German Ideology* and *Capital*. This suggests a theory of the continuity of Marx's intellectual development that I elaborate in a Lukácsian interpretation of the early Marx. Lukács himself developed the most complex version of the philosophy of praxis. In his writings the structure of this *figure of thought* becomes clear. The identification of such figures, which ultimately are

defined in ideal-types such as “empiricism” or “idealism,” is an important contribution of philosophy to the history of ideas.

The articulation of the logic of philosophy of praxis is essential to understanding its later transformation in the Frankfurt School. Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse were influenced by Marx and Lukács’s philosophy of praxis that they were familiar with quite early. However, there is a deeper connection: even where they write without reference to these sources, they operate within the logic of the philosophy of praxis. That logic requires that philosophical abstractions be traced back to their roots in concrete social conditions. And once those conditions have been identified, the hypothetical construction of their revolutionary transformation rebounds back on the philosophical concepts and shows how their contradictions can be resolved.

But the realization of philosophy through social practice is frustrated by the historical situation of the Frankfurt School, which is very different from Lukács’s revolutionary context. Although the Frankfurt School works in a period of reaction, it remains bound by the demands of philosophy of praxis. Its focus shifts from the specific consequences of capitalism toward the more general problems of the domination of nature and the structure of modern experience, presumed to be the source of the failure of the revolution.

This approach leads to two possible outcomes: either the resolution of the antinomies through social transformation is treated as a utopian demand, devaluing social reality by contrast, or a new agent of revolution is discovered, able to carry through the project of social transformation. These alternatives correspond roughly to the difference between Adorno and Marcuse’s late work. In Adorno the historical thesis of the philosophy of praxis serves primarily to provide an independent point of view for social critique. Marcuse eventually finds hopeful signs in the New Left. He sees the social movements of the 1960s and ’70s not as a new agent of revolution but as prefiguring an emancipatory mode of experience. Revolution in an advanced society is at least possible in principle on the basis of a generalization of this new way of experiencing the world. This is sufficient for Marcuse to construct a final version of the philosophy of praxis in which the transformation of technology plays a central role. This version of philosophy of praxis is discussed in the concluding chapters of this book.

As noted above, Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse were deeply influenced by Lukács's philosophy of praxis. They seized on his concept of reification that, in combination with other sources, became the basis of their critique of positivism and their dialectical reformulation of Marxist theory. Somewhat later, in the period after World War II, French Marxism came under the influence of the early Lukács as a whole generation of social theorists sought radical alternatives to the dominant Stalinist orthodoxy. The most famous text of this trend is Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Adventures of the Dialectic*, which first introduced the term "Western Marxism" to describe the tradition stemming from *History and Class Consciousness*. The French were primarily interested in Lukács's concept of praxis and his theory of class consciousness. They saw in these ideas an alternative to the official Marxist dogma of the party as surrogate subject of the revolution. With Lukács they reaffirmed the primacy of working-class praxis, articulated ideologically by the party but not replaced by it.

I had the good fortune to study with representatives of both these schools of thought, with Herbert Marcuse and Lucien Goldmann. Starting out from the disparate traditions and emphases they represent, I propose a new interpretation designed to reestablish the unity of Lukács's early Marxism. This background may help to explain the difference between my approach to Lukács and that of scholars widely read in the English-speaking world such as Leszek Kołakowski, Gareth Stedman Jones, and George Lichtheim, who condemn the theory of reification as irrationalist and the theory of class consciousness as Stalinist. These very negative evaluations square neither with the content nor the historical impact of Lukács's text.

When Lukács is compared, not with Bergson or Stalin, but with Marx's early philosophical works and the Frankfurt School, a very different picture emerges. Like the early Marx, the early Marxist Lukács is a critic of the "alienation of reason" in modern capitalist society. But that critique is by no means irrationalist; rather, it aims at the establishment of a dialectical paradigm of rationality suited to the task of social self-understanding and human liberation. Such a dialectical rationality can be of no service to authoritarian regimes, but only to a socialist culture of self-rule. Not the least important dimension of these philosophers of praxis is the contribution they make to defining the broad outlines of such a culture.

The writing and rewriting of this book has placed me in the debt of many people. Lucien Goldmann and Herbert Marcuse introduced me to Marxist philosophy and to the work of Lukács. My wife, Anne-Marie Feenberg, and Jerry Doppelt, read chapter after chapter and frequently convinced me to make changes for the better. Many others read portions of the manuscript and offered criticism and encouragement. I recall with pleasure fruitful exchanges with Al Gouldner, Stanley Aronowitz, Doug Kellner, Bill Leiss, Stanley Rosen, Mark Poster, Steven Vogel, Deborah Cook, Stephen Crowell, Richard Westerman, Timothy Hall, Robert Pippin, Ian Angus, Samir Gandesha, Stefano Giachetti Ludovisi, Shane Gunster, Hans Radder, Allen Wood, Woody Sayre, Michael Löwy, Frank Cunningham, and William Rasch. We did not always reach agreement but I always learned something from our discussions.

¹ For an analysis of the complex relation of Marxism to romanticism, see Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001), [Chapter 3](#). They write, “Marx’s ideas were neither romantic nor modernizing, but constituted an attempt at a dialectical *Aufhebung* between the two, in a new critical and revolutionary worldview” (99).

CHAPTER ONE

The Philosophy of Praxis

MARX AND LUKÁCS

In this chapter, I discuss the philosophy of the early Marx from a Lukácsian perspective, as background to the exposition of Lukács's own parallel attempt to resolve the problems first posed by Marx. Considerable differences separate these thinkers, and there is always the risk that in comparing them in this manner the identity of one will be submerged in that of the other. I will do my best to avoid an artificial identification of the two positions where they do actually differ; however, I will argue that in spite of real differences we are dealing here with a specific philosophical doctrine, which I will call "philosophy of praxis," and which is shared by a number of thinkers.

While writing his notebooks in prison, Gramsci used the phrase "philosophy of praxis" ambiguously to signify Marxism in general and his own cultural interpretation of Marxism. In essence Gramsci argues that all knowledge is situated in a cultural context, itself based on a class-specific worldview. No domain of knowledge and no corresponding domain of being is independent of society. That interpretation, which he called "absolute historicism," resembles in broad outline the Hegelian Marxism of Lukács, Korsch, Bloch, Marcuse, and the early work of Marx himself.¹ It seems appropriate therefore to call this whole trend "philosophy of praxis," not as a euphemism for Marxism in general but rather to distinguish a particular radical philosophical version of Marxism from other interpretations.

The early method of Marx and Lukács is very different from the "scientific socialism" erected later on the basis of historical observation and economic theory. In 1843 and 1844 Marx developed a philosophy of revolution that he seems to have intended as a foundation for economic studies. From 1918 to 1923 Lukács elaborated a philosophy of revolution

supplementing Marxist economics. For both the early Marx and Lukács, such central Marxist concepts as the proletariat and socialism were not first developed through empirical research. Instead, as philosophers they set out from a critical discussion of the philosophical tradition in the course of which they *deduced* the characteristic historical concepts of Marxism. Included in this deduction is the concept of revolution, which plays a pivotal *methodological* role in their philosophies.

In interpreting Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* as a philosophy of praxis, I have been obliged to choose positions in some of the numerous debates over this early work. It will be useful at the outset to make these positions explicit by situating this interpretation with respect to some others. I will not review the enormous literature on the *Manuscripts*; only two facets of it are relevant here: the debates over the *ontological* and the *normative* character of social categories in the *Manuscripts*.² At issue is more than a matter of textual exegesis. The larger question concerns whether the *Manuscripts* are a philosophy of praxis, as I am engaged in defining it, or on the contrary, a far less ambitious ethical complement to economic research within the framework of some traditional ontology.

I show the former—that Marx founds a new concept of reason in revolution through an *ontological* treatment of *social* categories. This approach brings to the fore all that links the project of the early Marx to that of Lukács. But Marx's *Manuscripts* had not yet been published when Lukács wrote *History and Class Consciousness*. In fact, *Capital* is the primary basis of Lukács's Marxism rather than Marx's early work.

Capital is self-consciously unphilosophical in spite of Marx's prefatory acknowledgment of Hegel's influence. In it Marx is careful to minimize the use of philosophical terminology and to avoid the exploration of philosophical problems. Yet we now know on the basis of extensive textual evidence just how complex were the philosophical considerations behind *Capital*. The link between the *Manuscripts* and the published writings of Marx's maturity is supplied by his own draft of *Capital*, the *Grundrisse*; but the publication of this text was delayed until the beginning of World War II.³ These textual absences, combined with the image Marx wished to project of his work in *Capital*, seemed to authorize a scientistic interpretation of his later doctrine that Lukács first challenged from a dialectical perspective.

Lukács made the connection between Marxism and philosophy (that is, between Marx and Hegel), primarily through reflection on Marx's methodology in his economic writings, and only secondarily on the basis of those of Marx's comments on philosophical matters with which he was acquainted. This is possible because, as Ernest Mandel remarks, "the concept of alienation ... is part of the mature Marx's *instrumentarium*."⁴ Lukács was in fact the first to show this, to notice and explain not merely the influence of Hegel on Marx's early political essays, or on the general Marxian "worldview," but on the concepts and method of *Capital*. He reevaluated Marx's famous "coquetting" with Hegel, and concluded that in that work, "a whole series of categories of central importance and in constant use stem directly from Hegel's *Logic*."⁵

Lukács reconstructed a philosophy of praxis from the methodological traces of Marx's philosophical position visible in his economic writings. The result of this effort is not identical with the position of either the *Manuscripts* or the *Grundrisse*; nevertheless, it is impressive to what extent Lukács's somewhat speculative extrapolations from Marx's published work can find support in these unpublished ones. Most important, Lukács's philosophy of praxis has remarkable structural similarities to that of Marx, notably insofar as Lukács develops an original critique of philosophy paralleling Marx's own. This convergence has a biographical background. Like Marx, Lukács was deeply schooled in Hegelian dialectics and so when he sought to develop a Marxist philosophy, he returned to the Hegelian doctrine from which Marx set out. It is this link, mediated by the supposedly "scientific" work *Capital*, which bespeaks an affinity of Marxism for philosophy of praxis. Yet this biographical coincidence does not quite explain the similarity of the transformation undergone by Hegel's dialectic at their hands.

THE ANTINOMIES

The defining trait of philosophy of praxis is the claim that the "antinomies" of philosophy can only be resolved in history. The concept of "antinomy" employed here is derived from Hegel, for whom it signifies the ever widening gap between subject and object in modern culture. Ever since Descartes distinguished the two substances, philosophy and life have become more and more sharply sundered. Rich and complex theories of the

subjective dimension of being explain the meaning of freedom, value, political ideals, while equally powerful and encompassing theories of the objective dimension of being explain the laws of necessity in nature and history. From his earliest to his last works, Hegel saw his task as cataloging the resulting contradictions in modern culture and transcending them in a dialectical conception of being that would take into account both its subjective and objective dimensions.

For Hegel the resolution of the antinomies is a theoretical task. However, he believes that this task can only be carried out under specific historical conditions that happened to be those of his own time and place. Philosophy of praxis begins with a critique of the conservative implications of this resolution of the antinomies and a radicalization of its historical aspect. Both Marx and Lukács argued that because Hegel could not conceive of really radical changes in modern culture, he treated temporary historical conditions such as monarchy and wage labor as though they were eternal necessities. They claimed that the antinomies would be transcended by social revolution and not by philosophical speculation.

Had Marx confined himself to arguing this position in relation to the antinomies of moral and political life, he would have created a new political philosophy. This new philosophy would have been compatible with a traditional ontology and might have been formulated as a “left” variant of Hegel’s philosophy. Marx’s startling innovation was to include *all* the antinomies in his theory of revolution, those relating to epistemology and ontology as well as the moral and political ones. He thus arrived at the astounding proposition that social change could not only accomplish such goals as reconciling individual and society, moral responsibility and self-interest, but that it could also unite subject and object, thought and being, man and nature.

This proposition has a number of paradoxical corollaries from which we must not shrink in interpreting the early Marx. As we will see in later chapters, Lukács and Marcuse pose a related challenge. When philosophy of praxis contends that human action is philosophically relevant not just in ethics or politics but in all domains, it is asserting a wholly original *ontological* position. For this philosophy, human action touches being as such, and not simply those special domains we usually conceive as affected by our activities. In somewhat different terms, essentially this same requirement can be formulated as the transcendence of the antinomy of

value and fact, “ought” and “is.” For, if human action affects being, then values do not confront a normless and humanly indifferent reality, but rather represent its highest potentialities.

This position is coherent only where being is interpreted through a special sphere in which human being is actually able to transform the objects on which it acts. Then the apparently humanly indifferent spheres, such as nature, can be ontologically subordinated to a sphere within which action affects the substratum of reality, for example, history. Action can only constitute reality where reality cannot be conceived independent of that special sphere.

The attempt to understand being in general through human being is a kind of inverted philosophical anthropology. Marx, Lukács, and the Frankfurt School share this approach with philosophers such as Feuerbach and Heidegger, with this difference: the latter focus on the individual, and so construct speculative philosophies with moralistic overtones. For philosophers of praxis, on the contrary, history is the “paradigmatic order” for the interpretation of being generally.⁶

For this philosophy, “reality” is historical, and history itself is to be understood as in essence an object of human practice. Because the philosophy of praxis conceives being as history and history as the product of human action, it can *mutatis mutandis* conceive of human action as relevant to the constitution of being. Action takes on a universal significance, going beyond the social world to affect being as such. As Lukács puts it, “We have ... made our own history and if we are able to regard the whole of reality [*Wirklichkeit*] as history (i.e., as *our* history, for there is no other), we shall have raised ourselves in fact to the position from which reality can be understood as our ‘action.’”⁷

The ontologically significant relation between human being and being in general is now social action because history is constituted in such action. History is ontology and the becoming of the human species is the privileged domain within which the antinomies of philosophy can finally be resolved. In an early essay on Marx’s *Manuscripts*, Marcuse concludes that “The history of man is at the same time the happening of ‘the whole of nature’; his history is the ‘production and reproduction’ of the whole of nature, the furtherance of objective being through the renewed sublation of its current form.”⁸

Throughout this book, I will be concerned with the implications of this remarkable proposition. These implications can be considered under two main headings. First, there is the dimension of philosophy of praxis concerned with the resolution of social antinomies through the disalienation or dereification of social life. As I have argued above, the ambition of philosophy of praxis goes beyond social theory, for it claims that all objectivity can be disalienated starting out from the disalienation of society. This wider claim indicates a second dimension of the theory concerned with the ontological generalization of the social analysis. This most daring dimension of the philosophy of praxis will be treated through what I call a “metacritical” approach to the history of philosophy. Later chapters will then consider the problematic role of nature and attempt to formulate an original response to the difficulties it poses for an “absolute historicism.” This argument will draw on the resources of philosophy of praxis in what I take to be its final formulation in the late work of Herbert Marcuse. Before turning to a discussion of the concept of metacritique and its relevance to the idea of a “realization” or “end” of philosophy, I would like to consider briefly some of the objections to viewing Marx’s philosophy of praxis as a contribution to ontology.

ONTOLOGY OR HISTORY

With the possible exception of Marcuse, the Frankfurt School contests the interpretation of Marx’s *Manuscripts* as a philosophy of praxis. Alfred Schmidt’s careful study of Marx’s concept of nature attempts to situate the *Manuscripts* at an equal distance from a materialist ontology and an absolute historicism. Jürgen Habermas also rejects the interpretation of Marx’s *Manuscripts* as a philosophy of praxis. He argues that the early Marx distinguishes between nature as such, and nature as it enters the historical sphere through labor, and which therefore has a social character. Marx’s social theory would have implications only for society in the larger framework of a naturalistic ontology. Within this same tradition, however, it is customary to attack Lukács’s philosophy of praxis as idealistic. Thus the similarities I identify between the early Marx and Lukács are denied.

It is interesting to note that another influential school of Marxist thought, founded by Louis Althusser, makes no such distinction. Rejecting equally the early Marx and Lukács, the Althusserians see in both a romantic refusal of scientific objectivity and the independence of nature. There is

thus a certain unwitting convergence of Frankfurt School and Althusserian interpretations in that both emphasize the autonomy of nature by contrast with philosophy of praxis and condemn as idealistic any doctrine that attempts to understand nature through history. I cannot consider these convergent critiques in detail. Here I would like to simply sketch the Frankfurt School's attempt to "save" the early Marx from historicism.

In *Knowledge and Human Interests*, Habermas admits that Marx's text is ambiguous. He claims that the ambiguities have given rise to a "phenomenological strain of Marxism" that overlooks Marx's naturalism and for which "the category of labor then acquires unawares the meaning of world-constituting life activity in general."⁹ Although Habermas includes Marcuse in this phenomenological strain, this would only be true of the very early and late work. Throughout much of his career, Marcuse's position was close to Schmidt's and Habermas's in denying the ontological status of social categories. In *Reason and Revolution*, for example, Marcuse too notes the ambiguities of Marx's text; he writes: "All this has an obvious resemblance to Hegel's idea of reason. Marx even goes so far as to describe the self-realization of man in terms of the unity of thought and being."¹⁰ But, in fact, "Marx ... detached dialectic from this ontological base. In his work, the negativity of reality becomes a historical condition which cannot be hypostatized as a metaphysical state of affairs."¹¹

Such an interpretation may explain Marx's later Marxism but it does not account for the *Manuscripts*. It is particularly significant that in the formulations of Habermas and Marcuse, the antinomies Marx attempted to transcend reappear as alternatives between which he is supposed to have chosen: naturalism or humanism, history or ontology. But Marx himself writes:

Communism as a fully developed naturalism is humanism, and as a fully developed humanism is naturalism. It is the definitive resolution of the antagonism between man and nature, and between man and man. It is the true solution of the conflict between existence and essence, between objectification and self-affirmation, between freedom and necessity, between individual and species. It is the solution of the riddle of history and knows itself to be this solution.¹²

The early Marx would not have defined his own advance over Hegel as the demonstration that alienation is a historical category rather than an ontological one. He argued that all ontology is historical in essence and that the dichotomy between being and history is therefore false. This is the main claim of philosophy of praxis, the idea that history, properly understood,

has ontological significance. As a philosopher of praxis Marx did not choose between an ontological and a historical interpretation of the social categories; he chose both. Hence his most striking utterances, such as the one just quoted, or the following: “Society is the accomplished union of man and nature, the veritable resurrection of nature, the realized naturalism of man and the realized humanism of nature.”¹³

THE NORMATIVE DIMENSION

The interpretation of the *Manuscripts* as a philosophy of praxis is also challenged from an ethical point of view. Marx’s claim that the “human essence” is “alienated” is frequently said to imply an ethical ideal. Marx is supposed to have rested his case for revolution on the injustice of capitalist alienation. Humanity’s true essence as “species being” imperatively requires the overthrow of capitalism and the creation of conditions in which social institutions are based on cooperation and creativity rather than competition. This formulation recapitulates the antinomy of value and fact, i.e., capitalist fact versus socialist value.

Not everyone agrees. Some see in the *Manuscripts* an attempt to transcend the opposition of value and fact presupposed by this interpretation. The debate over the *Manuscripts* is of course related to the larger debate over Marxism and ethics.¹⁴ Considered as a philosophy of praxis, Marx’s theory is unquestionably normative in some sense, but I argue that it is not based on an ethical conception.

What is at stake here is the dialectical character of Marx’s theory, hence also his relation to Hegel. Were Marx to accept the dichotomy of value and fact, ethics and social reality, he would regress behind Hegel to a utopian-moralistic position like that of Bruno Bauer and Moses Hess. In his essay on Hess, Lukács showed that these Left Hegelians attempted to recover revolutionary possibilities by positing ethical values as the basis for knowledge of the future. They thus rejected Hegel’s concrete analysis of and reconciliation with the present.

In his mature works Hegel found the “ought” realized in the “is” of his society. On Hegel’s terms, if Marx had posited the “human essence” as an ethical ideal, philosophy would already have transcended it theoretically through the demonstration of the relative rationality of what is. Alienation might, like the police courts Hegel deduces from the Idea, remain as an

unpleasant fact of practical life. But then so are fleas and measles. The indifference of philosophical reason to such matters, essentially to human happiness, is not arbitrary but expresses the essence of social reality. The demand for the abstract ideal is a moment of negation necessarily frustrated by an objectivity that transcends it, that is to say, by reason itself. Hegelianism is not overcome by the renewed positing of the ideal, but rather anticipates it and refutes it in advance.

Hegel's critique of Kant and of abstract ethical idealism influenced Marx to seek a basis for revolutionary theory in the tendencies of social reality, in a dialectic of ideal and real in history. Lukács argues that Hegel prepared the Marxian approach:

In contrast to Fichte with his revolutionary Utopia, Hegel developed very early on in his work the tendency to "understand what is," a tendency which originally pointed energetically in the direction of the future. His concern to comprehend the present as at once become and becoming is ... the germ of a true historical dialectics (the dialectics of history translated into thought). For it is precisely in the present that all forms of objectivity can be revealed quite concretely as processes, since it is the present which shows most clearly the unity of result and starting point of the process. Given that, the rejection of all "Oughts" and futuristic utopian thinking, the concentration of philosophy on knowledge of the present (grasped dialectically) emerges precisely as the only possible epistemological method of knowing what is really knowable about the future, the tendencies within the present which impel it really and concretely toward the future.¹⁵

This sounds more like Marx than Hegel, indeed, more like the mature Marx than the author of the *Manuscripts*. That work may be seen as transitional between an ethical and a socioeconomic approach to knowledge of the future. In the *Manuscripts*, Marx attempts to reconstruct the ideal concepts of political philosophy as potentialities awaiting realization. The contradictions between philosophy and reality are reformulated as immanent contradictions in reality itself. The new method is neither speculative nor empirical, but synthesizes these contrary approaches in a metacritique. This metacritique relativizes what is and what ought to be as contradictory tendencies actually inhabiting the real-in-process. It is through this conception that Marx relativizes ethical ideals as moments in the real process of becoming of what is, and so goes beyond utopian moralism.

For example, Marx does not set out from a philosophically elaborated concept of the state contrasted with the existing institutions he wishes to criticize. In fact, he dismisses this method contemptuously in a letter to Ruge: "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.”¹⁶ Instead, the philosophical deduction of what ought to be must proceed from actual struggles testifying to the living contradiction of ideal and real. The appropriate role for the new philosopher consists in “explaining 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. “The critic,” Marx writes, “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.”¹⁷

In these earliest “Marxist” writings, Marx can be seen struggling to release new grounds for revolution from Hegelian political philosophy. A generation later Engels summarized Marx’s conclusion with admirable simplicity. Where Hegel had claimed that “All that is real is rational; and all that is rational is real,” for Marx:

The Hegelian proposition turns into its opposite through Hegelian dialectics itself: all that is real in the sphere of human history becomes irrational in the process of time, is therefore irrational by its very destination, is tainted beforehand with irrationality; and everything which is rational in the minds of men is destined to become real, however much it may contradict existing apparent reality. In accordance with all the rules of the Hegelian method of thought, the proposition of the rationality of everything which is real resolves itself into the other proposition: All that exists deserves to perish.¹⁸

In sum, the only way *beyond* Hegel is *through* him. Marx makes this passage in the *Manuscripts*, where he is finally able to “develop the true actuality out of the forms inherent in existing actuality as its ought-to-be and goal.” There Marx identifies reason (true actuality) with the socially mediated process of satisfying human needs and on that basis developing human individuality. Then the “existing actuality,” alienated capitalist society, is shown to be reason’s “unreasonable form,” which must be further mediated and overcome through revolution. The critique of political economy, which begins already in the *Manuscripts*, derives socialist potentialities from the contradictions of the given capitalist forms. The “ought-to-be and goal” emerges from the dialectic of existence and essence as a demand of reason, a methodological precondition of rationality, and not as an ethical ideal.

As a philosopher of praxis, Marx attempts to reconstruct the concept of reason so that capitalist alienation appears as reason’s essential problem, a

problem to be resolved through historical action. Marx takes what for Hegel and earlier philosophy is a mere social contingency, human suffering, and dignifies it with ontological status, not in order to attribute it to the human condition, but rather the better to comprehend the presuppositions of its historical transcendence. These presuppositions are preserved ideally in philosophy in the concept of reason, and therefore Marx insists, against the reformers of the “practical political party,” that “you cannot abolish philosophy without realizing it.”¹⁹

The concept of an “*Aufhebung*” of philosophy also has a methodological side, with which we will be focally concerned in this book. Once again, it is by reference to the Frankfurt School that I will attempt to clarify the project of the early Marx and Lukács.

METACRITIQUE

The term “metacritique” became widely known through Habermas’s use of it to refer to the study of the various forms of theory in the light of their intrinsic dependence on specific “knowledge-constitutive interests.”²⁰ Habermas distinguishes these interests from those of everyday practical affairs by their enormous generality, however, despite this they belong to the social world. They are quasi-transcendental conditions of objectivity for the spheres of knowledge they determine. The odd description, “quasi-transcendental,” refers to their character as neither ordinary social facts nor world-constituting posits of the pure ego. Habermas needs some such concept since he wants to avoid both positivism and historicism in order to affirm both the cognitive value of natural science and its rootedness in a generic interest in technical control that determines the type of object it studies.

The term “metacritique” in this sense bears a certain resemblance to the method of Lukács and Marx insofar as it crosses the usual boundaries between philosophical and social explanation. There is, however, a considerable difference between the metacritical approach in philosophy of praxis and Habermas’s metacritique. His knowledge-constitutive interests are anthropological in their generality. The (relative) truth of knowledge is conserved in contact with these interests by reason of their very generality. Reductionism is thus avoided at the cost of a loss in sociological concreteness. Marx and Lukács offer no such theory of general

anthropological interests. Instead, their metacritique moves in the opposite direction, toward a domain of concreteness that they claim founds theoretical abstractions. We might better compare this approach with Whitehead's: "I hold that philosophy is the critic of abstractions. Its function is the double one, first of harmonizing them by assigning to them their relative status as abstractions, and secondly of completing them by direct comparison with more concrete intuitions of the universe and thereby promoting the formation of more complete schemes of thought."²¹ In Marx and Lukács, of course, the aim of such criticism of abstractions is not to found a speculative metaphysics, but rather to achieve what might be called a *sociological desublimation* of the concepts of philosophy.

To some extent this difference in orientation, as compared with Habermas, may be due to the fact that the latter is primarily concerned to refute a supposedly value-free positivistic empiricism. Concepts drawn from the Kantian tradition are helpful for this purpose. In Kantian philosophy the formal properties of rationality are abstracted as completely as possible from the particular contents on which the faculty of reason exercises itself. Kant demonstrates that these formal properties, as they relate to epistemology, ethics, and aesthetics, are a priori preconditions for any and all knowledge and action in the corresponding domains of real life. Each precondition responds to a distinctive value that is defining for its orientation toward reality.

By contrast, Marx and Lukács react against a Kantian cultural climate; they follow in the footsteps of Hegel in attempting to resolve the antinomies of form and content that arise from Kant's formalistic paradigm of rationality. To Hegel they owe dialectics as the method through which the opposites can be reconciled in a higher unity, a totality. The application of the category of totality to the study of the historically given forms of rationality provides the basis for a non-reductive social theory of knowledge. Philosophy is not regarded as a mere rationalization of covert interests, nor as a passive reflection of production relations. Rather, it is the form in which the actual contradictions of social life are raised to consciousness *under the horizon* of the given society. The juxtaposition of the philosophical concepts with a specific social background both explains the impasses and antinomies of theory, and shows a path to resolution through social action.

Susan Buck-Morss argues that Adorno's cultural criticism was deeply influenced by this method, as he discovered it in Lukács. She summarizes Lukács's approach as follows:

Instead of reducing bourgeois thought to the economic conditions of its production, Lukács argued that the nature of those conditions could be found within the intellectual phenomena themselves ... Once these thinkers accepted given social reality as *the* reality, they had to come upon a barrier of irrationality which could not be overcome (and which had led Kant to posit the thing-in-itself, because that barrier could not be removed from theory without being removed from society). Conversely, if theorists could see through the reified appearances, they would recognize that the antinomies of philosophy were due not to the inadequacies of reason, but to those of the reality in which reason tried to find itself.²²

Much the same analysis could be made of Marx's early critique of political philosophy. Buck-Morss contrasts sociological reductionism and metacritique. But what does it mean to find "the nature of [economic] conditions ... within the intellectual phenomena?" This is a crucial point that requires clarification in the case of Marx by reference to the influence of Feuerbach.

Feuerbach's central idea is that philosophy is secularized theology. He says, "What lies in the other world for religion, lies in this world for philosophy."²³ When philosophy identifies the subject with reason, with thinking, it brings the theological idea of "spirit" down to earth. Similarly, the concept of the object as an object-of-thought, constituted by thought or obeying rational laws, is a homely transcendental equivalent of Biblical Genesis. This appears to be a crass reduction of the essence of philosophy. What makes Feuerbach interesting is his attempt to go beyond this basic thesis toward a reconstruction of philosophy.

Feuerbach calls Hegel's thought, which he sees as the culmination of the philosophical tradition, a "philosophy of identity." The identity referred to is that of thought and being, reason and reality. This identity is theological and to it Feuerbach opposes what he calls "the true and absolute viewpoint": "the viewpoint of the distinction between I and thou, subject and object."²⁴ Yet although Feuerbach rejects the philosophy of identity, he reconstructs its formal principles on another plane.

He detaches the formal structure of philosophy from its concept of the subject and object. The "philosophy of the future," as he calls it, will conserve these formal traits but attach them to a new subject-object concept. This is a metacritique of fundamental philosophical concepts.

These concepts are relativized by reconstructing them in the concrete existential domains from which they were first abstracted.

Feuerbach first redefines the concepts of subject and object, arguing that they are both sensuous, natural things in the world which cannot be brought together merely conceptually. The identity achieved in and through thought is spurious and ideological, but there is another kind of subject–object identity which can be achieved through sense perception and love. Feuerbach writes, “The identity of subject and object, which in self-consciousness [in other words, in Hegel] is only an abstract idea, is truth and reality only in man’s sensuous perception of man.”²⁵ Thus the formal principle, subject–object identity, is taken from Hegel and conserved while its content in Hegel’s thought is rejected.

The upshot is an enlargement of the concept of the subject to include more than thinking, to include the whole human being, so to speak. This enlarged subject retains what might be called an “ontological pathos” through its continued submission to the formal principles of idealism. Feuerbach expressed his conclusion in ringing phrases that certainly influenced Marx.

The unity of thought and being has meaning and truth only when man is comprehended as the ground and subject of this unity. Only a real being recognizes real objects; only where thought is not the subject of itself but a predicate of a real being is the idea not separated from being ... From this result the following categorical imperatives: Desire not to be a philosopher as distinct from a man; be nothing else than a thinking man. Do not think as a thinker, that is, with a faculty torn from the totality of the real human being and isolated for itself; think as a living and real being, as one exposed to the vivifying and refreshing waves of the world’s oceans. Think in existence, in the world as a member of it, not in the vacuum of abstraction as a solitary monad, as an absolute monarch, as an indifferent, super-worldly God; then you can be sure that your ideas are unities of being and thought.²⁶

That is precisely Marx’s starting point in the *Manuscripts*. There he attempts to obey Feuerbach’s injunction by a heroic effort to overcome the gap between thought and life. As Marx puts it, “One basis for life and another for science is *a priori* a falsehood.”²⁷ Elsewhere in the text, Marx expresses himself in the first person in a manner that indicates his personal stake in the matter. “My universal consciousness is only the theoretical form of that whose living form is the real community, the social entity, although at the present day this universal consciousness is an abstraction from real life and is opposed to it as an enemy. That is why the activity of

my universal consciousness as such is my theoretical existence as a social being.”²⁸

However, Marx is a better dialectician and more rigorous thinker than Feuerbach. He is not content to retain simply the general form of the philosophy of identity while giving an anthropological twist to the concepts of subject and object. He takes more than this from Hegel in order to accomplish more ambitious goals than Feuerbach’s. Marx follows Hegel in requiring that subject–object unity be grasped as the actual constitution of the object by the subject. And like Hegel he tries to avoid a Fichtean reduction of the object to the subject through a dialectical conception of their relationship. He also agrees with the Hegel of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that this relationship is established in the historical process. He accepts, in other words, what Lukács describes as “Hegel’s program: to see the absolute, the goal of his philosophy, as a *result* remains valid for Marxism with its very different objects of knowledge, and is even of greater concern to it, as the dialectical process is seen to be identical with the course of history.”²⁹ The formal principles Marx retains are thus richer and more complex than those that survive Feuerbach’s critical appropriation of traditional philosophy.

As Marx works out his program in the *Manuscripts*, it becomes clear that he is attempting not just a “reform of philosophy”—Feuerbach’s phrase—but a rigorous *Aufhebung*, or transcendence, of Hegelian idealism, and with it of philosophy generally. To accomplish this Marx develops a metacritique of Hegel, designed to show that the concept of reason as absolute knowledge is still a theological attempt to overcome social alienation in thought. The “*ordre des raisons*” must be reversed: when alienation is overcome in real life, then and only then will it be possible to overcome the alienation of reason. Thus the *Manuscripts* do not achieve their end in a mere philosophical reformulation of the concept of reason. Revolution becomes the basis for a new constellation, overcoming the opposition of thought and life, thinker and society, by founding reason practically in life and community. The retention of the formal structure of Hegel’s thought infused with this new content yields a philosophy of praxis.

What makes the approach taken by Marx and Lukács unique, and distinguishes it not only from Kant but also from Hegel, is their belief that the primary antinomy to be overcome is that of traditional philosophy and social reality. Here the term “metacritique” applies in a double sense. Not only do Marx and Lukács attempt to relate philosophical abstractions to the social lifeworld, they also claim to identify the intrinsic limitation of the traditional philosophical method of abstraction. Because traditional philosophy assumes that the alienated foundations of the social order are rooted in the very nature of reality, it concludes that the antinomies can only be resolved speculatively, in thought, and formulates them in view of such a resolution. The criterion of philosophical adequacy that guides concept formation in the tradition thus reflects an implicit sense of the limits of social change that Marx and Lukács challenge. They argue that the resolution of the antinomies requires a radical social transformation unimagined by their predecessors.

Nevertheless, neither Marx nor Lukács simply dismiss philosophy. Rather, they proceed from the assumption that the tension between the concept of reason and its concrete social substratum reflects contradictions in social reality. Despite its limits traditional philosophy was able to identify social potentialities, even if only in a speculative form. The problem now consists in reconstructing the insights of philosophy in a new context, oriented toward practical social change. Marcuse summarizes this conclusion as follows: “The philosophical construction of reason is replaced by the creation of a rational society. The philosophical ideals of a better world and of true Being are incorporated into the practical aim of struggling mankind, where they take on a human form.”³¹

In sum, the metacritical approach as the term will be used here consists in dialectically relativizing philosophical form and social content, and correspondingly, theory and practice. Marx and Lukács do not philosophize within the historically given tradition, presupposing the continuing validity of philosophy as such, and *eo ipso* of its forms of evidence and its problematics. Rather, they consider the tradition as essentially completed, and then proceed to study it from “outside,” as a moment in a larger social process in which action can intervene. It is in this light, and not in some merely pragmatic sense of urgency, that we are to understand Marx’s eleventh thesis on Feuerbach: “Philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it.”³²

Within the tradition of Western Marxism, these rather opaque formulations of the theory–practice relation have a quite definite meaning. One of the aims of this book is to clarify that meaning. Since I am writing within that tradition myself, I will follow Marx’s and Lukács’s construction of terms like “philosophy,” “theory,” “practice,” and phrases like “the unity of theory and practice,” “the realization of philosophy.” Before proceeding on this basis, I would like to step briefly outside that framework to anticipate some objections. I will put these objections in the form of questions that implicitly challenge the very idea of a unity of theory and practice or a realization of philosophy.

1. Marx and Lukács claim that they are “realizing” philosophy, putting theory into practice. How does this differ from “applying” theory to the solution of a practical problem?

2. Marx and Lukács claim that the philosophical tradition is finished, which would seem to mean that they themselves are not philosophers contributing to that tradition. Yet surely the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* and *History and Class Consciousness* are philosophical works. Are they then philosophers after all, and if so how can they elaborate a philosophy on the basis of the proposition that philosophy is dead?³³

3. Marx and Lukács seem to say that only the revolution can “solve” philosophical problems, and yet they propose solutions to these problems before the revolution. Does this not imply that the revolution is after all irrelevant to the solution of philosophical problems?

These questions arise from ambiguities in Western Marxism’s special terminology. When this terminology is understood it becomes clear that Marx and Lukács are not making quite such radical claims as at first appears. The chief difficulty stems from ambiguities in the terms “philosophy” and “theory.” I will therefore begin with this issue.

In its usual meaning “philosophy” refers to the activity of reflecting on the basic assumptions and concepts of a discipline, practice, or culture. In this sense Marx and Lukács are obviously still doing philosophy, and they would not deny it. But for them, “philosophy” refers to a specific historical tradition that develops common themes from the Greeks to Hegel. They regard this tradition as “completed,” and they would deny that they are merely continuing it in their own work. The unity of the tradition consists in certain paradigmatic concepts and methods that run through it from

beginning to end, in spite of variations and innovations. It is this paradigm that has been exhausted, not the activity of reflection *per se*.

The early Marx and Lukács, Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Derrida have all proposed general theories of the unity of the philosophical tradition, and on that basis have announced its end. Reflection continues, and indeed it has no original concepts to substitute for the old ones. But the philosopher's relation to these concepts is no longer immediate, naïve; the "death" of philosophy means no more than that thinkers become conscious of the historical limits of the cultural system on the basis of which these concepts arise.

For Marxists, this consciousness is specifically social. They trace the origin of philosophy's eternal truths, its constants and paradigms, back to a social world that is in the process of disappearing. There is a particularly clear statement of this position in the *Communist Manifesto*.

The history of all past society has consisted in the development of class antagonisms, antagonisms that assumed different forms at different epochs. But whatever form they may have taken, one fact is common to all past ages, viz., the exploitation of one part of society by the other. No wonder, then, that the social consciousness of past ages, despite all the multiplicity and variety it displays, moves within certain forms, or general ideas, which cannot completely vanish except with the total disappearance of class antagonisms. The Communist revolution is the most radical rupture with traditional property relations; no wonder that its development involves the most radical rupture with traditional ideas.³⁴

If we accept the limitation of "philosophy" to a specific tradition bound up with the history of class society, then we need a wider term with which to refer to the general process of reflection on basic assumptions of which "philosophy" would be an instance. This more general term is "theory." Now we need to distinguish between two types of theory, a type that is identified with traditional philosophy and a new type in which Marxism engages. This is precisely the distinction between "traditional" and "critical" theory that Horkheimer introduced in a famous essay.³⁵ Like the Frankfurt School, Marx and Lukács argue that traditional theory has been superseded by a new critical theory. They do not suggest that philosophy should be abandoned for practical activity or simply "applied" in the usual sense of the term. The point, then, is not that reflection should cease, but that a new kind of reflection is needed.

This new reflection differs from the old in treating many assumptions the philosophical tradition took for granted as relative to the social situation from which they arise. For example, instead of accepting the eternal

necessity of the antinomy of public and private interest, critical theory shows that this antinomy belongs to a specific social world. Critical theory still works with the concepts of public and private interest elaborated in philosophy, but it problematizes the social background against which these two forms of interest appear as antinomial opposites.

The critique of abstract or “pure” theory is to be understood in this context. Once again it is not that Marx and Lukács reject conceptual generality for empirical specificity, but rather that the process of abstraction in which philosophy detaches its concepts from their social basis gives rise to a bias they reject. Philosophy treats its concepts as though they rested on eternal facts of nature or the human condition. But once conceived in this way, the social background of these concepts is occluded and it becomes impossible to imagine a role for human action in resolving the philosophical problems they entail. Marx and Lukács thus do not return to the empirical so much as show the inseparable connection between the most abstract concepts of philosophy and a concrete social context that can be changed.

Let me return now to the example of the antinomy of public and private interest to illustrate how practice can contribute to resolving a theoretical problem. Plato sets up the problem as philosophy has treated it ever since. The lower classes of the *Republic* pursue private interests and this disqualifies them from rule. Plato’s guardians are qualified to rule by the complete elimination of their private lives; they cannot even know their own children. For the Greeks the abolition of the family is the abolition of the private sphere, hence also private interest. The antinomy is evident here.

It does not disappear in as different a philosopher as Rousseau. He distinguishes the general will from the will of all as public versus private interest. He does not conceive of a special class as the bearer of the general will, but instead projects the antinomy onto the individual. The division in the soul this produces requires “virtue” in the citizen to resist mere greed. Even Mandeville, who claims that “private vices are public benefits,” readily admits that the intention of the individuals in pursuing private interests has nothing to do with the public benefits achieved by a paradoxical reversal. The antinomy survives down to the present. The “original position,” famous from Rawls’s *A Theory of Justice*, accomplishes the same division of public from private interests that Plato demands. Habermas, with his rigid distinction between communicative and strategic uses of language, also perpetuates the antinomy.

For a Marxist the limitation of this type of thinking is clear. The unquestioned assumption that lies behind the antinomy is the permanency of privately owned means of production and the resulting antagonism between the members of society. Public interests then arise alongside private ones insofar as the community has needs that are not identical with the mere summation of these antagonistic private interests. But what if historical conditions arose in which private ownership of means of production could be replaced by the rational administration of both the economy and the state in the interests of the whole community? Of course some forms of personal “private” interest would remain, but these would not stand in an antagonistic relation to the public interest of the community. Instead of dedication to public interest requiring a virtuous dictatorship or general renunciation of private interests, the two would be in harmony, the free development of each supporting the free development of all. The traditional philosophical construction of the issue would no longer apply. Or at least so claims Marxist theory.

The point I want to make is not that such a Marxist reform of society would work—that is another problem—but rather that once one envisages it as a real possibility, social action appears to play a central role in resolving a philosophical problem that has traditionally been treated as purely theoretical in character. It is this new role for social action that is intended by the concept of a “realization” of philosophy. Philosophy is realized in the sense that its old ideal of somehow reconciling public and private interest is finally achieved. This realization involves a radical social change, and not a purely conceptual mediation such as Plato’s utopia, Rousseau’s “virtue,” or Mandeville’s version of the “invisible hand.”

Note that this new type of theoretical reflection need not await the revolution. Reflection can always go beyond the given achievements of its era toward ideal outcomes. This is true of Marx as much as it is of Plato. But what appears as a real possibility to anticipatory thinking differs drastically with time and place. Although Plato could imagine women becoming guardians in his ideal republic, he saw no way to abolish slavery. Aristotle once made the fantastic suggestion that slavery could be abolished if tools could activate themselves without human agency. Marx writes in a time when this idle fantasy of the ancients appears as an imminent possibility. On the basis of this changed historical situation, he imagines a wholly different practical context for philosophy than the one prevailing in

all previous class societies. Thus Marxists can propose theoretical solutions to problems the revolution is supposed to solve practically. However, they do generally insist that only by struggling against capitalism has the working class been able to problematize the dominant assumptions of a millennial class culture so that new solutions to old problems can be anticipated.³⁶ Later chapters will explain this connection between theory and practice in more detail.

¹ Gramsci describes Marxism as “absolute historicism” in his *Notebooks*. See Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and trans. Q. Hoare and G. N. Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 417, 465. See also 445–6. For an account of Gramsci’s philosophy of praxis, see Thomas Nemeth, *Gramsci’s Philosophy: A Critical Study* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1980).

² Important contributions to the debate are contained in: Ernest Mandel, *La Formation de la Pensée Economique de Karl Marx* (Paris: Maspero, 1967); Jürgen Habermas, *Theorie und Praxis* (Neuwied and Berlin: Luchterhand, 1967). Also interesting are: Herbert Marcuse, “New Sources on the Foundations of Historical Materialism,” in Herbert Marcuse, *Heideggerian Marxism*, ed. R. Wolin and J. Abromeit (Lincoln, NE: University Nebraska Press, 2005), first published in 1932; Louis Althusser, “Sur le jeune Marx,” in *Pour Marx* (Paris: Maspero, 1966); Bertell Ollman, *Alienation* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1971); István Mészáros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972); Michel Henry, *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality*, trans. K. McLaughlin (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998).

³ Important discussions of the relation of the *Grundrisse* to *Capital*: Roman Rosdolsky, *Zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Marxschen ‘Kapital’* (Vienna: Europa Verlag, 1968); Iring Fetscher, “The Young and the Old Marx,” in *Marx’s Socialism*, S. Avineri, ed. (New York: Lieber Atherton, 1973); Ernest Mandel, *La Formation de la Pensée Economique de Karl Marx* (Paris: Maspero, 1967); Hiroshi Uchida, *Marx’s Grundrisse and Hegel’s Logic* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988); Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). Most of these authors agree that the early concept of alienation in Marx is further developed in the concept of fetishism in *Capital*.

⁴ Mandel, *La Formation de la Pensée Economique*, 172.

⁵ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. R. Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1971), xlv (emphasis omitted). [Chapter 4](#) explains this remark in more detail. Throughout the footnotes, *History and Class Consciousness* will be referred to as “HCC.” All references are to this edition, but Livingstone’s translation has sometimes been modified to approach literalness as nearly as possible.

⁶ HCC, 144.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 145. For a further discussion of Lukács’s concept of praxis, see Lucien Goldmann, *Lukács et Heidegger* (Paris: Denoël, 1973), 103–5, and Andrew Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History* (London: Routledge, 2005), [Chapter 4](#).

8 Marcuse, “New Sources on the Foundations of Historical Materialism,” 102–3. See the original, Herbert Marcuse, “Neue Quellen zur Grundlegung des Historischen Materialismus,” in *Der deutsche Künstlerroman: Frühe Aufsätze* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979), 530–1.

9 Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 28.

10 Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 275.

11 Ibid., 314.

12 Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, trans. and ed. T. B. Bottomore (London: C. A. Watts, 1963), 155.

13 Ibid., 157. In this, as in many other passages from the early Marx quoted here, italics have been omitted for the sake of clarity.

14 One who sees Marx’s *Manuscripts* as an ethical work is Eugene Kamenka. See his, *Marxism and Ethics* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1969). A contrary position is taken by Ollman, *Alienation*, 47. Cf. Allen Wood, “The Marxian Critique of Justice,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 1, No. 3 (Spring 1972). For an important discussion of the historical debate over Marxism and ethics, see “Y a-t-il une sociologie marxiste?” in Lucien Goldmann, *Recherches Dialectiques* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959).

15 Georg Lukács, “Moses Hess and the Problems of Idealistic Dialectics,” in *Tactics and Ethics*, trans. M. McCollgan, ed. R. Livingstone (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 191.

16 Karl Marx, “Letter to Ruge,” in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, trans. and ed. L. Easton and K. Guddat (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 213.

17 Ibid. For more on this conception of the theory–practice relation, see the [Appendix](#).

18 Frederick Engels, “Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* (New York: International, 1968), 596–7. As Marcuse puts the same point in Hegelian language, “Every state of existence has to be surpassed; it is something negative, which things, driven by their inner potentialities, desert for another state, which again reveals itself as negative, as limit.” (Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, 136).

19 Karl Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, 50.

20 The term was originally used by early critics of Kant but fell into disuse. For a summary of Habermas’s theory, see the [Appendix](#) to Habermas’s *Knowledge and Human Interests*.

21 Alfred North Whitehead, *Science in the Modern World* (New York: Mentor, 1948), 88.

22 Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origins of the Negative Dialectic* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 26–7. For an application of a similar critical approach to the “sublimation” or “euphemization” of social categories in philosophical abstractions, see Pierre Bourdieu, *L’ontologie politique de Martin Heidegger* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1988).

23 Ludwig Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future*, trans. M. Vogel (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1966), 5.

24 Ibid., 70.

25 Ibid., 58.

26 Ibid., 67. For a useful discussion of the relation of Marx to Feuerbach, see Shlomo Avineri, “The Hegelian Origins of Marx’s Political Thought,” in *Marx’s Socialism*, 3–4.

27 Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 163.

28 Ibid., 158.

29 HCC, 170. Cf. Lukács, “Moses Hess and the Problems of Idealist Dialectics,” 214–15.

30 I owe many of the ideas in this section to discussion with Gerald Doppelt.

31 Herbert Marcuse, “Philosophy and Critical Theory,” in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 142.

32 Karl Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach,” in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, 402.

33 Timothy Hall poses this question in terms of the reflexive problem of “how these theories account for their own self-possibility ... The problem faced by metacritical approaches is that the insight into the conditioned character of philosophical critique is itself philosophically question-begging. In taking up a standpoint *outside* philosophy, the issue of the normative assumptions underpinning this standpoint immediately arises.” Timothy Hall, “The Metacritique of Philosophy: Marx, Lukács & Adorno,” unpublished manuscript, 2.

34 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Communist Manifesto* (New York: International, 1979), 29.

35 Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. M. O’Connell (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

36 Lukács, *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness*, 109.

CHAPTER TWO

The Demands of Reason

DEONTOLOGICAL GROUNDS FOR REVOLUTION

The ambition of philosophy of praxis is to link the fulfillment of what Marx calls the “demands of reason” to revolutionary political goals. The establishment of this link implies that revolution can be rationally justified and that the practice of a rational life includes revolutionary political action. These are in fact fundamental conclusions of the early Marx and Lukács. In his early works Marx develops a metacritique of political philosophy and derives a rationale for revolution from it. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács constructs a metacritique of classical German philosophy from which he too derives a rationale for revolution. And not coincidentally, Marcuse’s major book on Hegel is entitled *Reason and Revolution*. This chapter is primarily concerned with Marx’s early justification of revolution, while [Chapter 5](#) will take up Lukács’s related argument and [Chapter 8](#) will consider Marcuse’s different approach to the same conclusion.

By way of introduction, it will be helpful to consider the traditional idea of the right of revolution. Throughout most of its history political philosophy has been more concerned with rational grounds for obedience to government than with the right of revolution. In modern times obedience has been justified by reference to functions performed by the state that benefit the individuals. However, the expectation of a fair return for obedience may be disappointed. Then, when the state fails to fulfill its functions, grounds for obedience become grounds for revolution. Similarly, most justifications of revolution imply a theory of obligation to a legitimate state. This dialectic of obedience and revolt is not a sign of inconsistency in political philosophy, but on the contrary results from its consistent commitment to rationality in a world of contingencies. These observations are confirmed by the early theories of Marx and Lukács. In both cases

conservative political doctrines, subjected to a metacritique, are transformed into their revolutionary opposites precisely in the name of reason.

We can gauge their originality by comparison with earlier political theory. The classic ground for revolution, formulated for example by Locke, is teleological or utilitarian in character. Locke believes that “the end of government is the good of mankind.”¹ Although Marxists only rarely offer utilitarian arguments for revolution, a vaguely utilitarian concern for human happiness constitutes the moral aura of most Marxist discourse. Marxists add to Locke’s critique of political relations a parallel critique of property relations, both of which, in their view, should be instrumental to “the good of mankind.” Locke’s main point is conserved: society, as a common creation of human beings, should serve their interests and not the contrary.

Socialism undoubtedly originated in some such sense of revolution as a legitimate collective means to happiness. But this is not a sufficient philosophical justification of revolution. Kant shows that a rational being has higher interests than those discovered through a utilitarian calculus, including duties of obedience to the state regardless of “material” consequences. By conceptualizing this “higher” sphere of duty in terms of a dialectical theory of individuation and mutual recognition, Hegel succeeds in basing similar conclusions on a far more sophisticated social theory. Thus in Kant and Hegel philosophy takes a conservative turn, denying the pertinence of the utilitarian grounds for revolution put forth in theories such as Locke’s.

Marx revives revolutionary theory not by a “regression” to utilitarianism, but rather by developing a new deontological ground for revolution based on the intrinsic nature of rationality. Deontological grounds for revolution flow from the demand for a rational polity, independent of the use to be made of the freedom it grants, whether it be happiness, self-actualization, human dignity, etc. Rousseau is the chief earlier representative of this position. For him freedom, as the actual exercise of self-determining rationality, is an end in itself.

The difference between teleological and deontological grounds for revolution is especially clear in Locke’s and Rousseau’s discussions of slavery. Both are against it but for very different reasons. Locke argues that slavery is illegitimate because “this freedom from absolute arbitrary power is so necessary to, and closely joined with a man’s preservation, that he

cannot part with it but by which forfeits his preservation and life together.”² Rousseau, on the contrary, makes no appeal to the right to life, but claims that moral self-responsibility is incompatible with slavery. He argues that “when a man renounces his liberty he renounces his essential manhood, his rights, and even his duty as a human being ... It is incompatible with man’s nature, and to deprive him of his free will is to deprive his actions of all moral sanction.”³

Deontological grounds for revolution are usually explained as Rousseau does here, by reference to an absolute value placed on human freedom, the right of each individual to determine himself and to secure respectful treatment from others. Where political conditions prevent this they ought to be overthrown. Here we pass from the mere *right* of revolution, which flows from a concern with human happiness, to an *obligation* to revolution in the name of freedom. This is very much the sort of problem that preoccupies the young Marx. He writes in one early essay: “To be radical is to grasp things by the root. But for man the root is man himself ... The criticism of religion ends with the doctrine that man is the supreme being for man. It ends, therefore, with the categorical imperative to overthrow all those conditions in which man is an abased, enslaved, abandoned, contemptible being ...”⁴ For the young Marx, a revolution “à la hauteur des principes” is a revolution for freedom and dignity.⁵

Basic to this theory of revolution is the idea that the rational subject is not fulfilled merely in thought, nor even in private morality, but also requires a sphere of public activity. But where rationality must be deployed, there freedom too is necessary, for “Freedom is the ‘formal element’ of rationality, the only form in which reason can be.”⁶ Thus for Marx, as for Rousseau, revolution is a condition for the full exercise of reason. It is comparable with Cartesian doubt or the Enlightenment struggle against superstition as an attack on contingent obstacles to rationality and as a methodological preliminary to the flowering of humankind’s highest faculty.

Marx’s concern with the problems of revolutionary rationality is formulated explicitly in some of his earliest writings. He tries to show that revolution can satisfy “the demands of reason,” that through it reason, or philosophy, can be “realized” in social reality.⁷ This terminology is of course Hegelian. It was Hegel who first proposed to show that reason was

realized, that the contradiction between the rational concept of the state and its historical reality had finally been overcome. This philosophical *tour de force* was intended to lay the revolution to rest, to deprive it of the halo of rationality with which the Enlightenment had surrounded it. Starting from such premises, Marx's task is laid out for him: to demonstrate that reason is *not* in fact realized, that it continues to produce "demands" transcendent to the given state of affairs, that revolution is therefore still a rational act.

But after Kant and Hegel, it is impossible to renew revolutionary theory by returning to the speculative methods of a Rousseau. Kant's argument against revolution is based precisely on the implicit grounds for obedience to government contained in Rousseau's revolutionary theory. This theory itself must therefore be submitted to a radical critique in order to discover how political philosophy had been reconciled—prematurely—with an unjust society, and to find in it elements that can be reformulated to again ground a revolutionary struggle against this society. The core of this effort consists in overcoming the antinomy of reason and need Marx identifies as constitutive of the entire tradition of political philosophy. Marx subjects these concepts to a radical revision in the course of which he develops his metacritical approach.

Marx's metacritique of political philosophy is based on a specific construction of the relation between reason and need that derives largely from a Kantian interpretation of Rousseau. This limits the bearing of Marx's analysis, which simply assumes that the essence of the whole tradition is revealed in what is presumably its highest stage. Nevertheless, the analysis is at least an interesting hypothesis about political philosophy in general; furthermore, Marx's approach is sociologically justified because it is the doctrine of Rousseau–Kant that underlies the democratic ideology of the French Revolution as understood by later German liberalism.

Marx assumes with Rousseau and Kant that freedom is not whim but "obedience to self-given law."⁸ With them he also assumes that the rules of conduct cannot be derived from happiness as an end, but flow from the concept of autonomy: the rational individual owes it to himself to maintain his independence from both his own needs and the power of other men. Happiness is not, however, a matter of indifference for Rousseau, nor even for Kant. In Rousseau, for example, freedom is essentially the right and the power to do what is in one's own interests as a member of the community.

Freedom is a value in itself, but it is also bound up with the pursuit of collective self-interest in the higher sphere of politics.

It has been argued that in Kant, too, right conduct establishes general forms of social interaction that maximize the freedom of each individual to follow his merely “natural” end, which is happiness. Kant does not so much reject the pursuit of happiness as reduce it to an “anthropological” or empirical consideration, thereby clearly delineating the boundaries between deontological and utilitarian grounds for political action.⁹ The basis of this philosophical distinction is the praxeological one between ethics and economics. In the ethical form of action, the behavior of all subjects is intrinsically compatible, while economic behavior is conflictual and competitive. Ethical action achieves harmony through conformity to a universal rule. It can thus be called “rational.” The pursuit of material welfare is mere “content” of experience, determined by nature and therefore contingent. It is compatible in principle with ethical behavior but subordinate to it by right.

Marx argues that this construction of the relation of reason and need splits the ideal of freedom from the actual motives freedom serves. This split undercuts the protest against poverty in a formally “rational” society, reducing such protest to a marginal concern of merely empirical interest. Life becomes a means to rationality in a topsy-turvy vision likely to satisfy only those for whom the means of life are assured. What is required is a reformulation of political theory to establish the intrinsic rationality and universality of the pursuit of happiness and the satisfaction of the needs on which happiness depends.

Marx worked out this program in three stages, to which correspond three important early works. In the first part of the essay “On the Jewish Question” he attacks the problem of need, in order to show that the conflictual form of action associated with it is not natural and necessary, but historical and therefore subject to revolutionary change. This essay culminates in a new formulation of the concept of freedom compatible with the revision of the concept of need. The second stage of the analysis is developed in the “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction.” There Marx “deduces” the political and social conditions for a realization of his new concept of freedom. This text identifies the proletariat as the agent of a revolution that will abolish philosophy in realizing it. The last stage is reached in the *Economic and*

Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844. There Marx follows the thread back to its beginning in the concept of reason, which he now sets out to revise.

THE ANTINOMY OF REASON AND NEED

Marx's essay "On the Jewish Question" is an attempt to explain the contradiction between the ideal democratic state and the facts of capitalist social life. This contradiction results from the split between moral-political rationality (the basis of the state) and utilitarian-anthropological goals (the basis of the economy), as it appears in Rousseau and the French Revolution, filtered through Kant and Hegel. Marx argues that the split is reflected in the distinction between "man" and "citizen" in French revolutionary theory, which corresponds with the distinction between civil society, the sphere of private activity, and the state, the sphere of cooperative activity.

The state accumulates the determinations of rationality: reflexivity, necessity, and universality. It is the locus of "species life," a term derived from Feuerbach that signifies the consciously social and cooperative nature of man. The merely empirical functions of natural human existence are then consigned to the sphere of civil society where the individual lives his "real" life, as opposed to his ideal life as a rational citizen in the state. In civil society the individuals create a competitive hell. Human action does not achieve rational universality there, but is rather mere nature. Marx writes:

The perfect political state is, by its nature, the species life of man as opposed to his material life. All the presuppositions of this egoistic life continue to exist in civil society outside the political sphere, as qualities of civil society. Where the political state has attained to its full development, man leads, not only in thought, in consciousness, but in reality, in life, a double existence—celestial and terrestrial. He lives in the political community, where he acts simply as a private individual, treats other men as means, degrades himself to the role of a mere means and becomes the plaything of alien powers.¹⁰

In presenting the problem in this manner, Marx is not simply criticizing the egoism of bourgeois society. There is that, but more important is the fact that "species life" is decisively linked to reason in the concept of the state. Rationality in the political domain is exemplified by the cooperative aspect of human nature, which takes refuge in the state once it has been driven from civil society. As Marx put it in a letter to Ruge: "Reason has always existed, but not always in a rational form ... As far as actual life is concerned, the political state especially contains in all its modern forms the demands of reason, even where the political state is not yet conscious of

socialistic demands.”¹¹ The task now is to criticize the “irrational” and contradictory form in which reason exists in the modern state and to explain why it has been confined to this limited domain while actual life persists as a natural residue in civil society.

Marx seeks a solution through a critique of the limits of the concept of political revolution, which is still equivalent for him with the French Revolution. Political revolution aims to maximize individual freedom in private life while accepting its basis as received from the *ancien régime*, namely private property, which it purifies of feudal restrictions. “This revolution,” Marx says, “regards civil society, the sphere of human needs, labor, private interests and civil law, as the basis of its own existence, as a self-subsistent precondition, and thus as its natural basis.”¹²

Civil society appears essentially as a sphere of “nature” because it lacks the most important determinations of rationality. On the one hand, the political revolution does not conceive of civil society as a historical result, as the outcome of a process of mediation, hence as a self-reflected and self-developed sphere of reason. Instead, it is seen as the product of the unmediated natural inclinations of the egoistic individuals. These egoistic individuals are simply received by the revolution as “the passive, given result of the dissolution of society [of the *ancien régime*], an object of direct apprehension and consequently a natural object.”¹³

On the other hand, as a “natural” man, the merely given product of instinct and need, the egoistic individual of bourgeois society is plunged into a *bellum omnium contra omnes*. The activity of this egoistic individual consists in competitive struggle. Its form is merely particular and falls under no universal law. Marx claims that the contradiction between reason and need, the one mediated, necessary, and universal, the other empirically given, contingent, and particular, cannot be resolved on the ground of capitalist society.

Marx goes on to show that the bourgeois split in the individual between need and reason, man and citizen is a dialectical one in which each antinomial opposite requires the other for its existence. The polarity of man and citizen reflects a split in human nature, inevitable in capitalist society, between its empirical content and its rational essence. Marx writes, “Man as he really is, is seen only in the form of egoistic man, and man in his true nature only in the form of abstract citizen.”¹⁴ The empirical man of civil society is the really existing human being, an egoistic individual standing in

perpetual contradiction with its own rational duty as citizen. But only through the citizen can the man exist, that is, can the individual freely pursue private interests under the protection of the state. Meanwhile, the ideal citizen, as a rational actor, manifests the essence of what it is to be human. Yet the citizen is there only to protect and defend the rights of egoistic man. Existence and essence require each other and also stand in contradiction.

Political revolution founders on this antinomy. It confines itself to liberating a pregiven “nature” characterized by irrational private competition. In contrast to this nature, reason has a bare “artificial” existence as an “allegorical, moral person” in the citizen.¹⁵ Most abstractly formulated, the dilemma is an example of the fundamental antinomy of form and content central to Lukács’s version of the philosophy of praxis: *rational form here presides over empirical content not by mediating it and raising it to rational universality, but by leaving it be in its given irrational condition.*

At this very abstract level, Marx’s critique of formal democracy is structurally similar to Lukács’s critique of Kantian ethics. In Lukács’s terms, the antinomy of reason and need is an example of the more general antinomy of value and fact, of “ought” and “is,” that arises from the formalistic concept of reason. This concept of reason is based on the acceptance of “immediacy,” that is to say, on the failure to discover in the given facts those potentialities and tendencies embodying rationality and driving toward a rational end. Instead, the given is *defined* as indifferent to reason and value, as the merely empirical, factual residue of the process of formal abstraction in which the concept of reason is constructed. As Lukács puts it, “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.”¹⁶ This is the dilemma of bourgeois democracy as Marx explains it: political rationality presupposes an irrational social existence as its material substratum.

Marx and Lukács arrive at similar solutions to the problem they have identified. For Marx, it is necessary to transform civil society into a sphere of rational interaction. But paradoxically this is not a political goal. Marx was aware of the Hegelian critique of Jacobin voluntarism and quite self-consciously worked toward a non-voluntaristic formulation of revolutionary

theory. Marx believed political revolution to be through and through tied to class society because in it moral principles contrary to the material interests of the individuals must be imposed by the state on a separate civil society of private owners. A revolution to abolish class society and private property would only reproduce these evils were it to attempt to impose morality in opposition to their interests. Rather, a social revolution against the very principle of class would necessarily have to be rooted in these interests; only on this condition would it overcome the antinomy of state and civil society, reason and need.¹⁷

Marx writes, “The political revolution dissolves civil society into its elements [egoistic individuals] without revolutionizing these elements themselves or subjecting them to criticism.”¹⁸ What is required is precisely the “revolutionizing” of private and individual existence so that it too conforms with the demands of reason. The content of free activity must no longer stand in contradiction with freedom itself. In the more abstract terms of Lukács, this solution “consists in annulling [*aufzuheben*] that indifference of form toward content ... which is the basis of reified rationality.”¹⁹

At this point Marx derives what might be called a new “concept” or *Begriff* of free society from the *Aufhebung* of the contradiction between the concept and the object of traditional democratic political theory. He does not yet know concretely what rational social activity would consist in, but he knows the condition for such activity, namely, the transcendence of the opposition between private egoism and rational cooperation. Collective action in the common interest, action based on the reciprocal recognition of the humanity and needs of all, must transcend the narrow boundaries of politics and extend to economic life as well. Economic activity must have a rational form and human needs partake of rational universality through their reciprocal recognition.

Marx concludes:

Human emancipation will only be complete when the real individual man has absorbed into himself the abstract citizen; when as an individual man, in his everyday life, in his work, and in his relationships, he has become a species-being; and when he has recognized and organized his own powers (*forces propres*) as social powers so that he no longer separates this social power from himself as political power.²⁰

This condition for the fulfillment of the “demands of reason” is contained already in abstract form in the modern state. It is the new basis of

deontological grounds for a revolution that will realize philosophy.

In sum, Marx has shown that political philosophy accepts the irrational form of the pursuit of happiness (civil society) as a natural fact, and so applies the demands of reason only to the state. These demands concern the establishment of a true community through the reconciliation of antinomic opposites such as individual and society, private interest and common good, and all the similar displacements of the antinomy of content and form in the political domain. Marx demonstrates that community cannot be realized in the state, which rules a civil society based on a conflictual form of action. To fulfill the demands of reason it will be necessary to also realize them in civil society. To accomplish this, in turn, it is necessary to overcome what Lukács calls the “immediacy” of the sphere of need, its philosophically naturalized form. Marx conceptualizes this transformation as a social revolution that not only changes the state, but also “revolutioniz[es] ... the elements themselves.” Community can be realized at all levels of society, including the material level of the sphere of need, only when the pursuit of happiness has been transformed.

THE AGENT OF REVOLUTION

Marx’s next step consists in finding a possible agent for the radical transformation of man and citizen. This proves to be a more delicate matter than first appears. On the one hand, Marx must base his new concept of freedom on some actual social force to escape the merely abstract ethical relation of philosophy to reality that he has already satirized in his letter to Ruge. On the other hand, in attempting to base his philosophy on a real social force, there is the danger that he will reduce historical action to a mere instrument of philosophy, which latter would then be the real “subject” of the revolutionary process. From this subject–object relation the state would be reborn.

Marx first approaches this problem in a speculative form in the “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction.” There he arrives at an undialectical construction of the relation of theory to practice, philosophy to the proletariat, that does not so much overcome the abstract character of ethical demands as attribute this very abstractness to the demands of an entire social class. Lucien Goldmann suggests that this failure is not of merely biographical interest, but that the undialectical conclusions of this text anticipate the later undialectical theory-practice

relation in the socialist movement: “In fact, it suffices to replace the word philosophy in the ‘Introduction’ with the word Party (and at bottom in the two cases we are concerned with an ideology-elaborating group) in order to obtain a position very close to that expressed by Lenin in his work *What is To Be Done?*”²¹

Marx’s failure in this essay is due in part to his method, which differs radically from that of his later sociological and economic work. He does not start from an analysis of society but from philosophy. He takes his new philosophical concept of freedom and tests it against the various classes of society to find one that can serve as its representative in practice. As he puts it, “Revolutions need a passive element, a material basis ...”²² Or again, “Theory itself becomes a material force when it has seized the masses.”²³

Marx’s essay looks like a class analysis and indeed some features of it anticipate his later theory of class. He argues that previous, merely political revolutions have failed to achieve human emancipation because they have liberated not man but particular classes from oppression. The French bourgeoisie, for example, was oppressed by the nobility in terms of its particular interests. The wrongs it suffered appeared to all other classes to exemplify the general injustice of the society and so they supported its revolution. But the liberation of the bourgeoisie from these wrongs was not human emancipation but only bourgeois emancipation. It did not free humanity but only the bourgeoisie to pursue its interests, which in turn came into conflict with the interests of society as a whole.

Thus it is the very principle of class that limits political revolution. Marx concludes, and this distinguishes his early method from that of the later works, that his philosophy cannot be realized by a social class in the usual sense but only by “a class in civil society which is not a class of civil society, a class which is the dissolution of all classes.”²⁴ What he is seeking, in other words, is a class that is not a class, a “universal” class in something like Hegel’s sense of the term, with no particular interest at all, hence none opposed to that of society as a whole. Having arrived at a rather Hegelian formulation of the problem in his earlier essay, it is not surprising that he here reaches a variant of the Hegelian solution.

Marx argues that the proletariat alone of all classes can go beyond a merely political revolution to a general social revolution for it has no place within the existing system. It is, Marx claims, and here he was right for his time if not for ours, the product of the “disintegration” of other social strata,

with no sectional interests of its own to defend. For this reason its project can be truly universal in character, and can bring down the system of class that Marx now identifies as the source of egoistic individualism and the basis of civil society.

Marx concludes that only the proletariat can “revolutionize the elements themselves,” that is, transform what it is to be an individual in society, for it has no interest in conserving a particular status opposed to the whole, hence no interest in perpetuating the split between civil society and the state. The proletariat thus appears as the appropriate instrument of Marx’s philosophy and the demand for revolution is now addressed to this class. Marx writes, “Philosophy is the head of this emancipation and the proletariat is its heart. Philosophy can only be realized by the abolition of the proletariat, and the proletariat can only be abolished by the realization of philosophy.”²⁵

In spite of the elegant symmetry of this solution, it falls far short of resolving the problems Marx has posed for himself. Here theory and practice arise independently, and if proletarian revolution satisfies essential demands of theory, it is by no means clear that the proletariat intends this result in revolting. Lukács remarks:

The issue turns on the question of theory and practice. And this not merely in the sense given it by Marx when he says in his first critique of Hegel that “theory becomes a material force when it has seized the masses.” Even more to the point is the need to discover those features and determinations both of the theory and the ways of seizing the masses which convert the theory, the dialectical method, into a vehicle of revolution. We must extract the practical essence of the theory from the method and its relation to its object. If this is not done then “seizing the masses” could well turn out to be a will o’ the wisp. It might turn out that the masses were seized by quite different forces, that they were in pursuit of quite different ends. In that event, there would be no necessary connection between the theory and their activity, it would be a form that enables the masses to become conscious of their socially necessary or fortuitous actions, without ensuring a genuine and necessary bond between consciousness and action.²⁶

Lukács points out that in the same text Marx briefly lays down the basic condition for achieving real unity of theory and practice. Marx writes, “Will theoretical needs be directly practical needs? It is not enough that thought should seek to realize itself; reality must also strive toward thought.”²⁷ Both Marx and Lukács thus arrive at the conclusion that it is not only the “indifference of form toward content” that must be overcome, but also the indifference of content toward form.

Marx has so far seen the necessity of creating a form of rational interaction in the fulfillment of human needs and to this end he has

identified an agent capable of implementing the “demands of reason.” But still the form-content distinction persists because the needs themselves have not been raised to rational universality, only their form under socialism, i.e., cooperation. The proletariat appears as a passive instrument of philosophy because its revolt unconsciously serves the “cunning of reason” by realizing this form. An ungenerous observer could still insist that Marx is tossing “the roasted pigeons of absolute science” into the mouth of the proletariat. Marx now seems to realize that there is no solution within the framework of a formalistic concept of reason, and so he proceeds to a radical critique and revision of the concept of reason itself.

REVISION OF THE CONCEPT OF REASON

In the third phase of his early work, in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844, Marx sets out to unify theory and practice through revising the concept of reason as it is formulated both in the philosophical tradition and his own previous writings. To accomplish this, Marx returned to the study of need from a new angle. In the early essays, Marx found a *form* of rational interaction in the pursuit of happiness. But the *content* of the concept of need with which he worked remained unthematized and unanalyzed; it remained, in fact, immediate and hence irrational for Marx as it had for earlier political philosophy. This now becomes the decisive problem.

If there was a still dogmatic element in the earlier essays, it lay in Marx’s failure to derive rational social interaction, the “revolutionizing of the elements themselves,” from the needs it was to help satisfy. Instead, social revolution still appeared as a philosophical exigency from which the needy could incidentally benefit. The antinomy of reason and need is not abolished in the accidental convergence of philosophy and the proletariat, but rather reproduced in a new guise. The antinomies of philosophy and reality, theory and practice that appear in Marx’s discussion of historical agency are simply displacements of the original antinomy of political philosophy. To resolve these antinomies, Marx reverses the terms of the problem and attempts to found the demands of reason in the very nature of need. But this amounts to demonstrating that the content of the sphere of need is rational, is, in fact, *the* essential sphere of rationality for a metacritically reconstructed concept of reason.

How does Marx go about it? I will sketch the three dialectical “moments” of Marx’s metacritique and then elaborate each in some detail. Marx begins by showing that philosophical categories are displacements of social ones. For example, Marx is convinced that the problem of alienated labor is the real foundation of Hegel’s philosophy, but that Hegel does not pose it correctly.

Hegel’s standpoint is that of modern political economy. He conceives labour as the essence, the self-confirming essence of man ... [But] labour as Hegel understands and recognizes it is abstract mental labour. Thus, that which above all constitutes the essence of philosophy, the alienation of man knowing himself, or alienated science *thinking* itself, Hegel grasps as its essence.²⁸

The whole artificial, speculative, and ultimately theological structure of Hegel’s system results from his failure to thematize real labor as the ontological core of history.

Having relativized the philosophical categories with respect to social ones, Marx proceeds to the second “moment” of the metacritique: casting the social categories in the form of the philosophical ones. Reductionism is avoided by treating the now socially interpreted categories not as empirical facts but as moments in a philosophical dialectic. Thus Marx’s labor is not that of the economists but plays a properly philosophical role. Finally, in a third phase, the metacritique demonstrates the power of social action to resolve the contradictions of the philosophically recast social categories. In this phase Marx is able to show that the alienation of labor is a fundamental problem *within* philosophy, and not just a contingent social problem. This is impossible for Hegel who encounters the alienation of labor in history as no more than a passing concern.

In sum, Marx redefines the *terms* of Hegel’s philosophy, while retaining in part the *relations* Hegel establishes between these terms. Marx can then set the entire system in motion in history because of the social redefinition to which he has submitted it. It is clear that Marx’s new definitions do not correspond with Hegel’s and that he shifts back and forth in the *Manuscripts* between his own concepts and Hegel’s. But this is not just an ambiguous use of terms. Marx’s substantive thesis is that Hegel’s concepts are a misconstrual of a reality that Marx himself has described more accurately, that he is solving the very problems Hegel addressed in a mystified way.

The first phase of Marx’s metacritique is developed in the conclusion of the *Manuscripts* in the “Critique of Hegel’s Dialectic.” There Marx argues

that Hegel's term "alienation" stands for the uncomprehended object of thought. To found reason, that is, to demonstrate the unity of subject and object, "It is necessary, therefore, to surmount the object of consciousness. Objectivity as such is regarded as an alienated human relationship which does not correspond with the essence of man, self-consciousness."²⁹ The return of the alienated, the demonstration of its unity with the conscious subject, consists for Hegel only in surpassing the cognitive appearance of the object. Thus the appropriation of alienated reality is its comprehension. But, Marx argues, in its social application this method leaves the world exactly as it was before, tacking a certificate of rationality onto every form of oppression. Since alienation is, at least for Hegel, really overcome in philosophy, the need to change the world has vanished. Thought can congratulate itself on having *produced* the reality and thereby justifying it.

This is what Lukács means by philosophy remaining in the standpoint of immediacy. In *The Holy Family*, Marx and Engels describe it as "the mystery of speculative construction." They write:

Speculation on the one hand apparently freely creates its object *a priori* out of itself and, on the other hand, precisely because it wishes to get rid by sophistry of the rational and natural dependence on the object, falls into the most irrational and unnatural *bondage* to the object, whose most accidental and most individual attributes it is obliged to construe as absolutely necessary and general.³⁰

Hegel's error results from describing real alienation as the appearance of the alienation of reason. For Hegel the alienation of the individual in the *ancien régime* did not consist in reduction to an "abased, enslaved, abandoned, contemptible being," but in the fact that the state did not correspond with its concept, that, in practice, it could not command the rational obedience of its subjects. Once the state has been reformed, then it *can* command rational obedience even from an "abased, enslaved, abandoned, contemptible being." There is thus a merely contingent relation between philosophy and Marx's "real" alienation, which consists in human misery and dependence. The philosopher becomes the "enemy" of the human community in demonstrating to it that it should accept its fate without protest. He withdraws the moral credit of the oppressed by rationalizing the established order.

Marx argues that Hegel falls into "uncritical positivism and uncritical idealism" because he begins by narrowing the subject to a mere function of thought.

For Hegel, human life, man, is equivalent to self-consciousness. All alienation of human life is, therefore, nothing but alienation of self-consciousness. The alienation of self-consciousness is not regarded as the expression, reflected in knowledge and thought, of the real alienation of human life. Instead, actual alienation, that which appears real, is in its innermost hidden nature (which philosophy first discloses) only the phenomenal being of the alienation of real human life, self-consciousness.³¹

Hence for Hegel, “It is not the fact that the human being objectifies himself inhumanly, in opposition to himself, but that he objectifies himself by distinction from and in opposition to abstract thought, which constitutes alienation as it exists and as it has to be transcended.”³²

In opposition to the formula he ascribes to Hegel, “man = self-consciousness,” Marx argues that man is sensuous natural existence, and that, therefore, the subject is a natural being.³³ Its essential mode of activity is also natural: labor, not thinking. Similarly, Marx proposes to redefine the concept of the object as an essential correlate of this subject, existing proximally for the human senses. Note that Marx does not return to Locke. He does not found knowledge on the senses in the empiricist manner, but redefines subject and object in their living connection. Thus Marx’s “sense object” is not a Lockean “idea” but the actual object itself, as it exists for the senses and especially as an object of need.

Writing still under the influence of Heidegger in his early review of the *Manuscripts*, Marcuse relates the Marxian concept of sensuousness to Kant’s claim that objects are necessarily given through sense perception. Sensuousness is thus a transcendental precondition of access to objectivity in general and not just a material relationship to particular objects. Feuerbach emphasized the passive nature of the sensuous subject and its quality of neediness and dependence on its objects. These ideas culminate in Marx for whom the “distress and neediness that appear in man’s sensuousness are no more purely matters of cognition than his distress and neediness, as expressed in estranged labor, are purely economic. Distress and neediness do not describe the individual modes of man’s behavior at all; they are features of his whole *being*.”³⁴ As such, Marcuse concludes, they are ontological conditions correlated with features of being itself. With the establishment of these new definitions of the philosophical subject and object, the first phase of Marx’s metacritique is completed.

The second phase of the metacritique then proceeds to reconstitute the formal structure of philosophy of identity with the help of these redefined

terms. It is easy to overlook this moment of the metacritique since Marx insists that “real,” natural subjects must have “real,” natural objects. This seems to imply that objects and subjects are things standing in external relations. But the concept of “thinghood” is inadequate to grasp the essence of natural being.³⁵ Despite the mutual externality of real subjects and objects his remarks seem to imply, Marx goes on to reconstruct their relations in terms modeled on identity philosophy. Michel Henry notes, “the structure of the proletariat appears as the structure of consciousness itself such as this is understood in German metaphysics.”³⁶

In this second phase Marx revises the concepts of need and reason to overcome their antinomic formulation in political philosophy. This revision consists in transferring the formal attributes of reason to need. In Hegel, reason is self-reflective, it mediates itself in the course of its own self-development in history; again, for Hegel reason is also universal, both in the narrow sense that its ethical postulates apply equally to all, but also in the broader sense that its unconditioned categories apply to the whole of reality. The unity of subject and object is the foundation of this concept of rationality, the essential demand of reason that establishes reason’s *imperium*. Marx transfers these determinations of rationality wholesale onto “man.” And since “man” in Marx’s sense is a being of need, need no longer appears as the irrational content of a formalistic rationality, but is itself charged with the functions of rationality.

For Marx the philosophical subject is now a natural being, man. As such, this subject encounters its object, nature, in a natural way, through need. The ontologically primordial sphere is not that of natural science, in which external relations prevail, but the sphere of need in which subject and object are essentially related. Bertell Ollman suggests the concept of “internal relations” to describe this.³⁷ Marx writes, “As a natural, embodied, sentient, objective being [man] is a suffering, conditioned and limited human being, like animals and plants. The objects of his drives exist outside himself as objects independent of him, yet they are objects of his needs, essential objects which are indispensable to the exercise and confirmation of his faculties.”³⁸ Again: “the need of an object is the most evident and irrefutable proof that the object belongs to *my* nature and that the existence of the object for me and its property are the property appropriate to my being.”³⁹

Were this simply a statement about human physiology it would of course be completely banal. It is no news that hunger requires food. However, Marx is attempting to make a statement about being in general, about ontology, and not just about the empirical being of the human animal. He explicitly affirms that this is an ontological relation, and not merely a fact of physiology. He writes, “Man’s feelings, passions, etc., are not merely anthropological characteristics in the narrower sense, but are true *ontological* affirmations of being (nature).”⁴⁰ What is more, he proposes a theory of the historical evolution of human need that indicates that it is not only hunger that is objectified in food, but the higher needs of the social human being that find their essential object in the natural world. In this sense the interdependence of man and nature takes on a larger metaphysical significance that I will call their “participatory identity.” Hence Marx says that “Nature is the inorganic body of man,” to express the idea that man and nature, subject and object, are indissolubly joined.⁴¹

Now too the labor through which need is satisfied will also appear as an ontological category in the forms of philosophy of identity. Labor is in fact the actual process of unifying subject and object, man and nature. Here Marx passes from the abstract and immediate positing of the unity of subject and object in need, to a reflective, mediated unity through the production of the object of need by the subject in labor.

Such philosophically reconceptualized labor Marx calls “objectification,” the natural activity of the naturalized subject, man. When human beings transform their environment through labor, they “objectify” their needs and faculties. This they must do, for as a natural being man must “express and authenticate himself in being as well as in thought,”⁴² The result is a “humanized” nature within which human beings can fulfill themselves and unfold their potentialities in a continuous process of self- and world-creation. Human existence is confirmed and universalized in the transformed objects of labor and, by extension, in all of being. Marx writes,

It is only when objective reality everywhere becomes for man in society the reality of human faculties, human reality, and the reality of his own faculties, that all objects become for him the objectification of himself. The objects then confirm and realize his individuality. They are his own objects, which is to say that man himself becomes the object.⁴³

Marx uses the word “human” here in an emphatic sense: “Man is not merely a natural being; he is a *human* natural being ... Consequently,

human objects are not natural objects as they present themselves directly.”⁴⁴ To be human in this sense is to be social. Thus the humanization of nature reveals social dimensions of objects hidden to alienated man. The full reality of nature is known to an attuned observer, not to “crude” perception. The “non-musical ear” knows less than the musical ear.⁴⁵ It misses the truth of what it hears. Marx thus distinguishes between a merely animal relation to the world and the revealing of a meaning. It is in the recognition of meaning that subject and object are united. “Thus *society* is the accomplished union of man with nature, the veritable resurrection of nature, the realized naturalism of man and the realized humanism of nature.”⁴⁶

Finally, the third phase of the metacritique derives philosophical and political consequences from these formulations, consequences that appear once the philosophical terms have been reconstituted in history where they can be set in motion through social practice. At stake here is the meaning of the concept of “alienation” which, Marx argues, stands in contradiction to the “human essence.” Hegel’s concept of alienation is now revised to mean a specific, degraded type of objectification in which the transformed world turns around and dominates its creators instead of serving them. The individuals cannot recognize or develop themselves through alienated objects, but are crushed and oppressed by them. Because alienation, as “loss of the object,” is not just a social category but also a determination of being, it recapitulates the antinomy of subject and object. In alienation, subject and object stand in conflict, as opposed principles requiring mediation.

Identity philosophy demands that the object appear to speculation as a product of the subject, but for Marx this production process is now a real one, occurring in history and not in the head of a philosopher. Alienation is a problem for philosophy, splitting subject from object, but not a problem that could be solved in pure thought through a speculative construction. Marx notes that “the medium through which alienation occurs is itself a practical one.”⁴⁷ Its transcendence will also have to be practical, requiring a reversal in the relations between human beings and the products of their labor. This then is the “real” alienation that must be overcome and that Hegel confounds with objectivity itself.

Philosophy now appears not as a means through which a subject–object unity is achieved, but rather as the reflection in thought of their unification through labor. If this unity is obstructed by alienation, philosophy too will fail. Thus where Hegel saw actual alienation, alienation in Marx’s sense of

the term, as the phenomenal form of the alienation of self-consciousness, Marx reverses the terms and defines the alienation of self-consciousness as the phenomenal form of actual alienation.

This alienation of self-consciousness consists in religion and idealistic philosophy. Human beings create a world through labor that dominates and dispossesses them; in thought too the products of the mind become dominating powers. The spiritual and intellectual struggle to understand alienation gives rise to myths and speculative constructions. The individuals rationalize their powerlessness and learn to accept its inevitability as a positive good, “the rose in the cross of the present.”⁴⁸ In Hegel this form of artificial reconciliation with alienation nevertheless points toward the solution by mythologizing the actual unity of subject and object in labor.

Such alienated thought, Marx believes, cannot resolve its own antinomies. The concept of reason cannot be founded so long as alienation is immediately accepted in reality. It is the fact that philosophy remains in immediacy, that its transcendence of alienation takes place merely in thought and not in real life, that is responsible for the turn toward a supra-sensible reality. But if the overcoming of alienation in practice is essential to the liberation of reason from theological myths, then revolution itself is a *methodological* necessity for philosophy.

A characteristic theory–practice relation now emerges, similar to that which Lukács establishes in his early Marxist work. If theory attempts to overcome alienation in pure thought, it will fall into various secularized forms of religion. Yet alienation is the obstacle that must be overcome in order to found reason, for to accept it means to fail to unite subject and object, to demonstrate the production of the latter by the former. Thus theory can found itself only by passing into practice to destroy alienation in reality. Marx writes:

It is only in a social context that subjectivism and objectivism, spiritualism and materialism, activity and passivity, cease to be antinomies and thus cease to exist as such antinomies. The resolution of the theoretical contradictions is possible only through practical means, only through the practical energy of man. Their resolution is not by any means, therefore, only a problem of knowledge, but is a real problem of life which philosophy was unable to solve precisely because it saw there a purely philosophical problem.⁴⁹

The purpose of theory is to provide the proletariat with the “intellectual arms” it needs to solve not only its own problems but those of philosophy as well. No longer does theory appear as the real subject of this process,

representing rational form to the proletariat, which latter, as mere need or factual content, is a “passive,” “material” base. Rather, the proletariat’s needs are rational in the sense that they reveal the truth of nature. The contradictions the proletariat experiences in its existence are not accidentally related to the contradictions of philosophy, but are one and the same. Theory and practice have been united.

In reaching this conclusion Marx finally derives a wholly new ground for revolution: the ultimate demand of reason is rationality; revolution alone can satisfy this demand by resolving the antinomies of philosophy. If this is true, then reason itself requires revolution, and every rational individual should lend a hand.

FROM MARX TO LUKÁCS

This chapter has shown that Marx’s early metacritique of philosophy is in fact a critique of objectivism and formalism, both in politics and more generally in the theory of rationality. These ideas directly influence later Marxist theory, notably the Frankfurt School. In [Chapter 4](#), I will show that Lukács’s early Marxist philosophy is also deeply influenced by Marx’s, even though the *Manuscripts* were still unpublished at the time of the composition of *History and Class Consciousness*. Insofar as the theory presented in the *Manuscripts* is concerned, this influence is therefore indirect, mediated by Marx’s *Capital*. It is precisely because Lukács studied *Capital* to find in it the basis of a metacritique of formal rationality that he was able to reconstruct and extend its philosophical dimension in a manner paralleling Marx’s own early work.

Marx arrived at the study of the economy not merely through a change in interests, but through a philosophical argumentation in the course of which he demonstrated that economics is the science of alienation. It charts the original and basic alienation from which its philosophical forms are derived. Although Marx later abandoned the philosophy of praxis of his early works, the trace of this original discovery of the economy is preserved in his later ones. This trace appears most clearly in the continuing metacritical approach.

Capital criticizes formalistic abstractions by bringing them into relation to the social substratum from which they were originally derived. It is true that in *Capital* these are no longer philosophical abstractions but economic ones; however, Marx treats these latter in the same way he had treated the

former in the *Manuscripts*. The social contradictions he discovers are, in effect, philosophical antinomies reconstructed in a domain where they can be resolved through social action. The “secret” of *Capital*, its frequent obscurities, the “coquetting” with Hegel, the significance Marx attached to it as the basis of a theory of socialist revolution, all this testifies to his fidelity to the original metacritical method. Thus *Capital* is more than a scientific work on economics; it is also a chapter in the history of philosophy.

However, given its economic focus, *Capital* cannot adequately formulate and resolve the philosophical problems that it implicitly addresses. This leaves a gap between the critique of capitalism and the socialist solution that is often filled by making pseudoscientific and determinist claims for the economic theory. Whatever Marx himself may have said along these lines on occasion, Marxist economics establishes no causal connection between capitalism and socialism. As I will explain in [Chapter 4](#), socialist revolution and the transition to a socialist society involve a type of cultural change that cannot be theorized on the model of those processes of “natural history” to which the mature Marx once compared them. On the contrary, Marx’s early metacritique of philosophy comes much closer to anticipating the cultural approach that can alone connect the economic theory of capitalism with socialism.

This was Lukács’s great insight: the discovery that the critique of formal rationality implicit in Marx’s economic works is the key to developing a theory of revolution. Lukács thus based his argument on a work that responded only implicitly, methodologically, to his own preoccupations. He made this implicit dimension of Marxism explicit by reconstructing its metacritical premises. Then, generalizing Marx’s concepts, Lukács reformulated the philosophical implications of the economic theory as the basis of a theory of revolution. To accomplish this, Lukács had to supply the missing moment in the metacritique at the basis of Marxist economics, the moment in which philosophy itself operates with the historicized philosophical concepts to resolve simultaneously both historical and philosophical problems. In taking this step beyond Marx, Lukács developed an original philosophy of praxis. But before turning to it, I need to discuss further the problem of nature in the early Marx. This problem, which first appears in Marx’s *Manuscripts*, is central to philosophy of praxis in all its forms.

¹ John Locke, “An Essay Concerning the True Origin, Extent and End of Civil Government,” in *Social Contract*, ed. E. Barker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962), 133.

² *Ibid.*, 15.

³ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “The Social Contract,” in Barker, ed., *Social Contract*, 175.

⁴ Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction,” in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, trans. and ed. T. B. Bottomore (London: C. A. Watts, 1963), 52.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Herbert Marcuse, “Philosophy and Critical Theory,” in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), 137.

⁷ Karl Marx, “Letter to Ruge,” in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, trans. and ed. L. Easton and K. Guddat (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 213.

⁸ Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Du Contrat Social* (Paris: Gonthier, 1962), 247, my translation. Barker’s edition has the tendentiously incorrect “to obey the law laid down by society is to be free.” Cf. *Social Contract*, 186. For more on the relation of Rousseau and Kant, see Ernst Cassirer, *Rousseau, Kant and Goethe* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963).

⁹ Cf. Jeffrie G. Murphy, *Kant: The Philosophy of Right* (London: Macmillan, 1970), Chapter III.

¹⁰ Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, 13.

¹¹ Marx, “Letter to Ruge,” 213.

¹² Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” 30.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 30.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *HCC*, 160.

¹⁷ This critique is basic to understanding the Marxian conception of socialism and socialist politics. It shows that Marx was at least aware of the type of problems raised by conservative critics such as Leo Strauss or J. L. Talmon, who see in Marxism simply another version of Jacobin voluntarism. For more on Marx’s approach, see especially his early essay, “Critical Notes on ‘The King of Prussia and Social Reform.’” in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*.

¹⁸ Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” 30.

¹⁹ *HCC*, 126.

²⁰ Marx, “On the Jewish Question,” 31.

²¹ Lucien Goldmann, “Philosophie et sociologie dans l’oeuvre du jeune Marx: Contribution à l’étude du problème,” in *Marxisme et Sciences Humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970), 148.

²² Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction,” in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, 53.

²³ *Ibid.*, 52.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 58.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁶ *HCC*, 2.

²⁷ Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction,” 54.

²⁸ Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 203.

²⁹ *Ibid.* Jean Hyppolite has written a defense of Hegel in response to such criticisms. See “Aliénation et objectivation,” in Jean Hyppolite, *Etudes sur Marx et Hegel* (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1965). For a response to Hyppolite, see István Mészáros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 242–5.

³⁰ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The Holy Family, or Critique of Critical Criticism*, trans. R. Dixon and C. Dutte (Moscow: Progress, 1975), 70.

³¹ Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 204.

³² Ibid., 201.

³³ Ibid., 203.

³⁴ Herbert Marcuse, "New Sources on the Foundations of Historical Materialism," in *Heideggerian Marxism*, ed. R. Wolin and J. Abromeit (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 100.

³⁵ Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," 206.

³⁶ Michel Henry, *Marx: A Philosophy of Human Reality*, trans. K. McLaughlin (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1998), 72–3.

³⁷ Bertell Ollman, *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971), 81.

³⁸ Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," 207.

³⁹ Marx, "Money and Alienated Man," in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, 273.

⁴⁰ Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," 189.

⁴¹ Ibid., 126–7.

⁴² Ibid., 208.

⁴³ Ibid., 160–1.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 208.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 160–1.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 157.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 130.

⁴⁸ The phrase is, of course, Hegel's. See, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 12.

⁴⁹ Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," 162. That the concept of reason is truly at issue in Marx seems to me to be a necessary implication of his discussion of the reform of the sciences. Cf. Ibid., 163–4.

CHAPTER THREE

Metacritique of the Concept of Nature

MARX'S CONCEPT OF NATURE

As I explained in the previous chapter, Marx sought to realize philosophy and to develop a new concept of reason based on the practical identity of subject and object metacritically reconstructed in the domain of labor. The dialectic of the natural subject and object of labor now carries the weight of idealistic identity theory.¹ This is the first appearance in philosophy of praxis of its most difficult conundrum, which Lukács and the Frankfurt School must also address. The problem can be formulated simply: how can the subject, once naturalized, constitute its natural objects? This chapter will focus primarily on Marx's solution. In conclusion, and in anticipation of the detailed discussion in [Chapter 6](#), I will introduce some basic resources developed by later thinkers addressing the same problem.

Marx writes, "[that] the physical and mental life of man, and nature, are interdependent means simply that nature is interdependent with itself, for man is a part of nature."² By itself such a statement only classifies man as a natural being without elucidating the essence of nature or establishing man's active powers in the natural world. However, Marx aims to prove more than this; he wants to convince us that the unity of man and nature results from human labor, which objectifies human faculties in transforming natural objects. This is the form in which human creative power in nature is most completely expressed. But since man is a natural being, it is also the self-relation of nature.

Alfred Schmidt summarizes Marx's conception as follows:

The hidden nature speculation in Marx [holds that] the different economic formations of society which have succeeded each other historically have been so many modes of nature's self-mediation. Sundered into two parts, man and material to be worked on, nature is always present to itself in this division. Nature attains self-consciousness in men, and amalgamates with itself by virtue of their theoretical-practical activity. Human participation in something alien and external to them appears at first to be something equally alien and external to nature; but in fact it proves to be a "natural

condition of human existence,” which is itself a part of nature, and it therefore constitutes nature’s self-movement. Only in this way can we speak meaningfully of a “dialectic of nature.”³

Marx’s materialism is thus quite different from all previous materialisms since he believes that human consciousness is a moment in nature’s self-development and not an external spectator on the latter.

However, his position is not without problems. Throughout the *Manuscripts* one senses that there is something wrong with his concept of subject–object identity. In claiming that “man himself becomes the object,” to cite but one example among many, he seems to hover between hyperbole and absurdity. Reading such passages, one wonders if he really means it. The grandeur but also the paradox of this culminating aspect of the theory consists in the universality of Marx’s claims for human labor. He is not content to confine human creative powers to the narrow domain that mankind actually and potentially transforms in an imaginable labor process, but wants to extend those powers to “objective reality everywhere.” Under what conditions can human beings *qua* social beings, with their fully developed subjective capacities, recognize consubstantiality with “objective reality everywhere” as “the reality of human faculties”? Will not the realm of independent nature always transcend society, hence the human subject? In short, will not human beings always be strangers in the universe, whatever their social interactions?

Marx seems to argue the contrary, that under the appropriate social conditions it will be possible to recognize the essence of nature as human activity. Formally, this recognition exactly parallels Vico’s notion that history is knowable as a human product. Just as this notion opens the way to the dereification of history and the recognition of human creative power in the historical domain, so Marx wants to dereify nature and to attribute to human beings a comparable creative power in the natural domain.

The paradox results from casting the dialectics of the labor process in the form of identity philosophy, metacritically redefining the subject and object as labor and material. The resulting theory is profoundly unsatisfactory. It is not only that some things are unimaginable as potential objects of labor; equally questionable is the reduction of the fundamental human relation to nature to labor. It is by no means self-evident that the transformative impulse is the primary one through which being is disclosed. In everyday coping, play, aesthetic appreciation, recognition, and contemplation humans relate to being perhaps just as fundamentally as they

do in labor without attempting to remake objects in their own image. And to these less active modes of involvement in the world there correspond dimensions of the real perhaps just as fundamental as any revealed to the laboring subject.

Marx is reacting against idealism, which sums up access to reality in the concept of consciousness. And he may well be right to protest that a more fundamental practical relation to the real should have priority. Yet the imaginable extension of the concept of an object of consciousness is in truth far greater than that of an object of labor. Thus if a Fichte or a Berkeley were to declare that “consciousness itself becomes the object,” we might disagree with the philosophical premises that lead to such a conclusion, but at least the notion of consciousness refers potentially to every possible object. The idealistic conclusion need not be rejected out of hand because consciousness self-evidently *requires* an object irreducible to it.⁴

Marx thus encounters a barrier to generalizing his concept of the object of labor from the human scale to the totality of nature. The universe is not, in principle, mere raw material: the very idea is either absurd or abhorrent. Even admitting that labor achieves subject-object identity in a partial domain such as history, this still falls short of the requirements of philosophy of praxis. As a result, the whole Kantian problematic of the thing-in-itself threatens to return, for alongside history, in which subject and object are one in labor, another sphere of nature and natural science must be distinguished in which man is *not* the object.

Instead of accepting the Kantian view, Marx elaborated a theory of sensation in which the senses “become directly theoreticians in practice,” acting on their objects as does the worker on his raw materials.⁵ The senses, unlike labor, have traditionally been conceived as a potentially universal mode of reception, relating to all possible (real) objects. The senses can therefore take over where actual labor leaves off, supporting the assertion of a universal identity of subject and object in nature.

Marx’s theory of sensation is distinguished by his metacritical reconstruction of the senses as a historically evolving dimension of human being. He argues that the object of sensation contains a wealth of meaning available only to the trained and socially developed sense organ. In alienated society man experiences nature as a dog or cat might experience a symphony. And, just as the “musical” ear recognizes itself “affirmed” in the music it hears, so will liberated humanity recognize itself affirmed in

nature. “The distinctive character of each faculty is precisely its characteristic essence and thus also the characteristic mode of its objectification, of its objective real, living being. It is therefore not only in thought, but through all the senses that man is affirmed in the objective world.”⁶ On these terms, the emancipated senses are active transformers of their objects and not mere passive receptors; they can be understood on the model of the labor process as engaging in a theoretical-practical activity, objectifying human nature and releasing the implicit potentialities of the material on which they work, in this case as meanings rather than as artifacts.

For the early Marx, the senses are alienated in the alienation of labor. Only under communism can the senses achieve their highest pitch of perfection. When the revolution transforms the senses by abolishing alienation it attains the core of being itself, as required by the philosophy of praxis: “The suppression of private property is, therefore, the complete emancipation of all the human qualities and senses ... The eye has become a human eye when its object has become a human, social object, created by man and destined for him.”⁷ Revolution unites subject and object in liberated sensation and thereby reveals the truth of nature.

But can one really speak of “truth” in this context? Conceivably, the historically evolved senses of communist man are different from those of man in class society, but are the senses in any case significantly related to the truth about nature? Is it not natural science that discovers this truth, often by the most arduous effort to transcend the given social-sensory horizon toward deeper representations? In the *Manuscripts*, Marx explicitly rejects the epistemology implied by these questions, and with it, the existing natural sciences as well.

Marx insists that he is seeking the “unifying truth” of “both idealism and materialism.”⁸ Given his quasi-naturalistic assumptions, he cannot claim that the senses “posit” their objects in some sort of prior constitution. This would be to deny the reality of nature while affirming the natural, sensory character of man, an obvious contradiction. He therefore argues, on the one hand, that the sense object is real and not simply a product of consciousness. On the other hand, he rejects any notion of a thing-in-itself transcendent to perception in principle. His position is compatible with neither realism nor Kantianism.

Marx cannot allow, as does British empiricism, that the sense object is merely a sign, causally (or otherwise) connected with a “real” object. If the sensed object is only a sign or image, then no real unity of subject and object is achieved as Kant’s first *Critique* makes abundantly clear. The “real” object is not “humanized” by sensation in realistic and critical epistemology, but flees behind experience to where it can be reached through thought alone, if at all. Marx therefore rejects the attempt to conceive nature as a reality transcendent to sensation: “Nature too,” he writes, “taken abstractly, for itself, and rigidly separated from man, is nothing for man.”⁹ To this “abstract” nature, he opposes the concrete, lived nature of direct sensory experience. Marx’s synthesis of idealism and materialism thus culminates in a unique form of phenomenism.

Marx rejects the natural sciences for their “abstract materialistic, or rather idealistic orientation.”¹⁰ His critique might be elaborated more fully as follows. The materialist interpretation of science asserts the reality of the ideal objects of scientific laws, in contrast with the mere appearances perceived by the senses; but the ideal objects of science are objects of thought, and so via materialism we return to the basic premise of idealism, the notion that in its essence being is an object of thought and not of a natural, sensuous subject. This is merely a secularized version of the theological priority of spirit over matter. Marx’s own radical epistemological atheism insists on locating both appearance and reality in the sphere of sensation, as levels or degrees in the unveiling of what is. The truth of the object does not lie beyond sensation or in thought but in truer and deeper sensation, in the developed and liberated senses of social man. Only on this assumption can Marx overcome the split between man and nature threatening his philosophy of praxis.

Now science must be transformed in its methods and its structure. Following Feuerbach (and definitely not Locke), Marx states: “Sense experience ... must be the basis of all science.”¹¹ Presumably, the perceptions of the liberated senses can be raised to consciousness by a new science although it is difficult to imagine in what form. Furthermore, the division of natural and social science must be overcome: the very object of natural science has been *aufgehoben* and in its place stands the “humanized” nature disclosed to liberated sensation. “There will be,” Marx prophesizes, “a single science.”¹² Marx seems to be saying that a reformed

science will, in studying nature, really be studying the objectifications of man's socialized senses, hence man himself.

The first object for man—man himself—is nature, sense experience; and the particular sensuous human faculties, which can only find objective realization in natural objects, can only attain self-knowledge in the science of natural being ... The social reality of nature and human natural science, or the natural science of man, are identical expressions.¹³

In these passages, Marx takes the step that Lukács later refused to take: the rejection of the existing natural sciences as the precondition for a radical historicization of the concept of nature. Undergirding the “abstractly conceived” nature of the existing sciences there is a primordial practical relation of human subject to natural object. This practical relation cannot be explained as an external interaction between the sort of entities conceived by natural science, but constitutes a more fundamental reality.

The next step, which Marx did not take, would be the development of a philosophy of nature based on a teleological concept of being as in essence subordinate to human aims. Rather than go this route, Marx rejects his entire early philosophy. In the works immediately following the *Manuscripts*, particularly in the “Theses on Feuerbach” and *The German Ideology*, he begins to backtrack. He first rejects not so much the premises of the *Manuscripts* as the conclusion they were supposed to establish, the identity of subject and object. In *The German Ideology*, for example, Marx sets out at one point to prove that the entire universe is a product of human sensuous activity. But, in the very middle of a passage that could have been lifted from the *Manuscripts*, he suddenly notes, “Of course the priority of external nature remains, and all this has no application to the original men produced by *generatio aequivoca*.”¹⁴

This is a damaging admission from the point of view of his earlier philosophy of praxis: it presupposes that nature can be meaningfully conceived apart from man, and so presumably, comprehended in abstraction from its sensuous appearance. Perhaps this implication still makes Marx a bit uncomfortable, for he immediately tries to patch things up. He continues, “But this differentiation has meaning only insofar as man is considered distinct from nature,” a perspective which, Marx assures us, is irrelevant in the modern world where industry has transformed nature except “on a few Australian coral islands of recent origin.”¹⁵

These are schoolboy squirmings compared with the daring and rigor of the *Manuscripts*, and show to what extent Marx has abandoned his philosophy of praxis even though some of his arguments still *tend* toward establishing his old conclusions. Such hesitation and wavering occur several times in the first part of *The German Ideology*, where occasional passages prepare proofs of the identity of subject and object despite the fact that Marx now ridicules the very terminology in which such a conclusion would have to be stated. Soon even this backhanded reference to the philosophy of praxis of the *Manuscripts* is dropped, and Marx plunges into economic and historical research.

Marx's later concept of nature is not based on philosophical arguments but on a materialistic faith in science. Yet some important aspects of the philosophy of praxis survive the abandonment of its most daring theses. The early metacritique continues to influence his later works. It will be recalled that the metacritique has three moments, the first two of which reconstruct the categories of identity philosophy in social reality, while the third resolves the philosophical antinomies of that philosophy through projecting the historical transformation of the reconstructed terms. The later works restrict the metacritique to reified forms of social thought. The metacritically reconstructed categories still interact dialectically in history, but the resolution of the antinomies no longer has ontological import.

It was left to Engels to elaborate an ontology corresponding to the social theory of the mature Marx. He did so in numerous articles and books that espouse an unabashed naturalism. Marx himself seems to have accepted this as a satisfactory substitute for the philosophy of praxis. Lukács was, of course, aware of Engels', views that he condemned as precritical, still unawakened from the "dogmatic slumbers" Kant interrupted for all time. On this point Lukács is undoubtedly right.

EXISTENTIAL MARXISM

Central to philosophy of praxis is the idea that the truth of being is historical becoming; but it is also from this idea that the antinomy of society and nature arises. This philosophy attempts to transpose the concept of subject-object identity from metaphysics to social practice. In support of this project, philosophy of praxis argues that being is disclosed to the subject in a practical relation such as needing, laboring, or historical action. The dialectical interdependence of the practically related subject and object

is then taken as paradigmatic for subject–object relations in general. The antinomy arises from difficulties in understanding the concept of nature on these terms.

The methodological dimension of this antinomy concerns the relation of theory to practice. So-called “external” nature is a privileged object of theoretical contemplation. As Lukács argues, even the corresponding technical practice in which nature is manipulated is basically “contemplative” in the sense that it passively obeys the laws disclosed to theory. The matter stands quite differently with society and history that are humanly created in their very being. Practice actually produces the objects that appear in their (created) independence as objects of thought and which in turn reproduce the practice that produced them. Here the objects of theory are objectifications of practice, which latter is therefore no merely derivative function of theory. The contingency of the laws of social life on practice is without parallel in the domain of natural science.

At issue in the ontological question of whether “external” nature has priority over social reality or vice versa is the methodological question of whether theory or practice has epistemological priority. In turn, on this depends whether or not subject and object can be united. In the customary representation of theory, subject and object are not identical, but distinctly separate. The ideal of truth as correspondence of thing and intellect presupposes the separation of the terms it brings into relation. The subject of theory occupies a position beyond all but cognitive connection with its objects, and unites with them not in reality but in knowledge, in a specular relation, i.e., speculatively.

This tenuous subject–object relation of theory is utterly unlike the practical relation the early Marx requires. He insists that subject–object identity be demonstrated by explaining the real process of production of the thought-objects of theory. This involves no merely reflective correspondence of thought and things, but an active creating. But can practice serve this ambitious philosophical purpose?

Marx argues that only “real” objects can exist in practical relations. But by “real” objects we usually mean objects that are independent of the subject; it is thus that we distinguish an objective thing from a subjective one that can only exist “in the mind.” We assume that the reality of objects is verified in knowledge, by which we distinguish the real from the illusory or misconstrued. Objectivity is revealed not to practice, but to thought; it

involves not the strong dialectical interrelatedness of a doing, but the weak and contingent relation of a knowing. Since our ordinary conception of practice presupposes the objectivity of its moments, the very attempt to make practice primordial appears to be self-contradictory.¹⁶

This contradictory result is reached because Marx rejects idealism and insists on defining the subject–object relation as a “real” practical relation between “real” objects, without sufficiently clarifying his concept of reality. He intends for practice to found objectivity, and yet he implies the contrary, that objectivity is independent of practice and founding for it. His philosophy of praxis would thus be bounded by some sort of traditional ontology and its corresponding form of contemplative rationality. This boundary is reached in interpretations such as Habermas’s in which nature “in-itself” lies beyond the horizon of social practice as a permanently reified external substratum society can never touch in its being but only know.

Some Marxists have concluded that a speculative nature philosophy can complete the philosophy of praxis, once and for all subordinating nature to historical practice.¹⁷ They attempt to conceive a “practice” prior to and founding for the objectivity of nature. In such theories, society’s meaning-positing functions are conceived as a generative principle for nature, or nature itself is conceived as a living organism of which humanity would be the conscious faculty. Yet even here, in the context of the most ambitious attempt to found philosophy of praxis, the antinomy of society and nature reappears. The historical practice which, for Marxism, founds the objectivity of social objects is the “real” practice of identifiable human subjects and social groups. The practice in which speculative philosophy conceives the constitution of nature does not have this “real” character, but is a conceptual mythology.

To the extent that Marx hints at a solution to the problem, he looks to a revision of the concept of objectivity as the precondition for conceiving subject–object identity with real subjects and objects. Unfortunately, he does not follow through adequately on this requirement of a consistent philosophy of praxis. He offers daring suggestions for transforming the concept of nature, but he barely sketches the metacritical revision of the concept of objectivity on which they depend. We will see that Lukács employs different conceptual means to address a similar problem with somewhat more plausible results, if not entirely successfully. It is still

noteworthy that both Marx and Lukács arrive independently at a similar break with the usual concept of objectivity.

The essence of their approach is the rejection of the hypothetical absolute subject that serves as an epistemological model for traditional theory of knowledge. The absolute subject has the power to shatter the hard-won unity of subject and object by positing external nature as reality. They therefore deny that it is meaningful even to imagine an observer that could perceive and question the universe from “outside,” from a disincarnated position of pure thought, the famous “view from nowhere.” In its regulative employment as an ideal of knowledge this hypothesis is an ultimate theological postulate they must expunge from philosophy.

The epistemology that derives from their critique is closer to Nietzsche’s than to Hegel’s, with whom Marx and Lukács are usually compared. It is true that, like Hegel, they regard knowledge as a historical outcome, but they deny the possibility of a final synoptic wisdom such as that in which Hegel’s philosophy culminates. Rather, the tendency to which they belong would say with Nietzsche:

Let us, from now on, be on our guard against the hallowed philosophers’ myth of a “pure, will-less, painless, timeless knower” let us beware of the tentacles of such contradictory notions as “pure reason,” “absolute knowledge,” “absolute intelligence.” All these concepts presuppose an eye such as no living being can imagine, an eye required to have no direction, to abrogate its active and interpretive powers—precisely those powers that alone make of seeing, seeing something. All seeing is essentially perspective and so is all knowing.¹⁸

This existentialist reference is not arbitrary, for at least in their critique of objectivism, Marx and Lukács are “existential” Marxists. Both assert the inescapable involvement of a finite subject of knowledge in the object of its knowledge; and both reject the skeptical consequences that usually derive from this premise by revising the concept of objectivity metacritically in accordance with the epistemological potentialities of a finite being.

There is a brief argument in Marx’s *Manuscripts* that makes these points with startling effect. In a discussion of the cosmological proof of the existence of God, Marx demands that an imaginary interlocutor who questions the source of the universe reflect on his own position in relation to the question:

If you ask a question about the creation of nature and man you abstract from nature and man. You suppose them non-existent and you want me to demonstrate that they exist. I reply: give up your abstraction and at the same time you abandon your question. Or else, if you want to maintain your abstraction, be consistent, and if you think of man and nature as non-existent, think of yourself too as

non-existent, for you are also man and nature. Do not think, do not ask me any questions, for as soon as you think and ask questions your abstraction from the existence of nature and man becomes meaningless.¹⁹

At issue in this passage is not just the problem of the existence of God, but also the very nature of objectivity. For, in denying his interlocutor the right to abstract from his position in existence in order to pose a question about existence, Marx denies that thinking can occupy what Lukács calls a “systematic locus,” an absolute position of truth beyond all real connection with its objects. In Karl Mannheim’s phrase (although not in precisely the sense he intended), thought is essentially “*seinsverbundenes*.”²⁰

There is a formal similarity between Marx’s argument and certain arguments in Kierkegaard.²¹ Independent of both Marx and Kierkegaard, Gabriel Marcel developed this type of argument into a methodology. Like Marx, Marcel challenges the legitimacy of interrogating being as a whole, and for the same reason, because it involves abstracting from the questioner’s position in being. A problem like that posed by the cosmological proof is insoluble because it is not a legitimate problem at all.

Both Marx and Marcel are concerned to demonstrate the ontological priority of lived experience over its objectivistic representation. For Marcel, lived experience is “meta-problematical,” a domain of “mystery” that can only be explored from within. Marcel’s term “mystery” is ill-chosen, because he does not intend a numinous reality. As he defines it, “A mystery is a problem which encroaches on its own data, invading them, as it were, and thereby transcending itself as a simple problem.”²² Just so, in Marx the “problem” of the existence of the universe “encroaches” on the subject who poses it as a problem. Marcel concludes again along lines anticipated by Marx, that “To postulate the meta-problematical is to postulate the primacy of being over knowledge ... it is to recognize that knowledge is, as it were, environed by being.”²³

Marcel rejects the act of abstraction in which the subject conceives itself as a thing in an external relation with another thing, a body or an object of sensation. What can be so related, he asserts, is only the falsely objectified concept of the “mind,” whereas the real living subject disappears “behind” this objective misconstruction in conceiving it. Marcel traces this particular argument back to Hegel.²⁴ It is not clear to what text in Hegel Marcel refers, but it may well be to the section on Reason in the *Phenomenology of*

Spirit. There Hegel attacks every form of objectivistic reduction of subjectivity, as epitomized by phrenology that holds “the reality of self-consciousness to consist in the skull-bone.” Hegel writes:

Brain-fibres and the like, looked at as forms of the being of mind, are already an imagined, a merely hypothetical actuality of mind—not its presented reality, not its felt, seen, in short not its true reality. If they are present to us, if they are seen, they are lifeless objects, and then no longer pass for the being of mind ... The principle involved in this idea is that reason claims to be all thinghood, even thinghood of a purely objective kind. It is this, however, *in conceptu*: for, only this notion is the truth of reason; and the purer the notion itself is, the more silly an idea does it become.²⁵

In sum, the skull or brain, as the material reality of thought, exists as such only as an idea for thought; hence thought exists as material reality only insofar as that reality is a thought reality. The search for a material foundation for reason ends up “ingenuously” affirming a thought as reality.²⁶ Like the hypothesis of the creation of the universe, so in another way the reductionist hypothesis implies the existence of an absolute subject, beyond all but cognitive connection to existence.

Marx’s argument against the cosmological proof is part of a larger attempt to establish the ontological priority of the lived nature of which we are a part over the objective nature of the natural sciences on which we are a spectator. To accomplish this he interrupts his imaginary interlocutor with the phrase, “Do not think, do not ask me any questions ...” He seems to be operating here with a criterion of meaning that restricts propositions about reality to those that can be accounted for in a dialectic of subject and object. His aim is to deny ontology access to the object “in itself,” as it would appear to a contemplative subject, apart from its relation to human beings in labor and sensation.

Otherwise stated, Marx attempts to found his theory on the “real” or “concrete” relation of human being to nature, subject to object, which, in labor, has the form of an essential interdependence, rather than founding it on the model of objective nature we owe to the sciences and which bears no essential relation to humanity. In effect, Marx wants to show that nature as it really is can only be conceived in ontological interdependence with human being, while “abstractly” conceived, merely “external” nature must be excluded from philosophical consideration as a meaningless construction.

Marx's problematic is also that of Lukács and the Frankfurt School. They all face the difficulties resulting from the metacritical appropriation of the idealist subject–object concept. And like Marx they propose a solution based on a revision of the concept of objectivity. However, the later thinkers do not question the truth of the natural sciences. As we have seen, Marx seeks a “unifying truth” that transcends the split between the natural and the social sciences. Unification on these terms devalues the existing natural sciences. Perhaps this made sense in 1844, but by the time Lukács and the Frankfurt School reflect on the issues, it is clear that natural science is one of several unsurpassable foundations of modernity. Their solution is not to replace science with another form of thought, but rather to treat it as a social and historical phenomenon. The result is not a unification of forms of knowledge and corresponding objects but a theory of their relations. I will explain this argument in detail as it applies to Lukács in [Chapter 6](#) and Marcuse in [Chapter 8](#).

The contrast between Marx's approach and that of Lukács is instructive. Lukács proposes a different metacritical reconstruction of objectivity in which mediation rather than experience plays the key role. Where in Marx labor and sensation have the constitutive power formerly attributed by idealism to transcendental consciousness, in Lukács “forms of objectivity” established by social practice play the constitutive role. In the next chapter I will show that these forms are roughly equivalent to cultural perspectives. They are not merely mental phenomena but shape social reality as well. Lukács's argument encloses rationality without remainder in the embrace of these cultural forms, and culture itself in social practice. Reason, culture, and practice are stacked like Chinese boxes, the one inside the other, with no way out. No personal discipline, no science, no wisdom can break through this limit. This is an integrally cultural epistemology that admits of no “outside” of culture from which reality could be viewed, no privileged scientific preserve on the margins of the world.

So far Lukács's position appears to be merely relativistic, and this is indeed how it was understood by those who, like Karl Mannheim, attempted to elaborate a sociology of knowledge on the basis of his concept of false consciousness.²⁷ However, the intrinsic dependency of knowledge on consciousness and culture is not incompatible with a concept of truth. Lukács insists that the social involvement of the subject is a necessary precondition for knowing, and not just a barrier from which a “pure”

science would have to abstract. This is a metacritical reconstruction of the concept of knowledge *in* the relative, under a finite horizon, rather than a skeptical critique of human limits in the light of an unattainable absolute truth.

Lukács's main target in these epistemological considerations is objectivism, and with it the idea that being in itself transcends the reach of social practice. Objectivism leads to dogmatic claims to knowledge of being or, on the contrary, to relativism, which denies such claims on the basis of a similar conception of truth. Both objectivism and relativism presuppose an "absolute" in the form of the "systematic locus" of thought as a supposed spectator on a reality in which it does not, in principle, participate. "This absolute," Lukács writes, "is nothing but the fixation in thought, the projection into myth of the intellectual failure to understand reality concretely as a historical process."²⁸

That failure results in a misapprehension of culture, the repository of society's most general categories of thought and action. Cultural assumptions are conceived as eternal or transcendental, as prior to the real process and founding for it. The absolute is this appearance of culture at the horizon of history as an unchanging essence. Lukács reverses this formula: it is not in transcending history that the truth is to be found, but in the recognition of the historical character of all transcendence.

For Lukács society cannot be known in the absolute, but it can indeed be known from within.²⁹ Lukács traces the "fixation" of thought in a realm beyond history to specific social causes. The absolute and its correlated concept of the relative appear in response to the untranscended immediacies of experience in class society. Because conscious cooperation is so difficult and rare in this type of society, whole domains of social reality confront the individuals as alien powers over which they have no control. The dominant culture can serve its historical function of justifying class rule only insofar as this function remains unconscious, insofar, therefore, as culture itself appears as eternal truth. The illusion of a transhistorical, systematic locus of thought corresponds to this untransformed reality and uncomprehended culture.

Lukács argues that the proletariat throws these immediacies into the movement of history and subjects them to a practical mediation that decisively alters the position of truth. Proletarian practice acts on the form of objectivity of its objects; it consciously transforms culture and therefore

reality as well; and, as the expression of a cooperative and potentially universal historical subject, this practice need not accept any merely given immediacy as its horizon.

As soon as mankind has clearly understood and hence restructured the foundations of its existence truth acquires a wholly novel aspect. When theory and practice are united it becomes possible to change reality and when this happens the absolute and its “relativistic” counterpart will have played their historical role for the last time. For as the result of these changes we shall see the disappearance of that reality which the absolute and the relative expressed in like manner.³⁰

The idea of theory as observation of reality from a disincarnated “beyond” is overthrown; theory becomes finite when it is located in a process of conscious cultural change.

Nietzsche claimed that truth was the last idol of a disenchanted world, the final form in which the eternal ripped the seamless web of time. Marx and Lukács too proceed to humanize truth itself, to make it enter into time as a real moment in the creation of history. They reject any ontological barrier between perceiver and perceived, subject and object, form and content. “Reality” is a social product and not a thing-in-itself that precedes society and which would have to be perceived from a scientific beyond of culture to be known in its truth. This reality, produced in a social process, can be known in the forms of its production.

This interpretation of philosophy of praxis suggests yet another similarity with existentialism. Marx’s and Lukács’s position resembles the phenomenological concept of “horizon” as a limit “under” which thought proceeds. Kant would seem to be the primary reference for this approach to the problem of meaning. It was he who first suggested that there are specific limits to the range of application of the categories of experience. The employment of reason beyond the domain of possible experience, that is to say, in relation to being in itself, gives rise to a “transcendental illusion.” Marx and Lukács retain the Kantian idea of limiting the application of the categories to the possible experience of a finite subject, but they reject the postulated transcendence of the thing-in-itself as a theological vestige. They thus arrive at what I call a “finite horizon” of being and knowledge.

In 1935, Max Horkheimer laid out a similar conception in an essay “On the Problem of Truth.” In this essay Horkheimer presents an extended argument for “the finitude of thought” which will be determining for the Frankfurt School.³¹ Notwithstanding his explicit rejection of such

Lukácsian categories as “subject–object identity,” the “unity of theory and practice,” and “totality,” the argument is quite close in spirit to that of Lukács. Horkheimer criticizes both absolutism and dogmatism on the grounds that they presuppose an incoherent confusion of the eternal and the temporal. The human subject, situated in history, is called to think eternal truths, a task at which it may be said to succeed or fail, but which is, in any case, self-contradictory. This essentially theological concept of truth must itself be questioned in terms of a historical and dialectical alternative. “Since that extrahistorical and hence exaggerated concept of truth is impossible which stems from the idea of a pure infinite mind and thus in the last analysis from the concept of God, it no longer makes any sense to orient the knowledge we have to this impossibility and in this sense call it relative.”³²

Once it is admitted that the subject of knowledge is a historical being and not what Lukács calls a “systematic locus,” then it follows that truth too must be conceived historically. This has two implications Horkheimer develops in some detail. On the one hand, the fullest understanding of particular truths requires that they be considered in the context of the overall system of knowledge of the historical period in which they appear. Knowledge rests not only on corroboration by the facts, but also on the validity of its concepts within the prevailing categorial system. On the other hand, that system of categories is historically relative to evolving social and economic conditions. While Horkheimer does not designate such a categorial system by the term “form of objectivity,” it is clear that he has something similar in mind, an underlying cognitive pattern.

Although particular truths depend on the system of categories of their time, this does not devalue them as relativism believes because there are no eternal truths setting a higher standard they fail to meet. This has a surprising consequence. “At the same time as [truth] nevertheless necessarily remains inconclusive and to that extent ‘relative,’ it is also absolute, since later correction does not mean that a former truth was formerly untrue.”³³ Judgments of truth are objectively valid even if historically relative and retain their validity even after history has moved on and replaced one set of categories with another.

Horkheimer gives the example of a diagnosis of tuberculosis. It may be correct or incorrect in terms of contemporary medical knowledge and retains its truth-value in the former case regardless of the future evolution

of medicine. Suppose that someday the very categories of medicine will have changed so much that the concept of “tuberculosis” will appear to its practitioners as irrelevant as do the “humours” of premodern medicine to physicians today. This development may represent a progress of knowledge but it does not alter the truth-value of the diagnosis made at the time when the categorial structure of contemporary knowledge supported the concept of tuberculosis. In this sense a truth may be historically bound without being falsified by history.

Horkheimer applies this argument to science generally. Its truths are more or less successfully verified on its own terms, but this in no way exempts science from the historical dialectic. “Indeed, any relation of concept and object not historically mediated, no longer appears meaningful as an idea.”³⁴ The historical relativity of science appears clearly “as soon as one more closely investigates the controlling categories and the choice of objects and methods.”³⁵ This conclusion is in surprising agreement with contemporary science studies.

Where Horkheimer’s argument differs most from that of Lukács is in the vagueness of his discussion of the ontological role of human action. While he asserts that action is implicated in the verification of ideas about society, it is unclear how and to what extent. Lukács’s similar argument comes to a clear conclusion: once human beings consciously control the categorial structure of existence itself, the very idea of a reality wholly separate from the subject collapses in absurdity. Knowledge is essentially mediation between an ontologically interdependent subject and object, not the communication of an isolated subject with an indifferent and alien thing-in-itself.

But this conclusion rests suspiciously on the hypothetical success of the revolution in actually transforming social reality. Horkheimer is anxious to resist any pragmatic reduction of truth to success and this is what creates the ambiguity in his argument. He accepts the Lukácsian premise that knowledge of history is not purely contemplative, but he fears that the Lukácsian conclusion will lead to a mere consecration of the victors in a time when progressive forces are everywhere in retreat. As a result, he confines his argument to epistemology and insists on the relative independence of theory and practice. We will see that this position is central to the later Frankfurt School. It marks the division between what Lukács called the era of the “actuality of the revolution,” and a later period which,

following Marcuse, we could describe as the era of “preventive counter-revolution.”

¹ Tom Rockmore has argued that the roots of this conception lie at least as much in Fichte as in Hegel. See Rockmore, “Lukács and the Recovery of Marx after Marxism,” in M. Thompson, ed., *Georg Lukács Reconsidered: Essays on Politics, Philosophy and Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2011).

² Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, trans. and ed. T. B. Bottomore (London: C.A. Watts, 1963), 127.

³ Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, trans. B. Fowkes (London: New Left Books, 1971), 70.

⁴ This is, of course, Sartre’s thesis, but it is by no means self-evident.

⁵ Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 160.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 206.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 163. On the equivalence of idealism and materialism, cf. Robert Havemann, *Dialektik ohne Dogma?* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1964), 27–32.

¹¹ Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 164.

¹² *Ibid.*, 164. Marx’s discussion of the reform of science has divided commentators. For two different interpretations, cf. István Mészáros, *Marx’s Theory of Alienation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), 101–21; and Jean Hyppolite, *Études sur Marx et Hegel* (Paris: Marcel Rivière, 1965), 112–13. Mészáros gives a common-sense reading of Marx’s text, which Hyppolite interprets literally as calling for the most radical transformation of natural science.

¹³ Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 164.

¹⁴ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International, 1947), 36–7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 36–7.

¹⁶ It is to avoid this paradox that Heidegger proposes that action has “its own kind of sight.” Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. J. Macquarrie and E. Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 99.

¹⁷ Ernst Bloch is the most famous example. For a discussion of the difficulties arising from Bloch’s position, see Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, 156–63.

¹⁸ Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Genealogy of Morals,” in *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*, trans. F. Golffing (New York: Doubleday, 1956), 255.

¹⁹ Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” 166. Cf. Jean-François Lyotard, “La place de l’aliénation dans le retournement marxiste,” in Jean-François Lyotard, *Dérive à Partir de Marx et Freud* (Paris: UGE, 1973), 112–15.

²⁰ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, trans. L. Wirth and E. Shils (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1936), 267.

²¹ Cf., for example, Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, trans. D. Swenson and W. Lowrie (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1968), 108–9. Like Marx, Kierkegaard

objects to the act of abstraction in which the subject places itself outside of existence to interrogate existence.

²² Gabriel Marcel, “On the Ontological Mystery,” in *The Philosophy of Existentialism*, trans. M. Harari (New York: Citadel, 1966), 19.

²³ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁴ Gabriel Marcel, *Metaphysical Journal*, trans. B. Wall (Chicago: Henry Regnery, 1952), 102, 332–9.

²⁵ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. J. B. Baille (London: Allen & Unwin, 1961), 370–1.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 370–1.

²⁷ For a discussion of the relation of Mannheim to Lukács, see Joseph Gabel, “Mannheim et le marxisme hongrois,” in *Idéologies* (Paris: Anthropos, 1974), 255–78.

²⁸ *HCC*, 187.

²⁹ This is the thesis of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Les aventures de la dialectique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 43–5, 63–4.

³⁰ *HCC*, 189.

³¹ Max Horkheimer, “On the Problem of Truth,” in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Early Writings*, trans. G. F. Hunter, M. S. Kramer, and J. Torpey (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1995), 244.

³² *Ibid.*, 192.

³³ *Ibid.*, 192. This astonishing proposition seems to imply either a radical deflation of the concept of truth, which would reinstitute the thing-in-itself, or a concept of reality as evolving with human knowledge. For more on this subject, see [Chapter 6](#).

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 193.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 201.

CHAPTER FOUR

Reification and Rationality

CULTURE AND THE CRISIS OF RATIONALITY

Husserl's 1935 "Vienna Lecture" ended with an ominous warning: "There are only two escapes from the crisis of European existence: the downfall of Europe in its estrangement from its own rational sense of life, its fall into hostility toward the spirit and into barbarity; or the rebirth of Europe from the spirit of philosophy through a heroism of reason that overcomes naturalism once and for all."¹ Husserl was reacting to the rise of romantic and pessimistic currents of thought, a Spenglerian mood of doom hanging over Europe. The earlier attempts of Dilthey and the neo-Kantians to distinguish humanistic knowledge from natural science and to salvage thereby a space for spirit in an increasingly mechanized world had failed. Triumphant science and technology were met by increasing hostility to reason itself. Heidegger's impressive attempt to formulate a philosophical alternative to disintegrating rationalism came to grief in a lamentable involvement with fascism.

Lukács too was a product of an intellectual environment that favored the idea of independent *Geisteswissenschaften* as against bourgeois social science and vulgar Marxism. He responded to the crisis with a return to Marx for a solution in the philosophical domain. His version of "heroic" rationalism was based on the revolutionary socialist movement.² Like the young Marx demanding the realization of philosophy, Lukács insisted that what is at stake in the struggle for socialism is not only a change in society, but also the fate of rationality: the revolution is an affair of reason. But Lukács's path to Marxism was long and began with the very romantic critique of rationalism that led so many other thinkers to reactionary conclusions. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce Lukács's concept of reification, through which he attempted to reconcile the themes of that early critique with a renewed faith in reason.

Reification means, literally, treating human relations as relations between things. In Lukács's usage, the "thing" implied in the "re" of reification is not just an entity in general but an object suited to formal rational comprehension, prediction, and technical control. Lukács writes:

What is important is to recognize clearly that all human relations (viewed as the objects of social activity) assume increasingly the form of objectivity of the abstract elements of the conceptual systems of natural science and of the abstract substrata of the laws of nature. And also, the subject of this "action" likewise assumes increasingly the attitude of the pure observer of these—artificially abstract—processes, the attitude of the experimenter.³

The problem, Lukács argues, is not with scientific reason *per se*, but with its application beyond the bounds of its appropriate object, nature. The bourgeois social sciences do not simply comprehend their objects but reflect and contribute to the reshaping of society to resemble a thing of nature. Marxism grounds a different dialectical paradigm of knowledge in a social movement capable of realizing that paradigm not merely in theory but in practice as well. The critique of scientism is recruited to the proletarian cause even as the proletariat becomes the bearer of this alternative form of rationality. As we will see, this surprising synthesis alters both the critique and the idea of reason. Understanding it poses challenges not all interpreters of Lukács successfully meet.

In his youth Lukács belonged to a group of philosophers and social critics whose principal concern was alienation in modern life.⁴ Marx's *Manuscripts* of 1844 interpreted alienation in terms of labor but this text was still unpublished at the time Lukács and his friends developed their cultural perspective. Their critique drew on the sociology of Weber and especially of Simmel, whose analysis of the "tragedy of culture" had a deep influence on their thinking.⁵

Culture as they understood it had both a descriptive and a normative dimension. On the one hand the hermeneutics of culture distinguished understanding of society from natural science and technology. This distinction supported a corresponding distinction between culture, as the realm of creative expression, and civilization, as the domain of practical activity. On the other hand, scientism, mechanization, and commercialism were destructive of personal *Bildung* as a value. Both these senses of culture come together in Lukács's early literary criticism where the objectifications of culture in customs and mores are analyzed as a rigid

“second nature” opposed to the personal self-development of the individual.⁶

World War I threw bourgeois society into a general crisis embracing not only the ethical and political domains, but the very substance of its cultural life. As Lukács put it in one early article: “The culture of the capitalist epoch had collapsed in itself and prior to the occurrence of economic and political breakdown. Therefore ... it is a pressing necessity, precisely in the interests of culture, in the interest of opening the way to the new culture, to bring the long death process of capitalist society to its completion.”⁷ The alienation sapping the spirit of Europe must be overcome along with the capitalist system that is its material base.

Soon after identifying the new culture with communism, Lukács rejected his early formulation of the problem. By 1923, when he published *History and Class Consciousness*, concepts drawn from Marx’s *Capital* and from his own Hegelian interpretation of Marx replace the cultural approach. No doubt Lukács believed this was necessary to overcome the vaguely spiritual and politically conservative associations of the concept of culture at that time. But lacking a concept of culture, Lukács was forced to formulate his theory of epochal cultural change in a strange mixture of Marxist economic determinism and idealist philosophical speculation. This has led to much confusion about his meaning. To a lesser degree Marx’s own formulations display a similar ambiguity. Neither of these revolutionary philosophers offer an elaborated theory of the revolution they advocate. Their explanations waver between philosophical deduction and causal necessity without achieving a convincing account. However, in the case of Lukács at least, it is possible to extract a coherent account from his various formulations. This is what I will attempt to do in this chapter.

In [Chapter 2](#) I have shown that Marx arrives at the concept of socialism not through an ethical argument but through a theory of rationality and its “demands.” Marx’s early theory ranks capitalism and socialism as forms of rationality. Their succession is determined less by economic motives or political power than by the logic of his metacritique. The later Marx sometimes takes this logic for a causal link. This is due to his self-misunderstanding in terms of a scientific paradigm of explanation unsuited to the tasks he set it. Marx claims that capitalism leads to socialism “with the inexorability of a law of Nature.” In fact he gets from capitalism to socialism not by a causal progression but by a dialectical demonstration. He

argues that just as capitalism has stripped craft producers of their tools, so will it lose control of machinery to the industrial labor force it has called into being. Socialism is thus “the negation of the negation” the “expropriators are expropriated in the revolution.”⁸ It is not surprising that unsympathetic critics speak of a religious or ethical exigency of socialism in Marx’s work, since the economic theory does not live up to Marx’s deterministic promise.⁹

Lukács takes over Marx’s critique of capitalism and projects a socialist resolution to its crises. He is more aware than Marx of the risks of confusing social change with natural processes. He develops a much more elaborate theory of the passage from capitalism to socialism, not as a causal sequence but as a dialectical transcendence of the capitalist paradigm of rational social order by a higher form of socialist rationality. But just because he downplays economic determinism, his argument has been interpreted by later commentators as a pure philosophical deduction. As in the case of Marx, critics claim that Lukács’s faith in socialist revolution is founded on a philosophical myth, the myth of the proletariat as “identical subject–object of history.”

The critics misunderstand the concept of social change in Marx and Lukács. But Marx and Lukács are partially responsible since they fail to clearly explain their alternative to philosophical deduction and causality. A theory of cultural change could have provided the missing term between Marx’s *Manuscripts* and *Capital*, on the one hand, and between the critique of capitalism and the socialist revolution on the other. Unfortunately, when he turned to economic research and abandoned philosophy, Marx left behind the conceptual tools needed to develop such a theory. The theory of alienation in the *Manuscripts* adumbrates a concept of culture that appears more fully developed in Lukács’s theory of reification. But as we have seen, Lukács rejected the concept of culture and so appeared to fall back on a philosophical projection of the future.¹⁰

Today we are remote from the sources of Lukács’s early concept of culture. The most widely accepted usage of the term no longer has any connection with reactionary culture-critique but derives from sociology and anthropology. “Culture” now refers to the unifying pattern of an entire society, including its typical artifacts, rituals, customs, and beliefs.¹¹ The concept of culture points toward the common structures of social life. It assigns the researcher the problem of discovering the overarching

paradigms of meaning and value that shape all the various spheres of society. This social scientific sense of culture has influenced everyday speech as well. The changed meaning and connotations of “culture” free the term from the associations that troubled Lukács. Today we can safely identify Lukács’s concept of reification as a cultural construct in the contemporary usage of the term.

There are of course many versions of a cultural approach to understanding society. Those closest in spirit to Lukács’s Marxism treat cultural structures as intertwined with the agency of the members of society in a circular pattern. The circularity of culture is a familiar social ontological principle currently referred to by the fashionable term “performativity.” For example, money is money only insofar as we act as though it were money and it is the success of this sort of action that determines our conviction that money is in fact money. Social “things” are not merely things but are implicated in practices. The categories under which social life makes sense are the categories under which it is lived.¹²

Gillian Rose shows that this concept of culture has its source in the neo-Kantian doctrines debated in Lukács’s own intellectual environment. The pattern of culture is a kind of naturalized version of the Kantian *a priori*, a quasi-transcendental precondition of the facts and values it engenders. “The status of the precondition becomes ambiguous: it is an *a priori*, that is, not empirical, for it is the basis of the possibility of experience. But a ‘sociological *a priori*’ is, *ex hypothesi*, external to the mind, and hence appears to acquire the status of a natural object or cause.”¹³

This neo-Kantian concept of culture operates under the Marxist surface of Lukács’s argument, offering a way out of the difficulties of Marx’s problematic determinism. According to Lukács, social being and social thought cannot be separately conceptualized and then related by a theory of reciprocal causal interaction, as in most Marxist theory. This view, he argues, leads to an insoluble antinomy of thought and things that can be overcome “only by conceiving of thought as a form of reality, as a moment in the total process ...”¹⁴ The focus must shift from the mechanistic “influence” of social conditions on consciousness to the generalized patterning of all dimensions of society by what Rose calls a “quasi-transcendental” form. Form in this sense is culture as an emergent property of social behavior, a property that is irreducible to the traditional categories of subjectivity and objectivity because it constitutes them.

Lukács's theory is based on the double character of the capitalist economy, as means of life and form of life, utilitarian instrumentality and foundation of a cultural system. This conforms with Marx's explanation of historical materialism in *The German Ideology*. There Marx writes, "This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather, it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part."¹⁵

The unusual feature of Lukács's cultural approach is his identification of *rationality* itself as a *cultural* pattern. It is this identification that is enshrined in the concept of reification. The disenchantment of the world Marx described in the *Communist Manifesto*, where capitalism is attributed an irresistible power to demystify tradition, is fully realized in the lawful character of the capitalist system. The mathematical precision of equal exchange becomes the binding logic of social life, replacing myth and deference to personal authority. Capitalism's rational form, the exchange of equivalents and its laws, replaces earlier non-rational meanings as the structuring principle of social thought and action. Lukács's challenge is explaining opposition to capitalist rationality without resuscitating the irrationality capitalism overcomes. He transforms romantic protest against a rigid conventional order into the philosophical conflict of forms of rationality.

There is a distinct advantage to considering reification as a cultural category. Reification is often defined as a mental state, an attitude. But this is not the conception of *History and Class Consciousness*. In that work reification is the underlying unity of the social system, the "model" of "all the forms of objectivity of bourgeois society together with all the corresponding forms of subjectivity."¹⁶ Treating human relations as things, the definition of reification, is constitutive of capitalist society, an essential aspect of its workings. In his unpublished *Defence of History and Class Consciousness* he says this explicitly although the reference to reification is veiled: "The direct forms of appearance of social being are not, however, subjective fantasies of the brain, but moments of the real forms of existence."¹⁷

The point of treating reification as a cultural category is not to deny its economic basis. From the Lukácsian perspective, Marxist theory *explains* the overriding influence of the economy on all sectors of capitalist society

rather than simply assuming it a priori on general “materialist” grounds. A specific feature of the capitalist economy, the commodity form, also functions as the basis of the capitalist cultural system. Economic exchange is the paradigmatic order in which rationality emerges from social practice to become the cultural form of society as a whole. Capitalism is thus the source of a cultural system prevailing throughout the social order: “What is known as economics,” Lukács writes, “is nothing but the system of forms of objectivity of real life.”¹⁸

This cultural approach is no more reductionist than capitalism itself, a society unique in the cultural significance it assigns the principle of exchange. As Marshall Sahlins writes, “In bourgeois society, material production is the dominant locus of symbolic production.”¹⁹ The theory of reification explains how the cultural pattern of capitalism is derived from its economic system and, still more fundamentally, from the practices producing that system.²⁰

But then the discovery of contradictions in the economic sphere takes on a larger significance. Exploitation is not just an economic issue but generates a tension between capitalist rationality as a “mode of life,” and working-class experience and needs. Class struggle is thus cultural struggle, and what Marx describes as the economic crisis and breakdown of capitalism, Lukács reconstructs as the system’s cultural crisis and breakdown. He thereby avoids economism, which derives revolution from simple dissatisfaction with the level of welfare that capitalism can (in theory) deliver to its working class.

The transition to socialism now appears in a different light as well; it is neither a causal sequence, nor an ethical exigency, but a process of cultural change. This process arises from the immanent cultural contradictions of capitalism, contradictions between reified social patterns and living human beings who resist the imposition of the reified forms even as they unwittingly reproduce them through their everyday practical activities.

Lukács can finally link the philosophical concerns of Marxism with its analysis of political economy and projection of a socialist future. The tension he identifies in social reality between its reified form and its living human substratum represents metacritically a larger conflict in the paradigms of rationality. In this conflict, capitalist rationality, with its quantitative concept of exchange and social law, comes up against a limitation that is overcome theoretically by Marxist dialectics and

practically by socialism. Lukács reconceptualizes class struggle as the dialectical mediation in which the formal-analytic rationality of capitalism is transcended as a cultural paradigm by an alternative dialectical paradigm.

Lukács relates Marxism to the problem of rationality through a revolutionary philosophical interpretation of *Capital*. The preceding chapters have shown how Marx moved from an early critique of formalism in political philosophy to a broader concern with the formalistic concept of reason, very much as Lukács supposed. Although Marx did not explicitly follow up this line of thought in his later work, nevertheless, it is clear that his early metacritique prepared his choice of a dialectical method in economic and social research. Long before the publication of the *Manuscripts*, Lukács discovered that Marx's critique of fetishistic formalism in political economy implies a far more general reconstruction of the concept of reason. Lukács's theory of reification is an original critique of formal rationality, based on Marx's *Capital*, and pursued to the point where it founds a dialectical concept of reason. There is a sense then in which his early Marxist work anticipates the publication of the *Manuscripts*, and goes beyond them theoretically.

This interpretation of Marxism is controversial. Commentators of the so-called "scientific" school of Marxism, such as Lucio Colletti and Louis Althusser, protest that Lukács's theory of reification leads back to the romantic culture-criticism from which Marx is supposed to have liberated radical social thought. For them the Lukácsian approach signifies the revival of philosophy, that is to say, of ideology, inside the *cordon sanitaire* surrounding the "science" of Marxism. The huge intellectual labor through which Lukács freed himself from his youthful romanticism and arrived at an original interpretation of Marxism is simply ignored.

Thus Gareth Stedman Jones writes that *History and Class Consciousness* "represents the first major irruption of the romantic anti-scientific tradition of bourgeois thought into Marxist theory."²¹ Colletti has a similar opinion, complaining that Lukács "entered the factory not with *Capital* but with the *Essai sur les données immédiates de la conscience* ..." ²² In sum, Lukács transformed the Marxian critique of capitalism into a romantic critique of reason *per se* by conceptualizing formal rationality through the concept of reification rather than considering such rationality in the approved "scientific" manner as a universal feature of knowledge as such.

But Lukács had no need to study Bergson to arrive at his intellectual destination: Marx and Hegel would have sufficed. Nor, *pace* Colletti, is his understanding of modern technology so very different from Marx's that it would justify the label of "romantic" it has acquired in the course of numerous polemics.²³ There is ample material in the first volume of *Capital* to support his critique of the alienating effects of the division and mechanization of labor. Lukács no more than Marx is hostile to machinery *per se*, as is sometimes charged. Nor is Lukács opposed to reason in general, but like Hegel he rejects the universal pretensions of formal rationality in order to validate the claims of dialectical rationality.

What really is questionable in his procedure is also what is most original and fruitful, namely, the discovery that linking all the phenomena of capitalist society Marx criticizes, from fetishism to mechanization and crises, there is a common structure, a pattern constituted by the imposition of formal rationality on the social world. It is this discovery that is the basis for Lukács's generalization of Marx's approach in the theory of reification. This, rather than any retreat into irrationalism, inspired by *mauvaises lectures*, is what lies behind the introduction of the concept of reification and its application in a cultural critique of capitalism. Lukács's leap from the critique of political economy to a theory of capitalist culture is a daring step beyond Marx made possible by the change in the intellectual and social landscape since Marx's day.

REIFICATION AS A SOCIOLOGICAL CATEGORY

For Lukács the crisis of reason encompasses the dominant paradigm of rationality in all its manifestations, from science and technology to the market and the bureaucracy, and even the socialist opposition itself. The concept of reification that Lukács applies in all these domains is based on multiple sources: Marx's critique of machine industry and his concept of commodity fetishism; Simmel's and Weber's concepts of the exchange society, bureaucracy, and rationalization; and Hegel's dialectical concept of appearance. To these overt influences, I would add the subtler impact of neo-Kantian philosophy, especially Emil Lask's concept of meaning. Lukács's theory can best be understood as a generalization of Marxian theory in two dimensions, in sociological breadth through Weber, and in ontological depth through neo-Kantianism and Hegel. So generalized, the

concept of reification becomes the basis for a critique of capitalist rationality as a worldview and a system logic threatened by its inability to grasp the material substratum of its own formalistic categories and institutional structures.

According to Lukács, commodity exchange is the basis of all forms of reification. He seeks the “*Seinsgrund*” of reified thought even in its highest philosophical manifestations in the structure of the market.²⁴ In *Capital* Marx explains the market in terms of the fetishism of commodities. By this peculiar expression he means the substitution of exchange value for use value, relations between social objects for relations between the human beings who produce them, both in everyday life and in the scientific representation of the economy. Fetishism characterizes a society in which the economic relations between the individuals are governed by the forces they unleash through their unplanned market interactions. In such a society, the “law” of the market takes on an independence and power, a “material character,” the individuals themselves increasingly lose. This is due to the fact that production and exchange are splintered and fragmented. Marx writes,

In the form of society now under consideration, the behavior of men in the social process of production is purely atomic. Hence their relations to each other in production assume a material character independent of their control and conscious individual action. These facts manifest themselves at first by products as a general rule taking the form of commodities.²⁵

Marx calls the result “fetishism” because the human relations of producers and consumers appear not as such, but as relations between economic goods and categories, which latter seem to have an effective dynamism independent of the individuals. The myriad interactions of individuals on the market, which none can chart although all contribute their share, appear as specifically economic “properties” attached to the goods in circulation. Thus goods “have” a price that seems to belong to them much as do their physical and chemical properties. Indeed, so real is their price that it effectively governs the movement of the goods. Similarly, some goods “are” capital, while others take the form of profit or wages or savings, and so on. Yet it is clear that while these categories are in no sense imaginary, neither are they “real” attributes of the things to which they are applied. They are, says Marx, social relations become things, or “reified.”

A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour.²⁶

Although Lukács initially grounds his account of reification in these considerations on the market, amplified by reference to Simmel's sociology of money, in the course of his discussion he adds an additional explanation in terms of the capitalist transformation of the work process.²⁷ Capitalism everywhere divorces workers from their means of production and organizes them in factories. The reification of labor becomes the model of reification throughout the society. "The destiny of the worker becomes the general destiny of the entire society."²⁸ Labor thus has new social and ideological functions in capitalist society, different in principle from those it possessed in earlier times. It is no longer a special concern of a particular estate as in slave and feudal society. Labor is not seen as a degraded, subhuman activity, but as the source of all social utility, as an eminently human occupation. Not only do ordinary people labor, the capitalist class itself justifies its right to possess the means of production by claiming that they are the fruit of its labor. This is not merely ideology; the key traits of reification workers experience also affect the upper classes. "The problems of consciousness arising from wage labor are repeated in the ruling class in a refined and spiritualized, but for that very reason, more intensified form."²⁹

Under capitalism, the means of production face the worker as an independent system that imposes its own rhythm and order. The more advanced the mechanization, the more the expenditure of labor power becomes the simple control of the autonomous productive activity of the machines themselves. Here work becomes "the contemplative stance adopted toward a process mechanically conforming to fixed laws, enacted independently of man's consciousness and impervious to human intervention, i.e., a perfectly closed system."³⁰

The capitalist too confronts reified reality. His much vaunted entrepreneurial "creativity," says Lukács, consists entirely in calculating as exactly as possible what will happen despite his own intervention. The capitalist then attempts to so position himself with respect to this predetermined outcome that he can profit from the objective evolution. Like

the worker confronted with the autonomous machine, the capitalist confronts the autonomous market.

The machines' reified appearance of autonomy and rationality obscures the fact that they are products of human labor, that their essence is not to be found merely in the structure of their operations, but also in the human activity that first created them and gave them that structure. What is true of the machine is also true of the market and, at a higher level of generality, of society as a whole. In short, obscured behind the rational structure of the productive system is the collective activity underlying social reality.

The activity of the individual subject in capitalist society cannot transform that reality in Lukács's ontological sense of the term, but rather conforms to it, and especially to its laws, in order to realize its potential benefits. The intervention of the subject is exhausted in taking up an orientation with respect to an ultimately unchangeable reality. Where this orienting activity is multiplied many times over, massive regularities of behavior appear that may indeed have a significant effect on the real world. But the subjects do not assume this effect as their common creation, but rather relate to it as the presupposition of an individual calculus of losses and gains. Thus, "the attitude of the subject ... becomes purely contemplative in the philosophical sense."³¹

Bureaucratization is a further consequence of the capitalist organization of labor.³² The division of labor disrupts the unity of every social process, not just those associated with industrial production. Specializations emerge that each address one or another fragment of social life. These specializations gain a certain autonomy and as a result their objects too become increasingly independent of each other. This "centrifugal movement" results in a disjunction between the bureaucracies and the reality of the society.³³

Lukács follows in Weber's footsteps in treating these aspects of reification as results of rationalization. The theory of rationalization has to do with the extension of formalistic, quantifying reason to social life. Weber links this process to Protestantism, which presided over the emergence of capitalism, and the scientific quantification of nature that contributes to the secularization of modern culture. The capitalist orientation toward economic gain and the scientific spirit are joined in the idea of society as an object of technical control. This idea is fully realized in the bureaucratic system.³⁴ Lukács incorporates Weber's theory wholesale into his own:

wherever quality appears as quantity, or human interaction appears as the interaction between social things, or the course of social events appears to be determined by quasi-natural laws, he finds evidence of reification.

Lukács's originality with respect to Weber lies in his emphasis on the tension between the formal structure of rationalization and the actual human "content" of social life on which it is imposed. Lukács thus borrows ideas from Weber, but treats them in the general framework of Marx's critique of fetishism, as a formal-rational "appearance" in dialectical conflict with an underlying reality. One might almost say that Weber's theory is recast by Lukács in the mold of Marx's, so that its general tendency is reversed: no longer an account of the inexorable progress of rationalization's "iron cage," Lukács's refurbished Weberianism sets this trend off against a dialectical counter-trend that promises eventual release from rationalization. In Lukács, social reality escapes from the net of reified rationality: the increasing rationality of the parts is tied, he claims, to the invincible "irrationality of the total process," to economic crisis and violent resistance from below.³⁵ With this approach, he has the basis of a specifically Marxist theory of the culture and crisis of capitalism, developed later in many dimensions by other Marxists, especially by the Frankfurt School.

REIFICATION AS AN ONTOLOGICAL CONCEPT

Lukács's essay on reification opens with the statement that "the structure of commodity-relations [can] be made to yield a model of all the forms of objectivity of bourgeois society and all the corresponding forms of subjectivity."³⁶ Lukács describes reification with a peculiarly ambiguous term: *Gegenstandlichkeitsform*, or "form of objectivity." This term unfortunately disappears from the English translation and is everywhere rendered by circumlocutions that obscure its philosophical significance.³⁷

That significance can only be grasped against the background of the neo-Kantian debates in which Lukács himself was involved a few years before he became a Marxist. The trace of these debates is very much present in *History and Class Consciousness*. This is the link between Lukács's sociological concept of reification and the philosophical problematic of rationality.

The neo-Kantian reference complicates the interpretation of the passage quoted at the beginning of this section. What does Lukács mean here by a

“model?” Is he referring to an analogy or a cause? If commodity-relations are analogically homologous to forms of objectivity and subjectivity, then we must seek elsewhere for the cause of both. The theory of reification might then lead to an idealistic explanation of some sort, for example, a flaw in the spirit of modernity. But if commodity-relations cause objects and subjects to take a reified form, then Lukács would appear to have lapsed into crude economic determinism.

The interpretative problem stems from the unspecified concept of form of objectivity. This neo-Kantian term implies a transcendental account of meaning that Lukács never explicitly develops. Dilthey and his neo-Kantian contemporaries all emphasized the distinctiveness of cultural and historical phenomena. The irreducible individuality of events defies attempts to order them under laws such as those of the natural sciences. The concept of “*Verstehen*,” or interpretive understanding, familiar from Weberian sociology, is a social alternative to natural scientific explanation. The object of interpretation is meaning, or “validity” as the neo-Kantians called it. Meaning is not bare physical existence, but that aspect of things through which they are intelligible, make sense, are known, belong to a culture. In this account of the conditions of cultural intelligibility meaning is derived from the intentions of the subject. Husserl would soon radicalize this approach in a new form of transcendental idealism.

The neo-Kantian philosopher Emil Lask was also a significant influence on both Heidegger and Lukács because he began the move from a transcendental to an ontological theory of meaning.³⁸ Lask’s concept of meaning as form is developed in his transcendental theory of logic. A brief account of this theory is essential to understanding Lukács. Lask argues that meanings are ordered under categories in regional ontologies that define domains of objects. This is easily illustrated by academic fields although not confined to them. The “object” of physics is matter in motion. The meanings with which it is concerned are specified by these terms. By contrast, the “object” of English literature is a canon of poetry and prose “classics.” Certain works have “meaning” as objects of study in this context. These general categories are *Gegenstandlichkeitsformen*. Every sphere of existence has its own such category. We could, for example, extend the concept to the tools in a workshop as did Heidegger in a related analysis of meaning.

Lask's notion of meaning is difficult to grasp because we normally confound meanings with the things that have meaning. There are a few experiences in which the distinction can be more easily apprehended. Consider for example the case of photographic representation. When we are asked what we see in a picture of a horse we are likely to reply, "A horse." But of course we are looking at a piece of photographic paper, not a horse. The meaning of the picture is distinct from its existence. But this is an inadequate example since "photographic paper" is also a meaning. If we showed the picture to a cat, it would not see a "horse" or "photographic paper" but something to bat around or sit on. It is not clear that even this constitutes an unmediated relation to existence yet such a relation is an essential postulate of Lask's theory.

Lask's ontology has two divisions: existence and meaning. But nothing can be said about existence outside the context of one or another meaning that forms it and Lask does not explain the origin of the forms. They are neither material things nor metaphysical entities. They are pure transcendental conditions of realms of objects. But unlike Dilthey, Husserl, and earlier neo-Kantian philosophers, Lask does not attribute such conditions to the subject. Lask died in World War I at the age of thirty-nine, his work still incomplete. No doubt he would have addressed this lacuna had he lived. In any case, it inspired Heidegger and Lukács, who both accepted Lask's breakthrough to a new kind of transcendental account of meaning that borders on ontology. Meaning is the "being" of the phenomena through which we gain access to them as what they "are." Heidegger and Lukács went on to attempt to ground being in practice rather than subjectivity.

Lask's terminology suggests this solution. He argues that the meanings or validities "hold" of particular entities through the form of those entities, and "form is nothing other than a particular objective *Bewandtnis* [involvement] pertaining to ... the material."³⁹ Involvements are articulated in judgments ("This is a hammer"), but Lask believes they are already present in the world before any judgments are made. Normally, we *live* with the meaningful entities we experience without thematizing meaning as such. (How often do we say "This is a hammer" when we see one, and yet we always know perfectly well what we are looking at?) The operative intelligibility of experience is the basis of the possibility of judgment and knowledge. Philosophical understanding of meaning requires a departure

from the lived relation to it in the adoption of a transcendental perspective that focuses on the form in which things are given in experience.

In very different ways, Heidegger and Lukács showed how objects and subjects acquire meaning in a social world, conceived as a totality of involvements, through the practices of that world. They both seek an ontologically founding practical relation to meaning in a domain of real existents. Something (ontic) in the world must found the world as the totality of involvements (the ontological). The chief difference between them is that for Heidegger the all important something is the everyday practical activity of individual *Dasein* whereas for Lukács it is the collective practices associated with the economic system.⁴⁰

In Heidegger's case this practical ground was explained in a "fundamental ontology" of phenomenological inspiration. In his workshop analysis, the notion of *Bewandtnis* is nicely developed in terms of "the arrangement, relevance, or involvement of the material itself," i.e., the connections between the various tools and the work that grants them meaning *qua* tools.⁴¹ A hammer out of all connection with nails, boards, and the idea of carpentry could not properly be called a hammer. It would lack the contextual preconditions of its meaning. It would just be an oddly shaped, unintelligible thing.

Lukács responded to the lacuna with an account of the role of economic practices in establishing the conditions of meaning throughout bourgeois society. He offers a quasi-functional account, arguing that the meaning of each social entity is determined by "its relation to the whole." And he adds that "the intelligibility of objects develops in proportion as we grasp their function in the totality to which they belong."

Every substantial change that is of concern to knowledge manifests itself as a change in the form of objectivity of every object of cognition. Marx has formulated this idea in countless places. I shall cite only one of the best-known passages: "A negro is a negro. He only becomes a slave in certain circumstances. A cotton-spinning jenny is a machine for spinning cotton. Only in certain circumstances does it become capital. Torn from these circumstances it is no more capital than gold is money or sugar the price of sugar."⁴²

Lukács concludes that the totality is a higher reality than the isolated facts. In it the "processual essence" of society "achieves validity," i.e., takes on its true meaning.⁴³

Lukács's methodology is clearly delineated in these passages. Particular social objects are to be understood in terms of their economic involvements.

They cannot be understood in isolation, but only in relation to the whole because that relation is constituting for their meaning. At the highest level of generality, the whole is characterized by the reification associated with the commodity form. A hierarchy of categories is implied in this approach, leading from particular to universal features of the totality.

As a form of objectivity, reification is in the first instance practical rather than theoretical. In constantly buying and selling commodities, including intellectual products, or working in mechanized industries, or engaging with bureaucratic administrations, the members of a capitalist society live the reified relationships that construct that society. The reified form of objectivity of the society gives coherence and meaning to social objects arising from and feeding back into the practical relationship to those objects, and it shapes the corresponding subjectivity of the atomized actors. This is what Lukács means when he says that commodity-relations are the “model” of the forms of objectivity and subjectivity in bourgeois society. The performativity of practice grants a single overriding form to the whole society, the form of thinghood.

FORM AND CONTENT

But the story of Lask’s influence on Lukács is not finished with these observations. Lask’s theory of meaning was intended to solve a fundamental problem in Kant’s philosophy, the problem of the thing-in-itself. Lask’s interpretation of the transcendental differed from Kant’s in that Lask did not propose a principle of mental synthesis by which forms would join with the content of sense experience. He dismissed the whole Kantian philosophical psychology and argued that the forms are independent of the mind. As subjects we are in immediate contact with a meaningful world. That world has its meaning in itself, not in our minds.

But meaning as we have seen is not identical with existence. The forms form a content that emerges with them from the original unity of the existing thing. This content is not a separate “thing,” for every thing is grasped through its meaning. Rather, the content is simply that which is so grasped. The easiest way to understand this is in terms of point of view. I apprehend a cup under the meaning “cup” but the content so apprehended could also inhabit other forms, for example, Wedgwood, or physical determinants such as weight and volume. What is more, the meaning “cup” could itself appear as a content for a higher level meaning such as

“dinnerware,” or an entirely different meaning such as “three letter words.” In each case the content is formed by the meaning but not exhausted by it. Lask calls this contingent relation of form and content the “irrationality” of content. This is his reinterpretation of the Kantian thing-in-itself.⁴⁴

In Kant the thing-in-itself hovers inconclusively on the border between the ontic and the ontological. It is unclear if it really is a “thing” or a hypothetical precondition of sensation. The ambiguity reflects a gap between form and content Kant formulated as the limitation of finite human knowledge to objects of experience. Experience is rational, i.e., meaningful, insofar as it is imprinted by the forms of understanding, but its matter ultimately escapes the forms. In Lask this tension is reduced to a shadow of itself. The irrationality of content is simply the trace left by the contingency of the relation of meaning to existence, the fact that no particular entity is destined to any one specific meaning.

Lask argued that Hegel attempted to encompass the irrational existence of things in his system of categories. But this “emanationist” logic fails because existence cannot be deduced from concepts. The irrational is a necessary correlate of the rational. The principle of the irrationality of contents is also central to Lukács’s theory of reification. And he joins Lask in rejecting emanationism. But he does not accept Lask’s explanation of irrationality. Instead, he introduces an entirely new approach to the problem of the contents of the forms that shatters the structure of Lask’s theory.

Lukács historicizes the form/content dialectic and treats the structure of meaning at the highest level of generality as a cultural form, as the principle of intelligibility of an epoch. As we have seen, reification characterizes the capitalist epoch. But in redefining form as a cultural principle in this sense, Lukács undermines Lask’s characterization of content as a purely logical correlate. Content no longer stands in an ideal relation to its form but now acquires a real relationship to it. Objects enter culture through social processes that can be studied and understood. What is more, tensions between objects and their forms can be observed and analyzed. The concept of the irrational contents of the forms now takes on a factual power Lask would never have allowed.

These modifications of Lask’s schema have two consequences that Lukács develops in the second and third parts of the “Reification” essay. In the first place, Lukács recasts the history of modern philosophy in terms of the tensions between form and content. In the second place, he extends the

argument to the living practical basis of the reified form of objectivity of capitalist society.

As we will see in more detail in the next chapter, Lukács applies his cultural approach to the analysis of the history of modern philosophy. He argues that modern philosophy identifies rationality with the reified form of objectivity of bourgeois society and then attempts to overcome the irrationality of the contents of the rational forms through deducing them from concepts. Why was bourgeois philosophy interested in overcoming the gap between form and content theoretically? According to Lukács, what is at stake is the vindication of the claim of rationality to embrace domains of being assigned to irrational forces such as royalty and religion in earlier societies. The ambition of the bourgeoisie to escape from the worldly power of the representatives of these forces requires it to extend its conception of rationality beyond all limits, at least in theory.

Lukács relates this ambition to Vico's famous "*verum-factum*" principle according to which we can only fully understand what we have ourselves created. But this principle comes to grief because of the formal character of rationality. The history of classical German philosophy shows the failure of the project of modern philosophy; the content of its formal rationality escapes all attempts to encompass it fully within the forms. The contingency of the world remains and is conceptualized in the thing-in-itself.

Formal rational disciplines such as mathematics and natural science cannot grasp their contents, that is to say the purely contingent or "factual" objects to which they refer. The limitation is self-evident in the relation of formal laws to the particulars to which they apply. An abstract formula such as " $\text{distance} = \text{velocity} \times \text{time}$ " cannot account for the existence of its objects, only their relations once they have been conceptualized on the terms of the law. Similarly, a representation such as a map is useless until the person holding it has been oriented to the particular environment in which she is situated.

The gap between form and content is not merely a philosophical challenge. It also has a practical side. In practical life this gap cannot be closed by simply squeezing contents into the available forms. This limitation has never bothered physicists in the application of their formulae or geographers employing their maps. For them the relation of form and content is purely theoretical, but it ends up posing problems in daily life

when forms actually form their content. Then it matters practically whether the forms are adequate to fully embrace their content. We are familiar with the unfortunate consequences of attempts to force the issue: bureaucracies that make no allowance for individual circumstances, laws the strict enforcement of which is unjust, work-to-rule strikes, teaching to tests, technical interfaces and manuals that require users to think like engineers, and so on.

In practice common sense treats forms as resources in the context of activities oriented toward a type of content rather than as absolutes.⁴⁵ We know very well that the map is not the territory but it is useful nevertheless once we find our bearings. But Lukács holds that modern capitalist society is a gigantic instance of economic and social forms imposed blindly on content.

The commodity form prevails regardless of whether it successfully mediates the distribution of use values or leaves masses in starvation. The formal economic laws fail to embrace the concrete content of economic life. Say's law can serve as an illustration. It holds that the total supply of goods and services in a free market economy will equal the total demand at any given time. This law is contradicted by economic crises in which a glut of goods outpaces demand, bankrupting producers and impoverishing workers.

Administration and law ride roughshod over the human "cases" they treat under unbending rules. Technology imposes its rhythms regardless of the workers' misery and the waste of their potential. The rationality of the system is fundamentally irrational from the standpoint of content. And that content is human! "The quantification of objects, their subordination to abstract mental categories makes its appearance in the life of the worker immediately as a process of abstraction of which he is the victim ..."⁴⁶

The Lukácsian crisis theory is concerned with the generalization and breakdown of formal rationality as the governing principle of capitalist social life. The crisis appears "in the conflict between existence in its immediacy together with its expression in thought in the categories of reflection, and living social reality."⁴⁷ Here we once again encounter the contradiction Marx identified between "true actuality" and "existing actuality."

Lukács argues that bourgeois political economy is the immediate theoretical expression of the social structure (that is, of "existence in its immediacy"). Its formal-rational character contradicts "living social

reality.” Lukács explains the emergence of political economy in terms of the relative success of the bourgeoisie in imposing its reified categories on actual social life. “Nor is it an accident that economics became an independent discipline under capitalism. Thanks to its commodity and trade arrangements capitalist society has given the whole of economic life an identity notable for its autonomy, its cohesion and its reliance on immanent laws. This was something quite unknown in earlier forms of society.”⁴⁸

But even this relative success of capitalist economic theory and practice meets its limit in inevitable resistance from below. Thus for Lukács formal rationality enters into crisis at two levels: epistemologically, in the ultimate failure of capitalist economic and social categories adequately to grasp the content of social life; and socio-politically, in the failure of the objects of these categories, the real institutions and relations they reflect, adequately to shape the lives of human beings in the society.

Nevertheless, Lukács insists that political economy is not simply wrong. It formulates more or less exact calculations and predictions in every sphere by abandoning qualitative explanations for quantitative ones. Partial abstract systems of laws can be constructed, each one embracing a specific segment of the economy in a form that allows it to be successfully manipulated for individual advantage. But the strength of this method is also its limit. Universal and atemporal laws such as those of political economy cannot grasp the practices that constitute social reality in its lawful regularity.

While partial social sub-systems such as enterprises and bureaucratic administrations are highly rationalized, the interactions between them are “irrational” in the sense that they are not organized and planned as they would be under socialism. The sum of the rationalized domains does not add up to the totality. Thus political economy cannot comprehend those shifts and transformations at the level of the totality in which the foundations of the social system are laid and changed. “The whole structure of capitalist production rests on the interaction between a necessity subject to strict laws in all isolated phenomena and the relative irrationality of the total process.”⁴⁹

This “irrationality of the total process” is reflected in the economic crises of capitalism, in which Lukács sees an unconscious rebellion of use value against the exchange value that is its phenomenal form. The reified form here fails to mediate successfully the production and distribution of

the real contents—use values—needed to maintain the system and the individuals who live under it.

This same “irrationality” appears consciously in the class struggle. Reification constrains human life processes without always fulfilling human needs or performing the sense-making function that constitutes stable objects. Life overflows rationalization in every direction and comes back to haunt the rationalized domains in the course of class struggles. These struggles reveal the human basis of the society that has been shaped but also repressed by the reified forms. This provokes reflexive processes unknown in nature. Human lives considered as content of the reified forms have an independent power not just to violate expectations but also to understand themselves as doing so. This resistant self-understanding constitutes the core of what Lukács, following Marx, calls class consciousness. The process of abstraction in which wage labor consists

cuts [the worker] off from his labour-power, forcing him to sell it on the market as a commodity, belonging to him. And by selling this, his only commodity, he integrates it (and himself: for his commodity is inseparable from his physical existence) into a specialized process that has been rationalized and mechanized, a process that he discovers already existing, complete and able to function without him and in which he is no more than a cipher reduced to an abstract quantity, a mechanized and rationalized tool ... 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.⁵⁰

As can be seen from this passage, Lukács is more interested in the alienation of the working class than in its motivations. The brief reference here to the workers’ “physical, mental and moral existence,” so damaged by capitalism, refers us to the self-evident focus of generations of labor struggle and socialist political work. He takes for granted critical awareness of poverty, deskilled labor, and the indignities and injustices of life for the lower classes. These conditions appear as “content” of the reified forms not for any intrinsic reason but simply because in generating them, capitalism “forms” them inadequately, producing poverty in terms of wages, deskilling as technical progress, and indignities and injustices as well-deserved consequences of personal failings. Obviously, this aspect of Lukács’s argument appears inadequate today. We would like to know how what might be called the “facticity” of the working class enters consciousness, by what process it becomes the basis for resistance and revolt. Lukács’s rather limited account is explained in his theory of class consciousness, discussed in the [Appendix](#) of this book.

In any case, the situation of the proletariat gives rise to what Lukács calls the “self-consciousness of the commodity,” a bizarre hybrid of the human and the non-human. Philosophy and revolutionary theory are joined most intimately in this concept. But Lukács notes that the mere fact of self-consciousness is not revolutionary. A slave does not modify his status or society in recognizing the fact of his own slavery. What is different about the worker? The fact that the worker’s self-knowledge “*brings about an objective structural change in the object of knowledge ...* Beneath the cloak of the thing lay a relation between men ... beneath the quantifying crust there was a qualitative, living core. Now that this core is revealed it becomes possible to recognize the fetish character of every commodity.”⁵¹

Capitalism is uniquely exposed to practical critique by its own members. No previous economic system was so vulnerable. This is because the existence of capitalism depends on the members of the society conceiving themselves as individual agents, interacting through objective systems such as markets. They must adopt a “contemplative” attitude and seek personal advantage in these systems. In sum, the reified structuration of the society depends on reified practice. Capitalism has a reified form of objectivity that is perceived and acted upon in a reified disposition, closing the circle of social construction. When it breaks down, the system is threatened.

The reified form of objectivity of the society is shattered from within. The workers, as private owners of a commodity called labor power, are transformed by self-consciousness into a potentially revolutionary force. The individualistic form of life imposed by capitalism, based on technical manipulation in conformity with the laws of the system, gives way to collective and conscious choice. “*The act of consciousness overthrows the form of objectivity of its objects.*”⁵² Lukács thus distinguishes what I call a “transforming practice” from a “contemplative” or reified practice.

In class struggle economic, political, and social acts react profoundly on each other, unlike the rigorous separation between them in bourgeois theory and practice; this constitutes an immediate refutation of the reified point of view. “Force ... appears as the concrete embodiment of the irrationality limiting capitalist rationality, of the intermittence of its laws.”⁵³ To the bourgeoisie the result appears as imminent barbarism and social disintegration. Lukács argues, on the contrary, that it is the uncomprehended content of that abstract labor power the capitalist pays at

the factory gate shattering its own reified form of objectivity and manifesting itself directly in historical action. Here the totality, as the actual moving force of history, the reality behind the reified appearances, emerges independently of the social laws and confronts them with forces they cannot control.

REIFICATION AND REASON

The full significance of Lukács's theory of reification can only be understood by examining its roots in Hegel. In his later *Defence of History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács writes that Hegel's "true philosophy of society" is his logic of essence because "unbeknownst to Hegel of course—here the real laws of movement, the real social being of bourgeois society mirror themselves conceptually." Thus, "If Marx, in overturning Hegel's philosophy, has at the same time rescued its real core, then he precisely rescued most from the logic of essence—demythologized, of course."⁵⁴

Lukács's claim is justified by Marx's frequent use of the Hegelian category of "appearance," elaborated in the *Doctrine of Essence*. Unfortunately this is one of the most difficult aspects of Hegel's thought. Marx's appropriation of Hegel's concept of essence in his economic theory also defies simple exposition.⁵⁵ For the purpose of this account of Lukács's theory of reification it is not necessary to summarize these discussions since he paints the Hegel-Marx relation with a broad brush. I will focus primarily on an "exoteric" presentation of Hegel's position in a short essay entitled "Who Thinks Abstractly?"⁵⁶ This essay helps to understand the most important aspect of Hegel's theory relevant to Marx and especially to Lukács's interpretation of Marx.

Hegel argues in this essay for reversing the usual understanding of abstract and concrete. It is not the philosopher who thinks abstractly, but the ordinary person who summarizes a complex of relationships in a single trait. Abstraction is thus a synecdoche in which a part stands for the concrete whole. Hegel gives the example of the servant who is treated as merely a servant by a vulgar master, in contrast with the "French noble" who understands that his servant has ideas and purposes just like himself and who relates to him accordingly as a person.

In this simplified version Hegel's idea is obviously relevant to Marxist economics. Take the example of commodity exchange. It is made possible

by abstracting a specific economic relation from the complex human and material relations that surround it. We enter a store and approach the clerk exclusively as a clerk, ignoring all other aspects of the clerk's being. We buy the product without any knowledge of its producers or how it came to be in the store. The objects and persons we encounter in the economic exchanges of capitalist society can be considered abstractions from the wider whole of the social world in which they are embedded. What is abstracted is the dimension of the social world through which it is commodified and controlled.

In the *Science of Logic*, a much more elaborate discussion of the relation of abstract to concrete is formulated in terms of the concept of appearance. In Hegel's sense, appearance is not in the mind, but is the "immediate" reality of essence, the form in which it reveals itself proximally. Appearances are abstract in Hegel's sense, not in terms of conceptual generality, but as unilateral aspects of a more complex whole. That whole consists not only in appearances but also in the internal relations between them that make up a whole. Hegel explores many different relations between appearances, the most important of which for Lukács's argument is the "law of appearance."

Hegel's concept of law is drawn from natural science. He does not reject science but he does reject its claim to arrive at the true essence of the appearances. Law achieves "only immediate because abstract unity" between appearances.⁵⁷ By this he means that the different appearances related by law retain their independence of each other even within their relation. For example, the formula introduced earlier equating distance with velocity times time does not "unify" space and time even as it relates them. The appearances and the law are thus abstract, partial "moments." Hegel requires something more, a concrete "totality" that effectively unifies appearances in a mutually dependent whole.

In the "A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy" Marx translates these Hegelian notions into his own language. He distinguishes the concrete of thought from the reality it represents in order to avoid any idealistic confusion between the two. Marx offers this "materialist" qualification simply to clarify his own appropriation of the Hegelian concepts. He writes, in a famous passage, "The concrete is concrete, because it is a combination of many objects with different destinations, i.e., a unity of diverse elements. In our thought, it therefore appears as a process

of synthesis, as a result, and not as a starting point, although it is the real starting point and, therefore, also the starting point of observation and conception.”⁵⁸ In other words, it may seem that the concepts we use to understand the real constitute it, but in fact the real is always already “synthetic” in itself, a “unity of diverse elements” presupposed by our thought.

The true intellectual “synthesis” that brings together all the various categories of the capitalist economy—its appearances—in a concrete totality in the Hegelian sense overcomes their unilateral character by explaining their historical origins, social functions, and relations. The law-governed appearances of the capitalist economy, analyzed in bourgeois economics, can be unified more fundamentally through explanations that reveal the mutual constitution of such things as capital, labor, money, machinery, and ultimately the relations and forces of production. So Marx writes that “the categories are therefore but forms of expression, manifestations of existence of this subject, this definite society, i.e., the concrete reality from which they have been abstracted.”⁵⁹

So far Marx seems to add little to Hegel’s concept of the abstract and the concrete, but another aspect of his position marks a definite departure. Marx’s theory of fetishism appears to rely on the conventional distinction between the abstract and the concrete to describe the process in which money “appears” as the general equivalent for all economic goods. Here is Alfred Sohn-Rethel’s description of this “real abstraction” underlying the capitalist economy:

The form of the commodity is abstract and abstractness governs its whole orbit. To begin with, exchange-value is itself abstract value in contrast to the use-value of commodities. The exchange-value is subject only to quantitative differentiation, and this quantification is again abstract compared with the quantity which measures use-values. Marx points out with particular emphasis that even labour, when determining the magnitude and substance of value, becomes “abstract human labour,” human labour purely as such. The form in which commodity-value takes on its concrete appearance as money—be it as coinage or bank-notes—is an abstract *thing* which, strictly speaking, is a contradiction in terms.⁶⁰

While Sohn-Rethel focuses on exchange, his remarks hint at a second and more fundamental “real abstraction”: labor. The purely quantitative “identity” of all commodities is ultimately rooted in the equivalence of the labor they contain. Under capitalism the comparability of all the forms of labor, their “abstract” identity (in the conventional sense of the term), is not

merely theoretical but is realized practically in the transformation of the labor process. Labor is systematically deskilled. It loses its “concrete” character as a complex performance. The qualitative specificity of the various types of craft labor is eliminated and all are reduced to the mere quantitative expenditure of energy. The result is the emergence of “work” as an economic category with a simple quantitative measure in terms of time. The real abstraction of labor is the basis of the real abstraction of price.

Political economy, Marx argues, is the system of categories describing such real abstractions. The facts of social life are raised to consciousness in its categories and comprehended through its formal-rational laws. These latter are not illusion or ideology, nor are they reality in the full sense of the term; rather they are the “law of appearance” in Hegel’s sense. But as such they do not comprehend the “essential relations” that describe the society as a concrete totality. For that the abstract categories of the economy would have to be explained in terms of the underlying social relations. Thus Marx’s use of the conventional distinction is embedded in a Hegelian dialectic of appearance and reality. Marx’s method condenses the two concepts of the abstract and the concrete, the conventional and the dialectical, into one. He shows that abstractness in the sense of conceptual generality, at least in the case of the commodity and labor, is the necessary form of appearance of the concrete social reality of capitalism.

But this conjunction is precisely the substance of Lukács’s theory of reification! Lukács’s starting point is the *appearance* of autonomy of the economy and, modeled on it, other apparently autonomous social institutions. Society appears as a collection of independent social “things” ruled by the laws of the differentiated domains. These “things” are comprehended by social science as facts. The facts appear as facts insofar as they are abstracted from the whole, separated from each other, reduced to quantitative determinants, and stripped of the many mysteries that characterized similar entities in precapitalist society. This apparent “factuality” of the social world is the form in which it is revealed *in* that aspect that has a systematic order, a lawful form.

So much is clear from the earlier discussion of reification, but it is easy to pass over Lukács’s deeper insight. The real abstraction of the capitalist economic categories does not merely *describe* the facts, superficially understood. This would be to underestimate the significance of reification by overlooking the problematic status of factuality itself. What does it mean

that social entities have the form of facts? It is unlikely that members of precapitalist societies would find a “factual” description of the foundations of their social world reasonable or salient. Of course they would be quite capable of such reifying procedures as counting or measuring particular objects where appropriate, but that is a far cry from understanding their origins, the cosmos, the founding myths of their society, the relations between the ages and sexes in terms of what we call facts. Even we find factual description inadequate to such things as our close human relationships. No, factuality is not a self-evident category. It must be *constructed* in the social world to which it is effectively relevant. This is the deepest function of the concept of reification. It is meant to explain *how* the world can appear as a collection of facts. The process of reification is the ontological foundation of the factuality of the social world. It is constitutive of the facts’ very factuality as their form of objectivity.

This insight explains why Lukács had to give up romantic critique. His theory of reification will not allow him to simply counterpose social and economic law to the claims of personality. Nor can he demand a return from the lawful order of the facts to immediate experience. The problem of modernity goes deeper, to the ontological foundations. It cannot be addressed at the level of the soul and its passions, which are merely reflexes of the Gradgrindian factuality of the world, the Sunday worship of what is excluded the rest of the week. Rather, transcendence must be sought at the level of the structuring forces that shape the form of objectivity of the social world. Lukács identifies those forces with the proletariat, which actually constructs the social world through its labor. This identification suggests another similarity between Marxism and Hegel.

Hegel reconstructed Kant’s contrast between understanding and reason, *Verstand* and *Vernunft*, to signify the difference between scientific research and speculative philosophical insight. In Hegel the two are related as stages in the acquisition of knowledge. The *Phenomenology of Spirit* contains an important account of their relation that has a remarkable similarity to Lukács’s argument. Hegel explores the attempt of science to understand the appearance of nature as the product of essential “forces” governed by “law.” This attempt fails to explain the law of these forces and ultimately leads to the startling discovery that the whole contrast of appearance and essence depends ultimately on self-consciousness. Hegel writes, “It is manifest that behind the so-called curtain which is supposed to conceal the inner world,

there is nothing to be seen unless we go behind it ourselves, as much in order that we may see, as that there may be something behind there which can be seen.”⁶¹

In contemporary Hegel scholarship, this argument is interpreted to demonstrate the sociality of knowledge. As Terry Pinkard puts it, with Hegel, “we move away from a representationalist picture of knowledge to the idea of socially situated reason-giving activities; we thus move away from the picture of ourselves as ‘subjects’ representing the world to an understanding of ourselves as *participants* in various historically determinate social practices.”⁶² But what if this social “we” of knowledge is divided by class and enters into conflict not only over particular material stakes but over those “historically determinate social practices?” In that case both appearances and the self-consciousness behind them take on practical functions in a struggle over meaning.

There is another significant difference between this Marxist and the original Hegelian approach: where in Hegel the contrast of understanding and reason is an atemporal distinction in ontological levels, Lukács explains it historically. Marxism shows “that history consists precisely in the constant transformation of those forms which earlier modes of thinking, undialectical and stuck fast in the immediacy of their present as they always were, regarded as suprahistorical.”⁶³ The theory of reification applies this approach to bourgeois culture. This culture takes as suprahistorical the form of analytic understanding, corresponding to the actual categorial structure of the economy that is its archetype and source. The identification of rationality as such with this form explains its general predominance in philosophy, the sciences, law and administration. Marx’s critique of political economy thus becomes the basis for a more general critique of formal rationality.

The sphere of appearance, which consists for Marx in the reified facts of capitalism, is bounded historically by a possible transcendence in action. The self-consciousness that overthrows capitalism is not “*Geist*,” but the class consciousness of the proletariat. Reification is thus not subjective, but neither is it an eternally unchanging reality. It is the failure to grasp reification as social appearance that leads to its philosophical representation as an eternal foundation of knowledge and experience, rather than as a historically specific cultural form.

With this discovery the boundaries between history and philosophy break down. Philosophy now appears as implicated in history rather than giving access to the eternal. Philosophy arises from the contradictions of the apparently suprahistorical forms, while the material life of society is viewed as mere factual content. In relating economy to rationality, Marxism overcomes the immediacy of form, historicizing it in contact with its content. This historicization can be extended to all the more abstract theories that arise on the basis of the formal structure of the economy. Philosophy is swept into the movement of history, and history itself becomes the study of the forms of reason, no longer a mere collection of contingent facts.

The next chapter applies this approach to the history of classical German philosophy. The passage from Kant to Hegel is the key transition in this history. Lukács argues that the Kantian analytic understanding represents in philosophy, at the highest level of generality, the same reified formalism found in bourgeois political economy. Just as Hegelian reason transcends the understanding through a synthetic process of mediation, so Marxism transcends political economy. For Lukács, however, Marx is not simply applying Hegelian dialectics to a particular domain, nor are the formalistic categories of political economy merely categories of a specific social science. Bourgeois economics and the forms of existence of which it is the expression are the archetypal domain from which formalistic rationality arises as a cultural pattern. The general predominance of formalistic rationality in philosophy, science, law, and the other areas of the superstructures can now be explained on this basis.

In linking political economy, as form of appearance, to its basis in the totality, Marx indicates the lines along which the concept of rationality would have to be revised to lose its formalistic limitation. Lukács thus rediscovers the Kant–Hegel problematic of rationality from these indications in the economic works. He identifies formal rationality with capitalism and dialectics with socialism as successive stages in the history of reason, and not as atemporal paradigms, each potentially valid throughout all of history. He regards this history of reason as the specific contribution of Marxism to the resolution of the problems raised by Hegel's philosophy.

The great advance over Hegel made by the scientific standpoint of the proletariat as embodied in Marxism lay in its formulation of the categories of reflection [*Reflexionsbestimmungen*] not as an

“eternal” stage in the comprehension of reality in general, but rather as the necessary forms of existence and of thought of bourgeois society. Marxism thus grasped these categories as reifications of being and thought, and therewith discovered the dialectic in history itself.⁶⁴

It is to Lukács’s metacritique of philosophy that I will now turn.

¹ Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. D. Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 299.

² The other major work of this tendency is Karl Korsch, *Marxismus und Philosophie* (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1966), originally published in 1923, at the same time as Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*. Korsch’s book is available in a partial English translation under the title *Marxism and Philosophy*, trans. F. Halliday (New York: Monthly Review, 1970). See also Franz Jakubowski, *Ideology and Superstructure in Historical Materialism*, trans. A. Booth (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1976). For a comparison of Husserl and Lukács, see Mihail Vajda, “Lukács and Husserl,” in Agnes Heller, *Lukács Reappraised* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983). See also, Richard Westerman, “The Reification of Consciousness: Husserl’s Phenomenology in Lukács’s *Identical Subject–Object*,” *New German Critique* 111, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Fall 2010), 97–130.

³ HCC, 131.

⁴ See David Kettler, “Marxism and Culture: Lukács in the Hungarian Revolutions of 1918/19,” *Telos*, No. 10 (Winter 1971), 35–92; Arpad Kadarkay, *Georg Lukács: Life, Thought, and Politics* (London: Basil Blackwell, 1991).

⁵ Georg Simmel, “On the Concept and Tragedy of Culture,” in Georg Simmel, *The Conflict in Modern Culture and Other Essays*, trans. K. P. Etzkorn (New York: Teachers’ College Press, 1968).

⁶ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. A. Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1968).

⁷ Georg Lukács, “The Old Culture and the New Culture,” trans. P. Breines and S. Weber, *Telos*, No. 5 (1970), 21.

⁸ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1, trans. E. Aveling (New York: Modern Library, 1906 reprint), 837. It is significant that this chapter is entitled “Historical Tendency of Accumulation” rather than “Historical Law of Accumulation.” Marx knew what he was claiming despite his occasional use of misleading language.

⁹ For a discussion of the gap between Marx’s critique of political economy and the revolutionary theory of socialism, see Stanley Moore, “Utopian Themes in Marx and Mao: A Critique for Modern Revisionists,” *Monthly Review* 21, No. 2 (1969). Moore’s argument is developed further in “Marx and Lenin as Historical Materialists,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1975).

¹⁰ “Missing from Marx’s oeuvre is any concept of culture, of formation and re-formation (*Bildung*) ... Because Marx did not relate actuality to representation and subjectivity, his account of structural change in capitalism is abstractly related to possible change in consciousness. This resulted in gross oversimplification regarding the likelihood and the inhibition of change.” Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (London: Athlone Press, 1981), 218.

¹¹ An exhaustive survey of the various meanings of the concept of culture is provided by A. L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (New York: Vintage, 1963). They conclude that “most social scientists” would define culture as follows: “Culture consists of patterns, explicit and implicit, of and for behavior acquired and transmitted by symbols,

constituting the distinctive achievement of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e., historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values; culture systems may, on the one hand, be considered as products of action, on the other as conditioning elements of further action” (357).

¹² For examples of such an approach, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. R. Nice (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1977) and Anthony Giddens, *The Constitution of Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984).

¹³ Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology*, 14.

¹⁴ HCC, 203.

¹⁵ Marx and Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International, 1968), 7.

¹⁶ HCC, 83 (translation modified).

¹⁷ Lukács, *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness*, 79.

¹⁸ HCC, 152.

¹⁹ Marshall Sahlins, *Culture and Practical Reason* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), 212.

²⁰ Lukács argues that reductionism gives an unrealistic picture of precapitalist societies. In these societies the economy does not play a central role in the establishment of social meanings. It also complicates the understanding of socialist revolution, a point I take up in the [Appendix](#) to this book.

²¹ Gareth Stedman Jones, “The Marxism of the Early Lukács: An Evaluation,” *New Left Review*, No. 70 (1971), 44.

²² Lucio Colletti, *Il Marxismo e Hegel* (Bari, Italy: Laterza, 1969), 342.

²³ In *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness* (133), Lukács refutes a similar critique by citing several passages from *Capital* in which Marx attributes the specific form of the mechanization of industry to the requirements of capitalism.

²⁴ Georg Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (Neuwied and Berlin: Luchterhand, 1968), 289.

²⁵ Marx, *Capital*, 105.

²⁶ Ibid., 83.

²⁷ Georg Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. T. B. Bottomore and D. Frisby (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1978).

²⁸ HCC, 91.

²⁹ Ibid., 100.

³⁰ Ibid., 89.

³¹ HCC, 130. For a further explanation of the concept of contemplation in Lukács, see Andrew Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History* (New York: Routledge, 2005), [Chapter 4](#).

³² For this aspect of the theory Lukács refers to Max Weber. See his *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, trans. A. Henderson and T. Parsons (New York and London: Free Press, 1964).

³³ HCC, 103.

³⁴ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. T. Parsons (New York: Scribner’s, 1958).

³⁵ HCC, 102.

³⁶ Ibid., 83 (translation modified).

³⁷ I have modified the English translation throughout to restore the term as “form of objectivity.”

³⁸ Sources for understanding the relation of Lukács and Lask include Hartmut Rosshof, *Emil Lask als Lehrer von Georg Lukács: Zur Form ihres Gegenstandsbegriffs* (Bonn, Germany: Bouvier Verlag Herbert Grundmann, 1975); Tom Rockmore, “Fichte, Lask, and Lukács’s Hegelian Marxism,” *Journal of the History of Philosophy*, Vol. 30, No. 4 (1992), 557–77; Istvan Feher, “Lask, Lukács, Heidegger: The Problem of the Irrationality of the Categories,” in C. Macann, ed., *Martin Heidegger*:

Critical Assessments (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 373–405. The original connection was made by Lucien Goldmann in the [appendix](#) to *Mensch, Gemeinschaft und Welt in der Philosophie Immanuel Kants* (Zürich/New York: Europa Verlag, 1945).

[39](#) Quoted in Steven Galt Crowell, *Husserl, Heidegger, and the Space of Meaning* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 101. Lask's comments are found in Emil Lask, *Die Logik der Philosophie und die Kategorienlehre* (Tübingen, Germany: Verlag von J. C. B. Mohr, 1911), 68–9.

[40](#) If by “ontic” we mean particular facts and by “ontological” their “being,” i.e. meaning, or more generally their form of objectivity, then Foucault's description of the “empirico-transcendental double” applies. The being that discovers in its history the forms of its knowledge and thereby makes of its empirical condition a transcendental precondition, ends up founding its being on “*le vécu*” its lived experience. See Michel Foucault, *Les Mots et les Choses: Une Archéologie des Sciences Humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966), 329–33.

[41](#) Crowell, *Husserl, Heidegger, and the Space of Meaning*, 102.

[42](#) HCC, 13. The quoted passage is from “Wage Labor and Capital,” in Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. R. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 207.

[43](#) HCC, 184 (translation modified). See the German text of Georg Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (Neuwied and Berlin: Luchterhand, 1968), 370.

[44](#) See HCC, 116 for the significance of this insight for Lukács.

[45](#) Generalized as a method, this is also one of the foundations of contemporary science and technology studies. It is one of several “dereifying” procedures for understanding scientific-technical thought. See, for example, Lucy Suchman, *Human-Machine Reconfigurations: Plans and Situated Actions*, 2nd Edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

[46](#) HCC, 165.

[47](#) HCC, 185 (translation modified).

[48](#) Ibid., 231.

[49](#) HCC, 102.

[50](#) Ibid., 165–6.

[51](#) HCC, 169.

[52](#) Ibid., 178.

[53](#) HCC, 179 (translation modified).

[54](#) Lukács, *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness*, 137.

[55](#) See, for example, Hiroshi Uchida, *Marx's Grundrisse and Hegel's Logic* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988).

[56](#) G. W. F. Hegel, *Texts and Commentary. Hegel's Preface to His System in a New Translation with Commentary on Facing Pages, and “Who Thinks Abstractly?”*, trans. W. Kaufmann (New York: Anchor Books, 1966).

[57](#) G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, Vol. 2, trans. W. H. Johnston and L. G. Struthers (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1961), 135.

[58](#) Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. N. I. Stone (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr, 1904), 293.

[59](#) Ibid., 302.

[60](#) Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1977), 19. Astonishingly, Sohn-Rethel makes no mention of the relation of this interpretation of Marx to Lukács's concept of reification.

[61](#) G. W. F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1979), 103.

[62](#) Terry Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 44. Cf. Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (New York: Humanities Press, 1963), 112–13. Marcuse interprets this passage explicitly in terms of the critique of reification.

⁶³ Georg Lukács, “Moses Hess and the Problems of Idealist Dialectics,” in *Tactics and Ethics*, ed. and trans. R. Livingstone and M. McColgan (New York: Harper and Row, 1975), 215.

⁶⁴ *HCC*, 177.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Realization of Philosophy

THE HERITAGE OF CLASSICAL GERMAN PHILOSOPHY

Étienne Gilson's book, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, traced the effects of certain fundamental problems in the philosophical tradition as they worked themselves out in a succession of thinkers from antiquity to modern times.¹ I too am interested in a "philosophical experience," but my story is not so ambitious. I focus on the struggle of four modern thinkers to carry out the specific philosophical program of the philosophy of praxis.

This program involves a social critique of idealism while preserving the structural features of the idealist subject-object relation. Like Gilson's philosophers, mine run into problems working out the implications of their program. There are two central problems, the status of science and technology in a radical social version of philosophical idealism, and the historical contingency of a social resolution of philosophical antinomies. The philosophers of praxis offer various solutions to these problems and are forced by changing historical circumstances to reformulate the program.

Within this larger framework, *History and Class Consciousness* itself contains a remarkable study of the particular philosophical experience of German idealism. This is the best description of the second part of the "Reification" essay, which surveys the history of classical German philosophy. Lukács develops a metacritique of the various positions taken in the course of the progress from Kant to Hegel and relates them to the cultural contradiction of capitalism.

For Lukács traditional philosophy is in essence theory of culture that does not know itself as such. Philosophy reflects on cultural structures—forms of objectivity—that it misinterprets as eternal principles disconnected from the accidents of history and social life. Yet in spite of this systematic misconstruction of culture, philosophy is important insofar as it thematizes cultural presuppositions and exposes them to discussion and criticism.

Philosophy has a unique contribution to make to a social theory that wants to understand its own place in a process of cultural transformation of which it is a part. This explains why the heart of Lukács's most important work is devoted to an extended analysis of the history of modern philosophy.

In the foreword to *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács says "it is of *practical* importance to return in this respect to the traditions of Marx-interpretation founded by Engels (who regarded 'the German workers' movement' as the 'heir to classical German philosophy')." ² However, this statement is misleading; it would incline the reader to expect a treatment of classical German philosophy similar to what it receives from Engels and his orthodox Marxist followers. In fact there are few important similarities, for Lukács returns not to Engels's interpretation of the heritage but to deeper questions concerning Marx's relation to his philosophical forebears.

Engels was the first to describe the broad sweep of the history of ideas from the French Enlightenment through Hegel and Feuerbach as an intellectual prolegomena to Marxism. However, his version of Marxism bore little resemblance to the heritage it assumed. He presented it as a natural philosophy, synthesizing the sciences into a materialist worldview. The final traces of classical German philosophy that remain were to be found in a revised dialectic that presumably continued the Hegelian theory of reality as process. But neither this materialist worldview nor this version of the dialectic can carry the weight of the inheritance Engels claims for them.

For Engels the essence of the heritage is science, because only science is *universal*, not bound by the class conditions on which it nevertheless depends for its birth. Although the bourgeoisie created modern natural science, it can no longer accept the truths its own sciences discover. Now new ideas undermine the foundations of its ideology, the static worldview and the "*post festum*" religious conversion of a class menaced by the repercussions of its own rationalistic traditions. The proletariat alone *needs* the truth, and it alone, therefore, can rise to the universal point of view required for the pursuit of truth in the period of the decadence of bourgeois society.

Like Engels, Lukács too sees more at stake in the socialist movement than a change in property relations; the struggle will also decide the fate of reason itself. But both the rationalism and the irrationalism of bourgeois society now appear to Lukács to be infinitely more problematical than they

appeared to earlier Marxists. Gone is the enlightenment optimism and faith in science of traditional Marxism, gone its untroubled confidence in progress.³ For the first time there arises within Marxism an interrogation of enlightenment itself, and not just of its limits or abuse in bourgeois society.

Lukács's critique of reified rationality foreshadows the later work of Adorno and Horkheimer in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Like them, Lukács sees in modern irrationalism not a mere regression behind the achieved level of rationality, but its dialectical correlate. He describes irrationalism as a reaction against reification under the horizon of reification itself.⁴ The heritage of classical German philosophy now appears in a very different light than it did to Engels, not as the salvation of the scientific debris of the Enlightenment from an increasingly obscurantist bourgeoisie, but as a great attempt to validate and found rationality, an attempt that had inevitably to fail in its bourgeois form but which the proletariat may yet bring off.

For Lukács, bourgeois thought reaches its peak in classical German philosophy, but at the same time its contradictions manifest themselves there with more clarity and rigor than elsewhere. Lukács sums up these contradictions as the "antinomies of bourgeois thought," the split between subject and object, freedom and necessity, value and fact, form and content. Philosophy attempts to unite the poles of these antinomies in what Lukács calls a "totality." For Lukács as for Hegel, "To transcend such ossified antitheses is the sole concern of reason."⁵ The resolution of the antinomies is the fundamental exigency of this philosophy, through which it founds the concept of reason.

Lukács considers Kant's philosophy to be the purest expression of these antinomies. The greatness of Hegel lies principally in having developed the dialectical methodology by which Kantianism could be subjected to a rigorous critique. But the antinomies emerge intact from bourgeois philosophy in spite of its most strenuous intellectual efforts. Marxism then appears as the completion of the Hegelian critique of Kant, a completion that requires a radical change in orientation, but which in essence prolongs Hegelian dialectics. Lukács's own contribution consists in the appropriation of Hegel's dialectical critique of Kant from within Marxism.

From this standpoint classical German philosophy takes on a wholly new importance for Marxism. It poses for the first time, if in a still relatively unconscious form, the fundamental problems that Marxism is

called upon to solve. Lukács refuses either to attempt a speculative resolution of the antinomies of philosophy, or to close his eyes to them in the naïve self-certainty of science. The only possible reconciliation is the practical transcendence of the opposition between the antinomic terms at the level at which they arise. The procedure of Lukács's metacritique of classical German philosophy consists in identifying this level as social and discovering the traces of their social origin in the most abstract concepts of this philosophy.

Bourgeois philosophy, Lukács says, "is able to think the deepest and most fundamental problems of the development of bourgeois society through to the end—on the plane of philosophy ... And—in thought—it is able to take all the paradoxes of its position to the point where the methodological necessity of going beyond this historical stage in mankind's development can at least be seen as a problem."⁶ Henceforth the founding of a universal concept of reason is impossible without this *historical* progress. This historical progress has therefore become, as such, a demand of reason. The failure of classical German philosophy demonstrates that reason requires, on purely methodological grounds, a step beyond bourgeois society, beyond philosophical speculation into revolutionary practice.

PHILOSOPHY AND PRACTICE

Lukács's approach to the study of philosophy is disconcerting for it asks us not only to believe that philosophical abstractions are rooted in social life, but, stranger still, to believe that the problems arising from these abstractions can be resolved in social life. This approach implies a question not ordinarily posed about philosophy, namely why it *is* philosophy.

This question is easily answered by the usual Marxist theory of ideology according to which philosophy serves to justify capitalism. This version of Marxism dismisses speculation and demands a direct practical assault on the problems philosophy merely mystifies. Philistines, whether Marxist or bourgeois, have always imagined they can simply replace philosophy with the serious business of action in the world. Lukács's point is that the kind of problems that become the basis of philosophical reflection cannot be solved by unreflective practice because they arise at the points where such practice fails, or still more critically, at those points at which its very success raises further questions it knows not how to address. For Lukács, therefore, it is

not any and every practice that might resolve philosophical problems, but only a very special kind of practice the nature of which he explains in *History and Class Consciousness*.

One might ask then what it is about the type of practice prevalent in bourgeois society that generates the problems with which philosophy is concerned. This question could also be reformulated more precisely as follows: what is the inner limit on practice in bourgeois society preventing it from resolving practically the types of problems that then appear in philosophy as antinomies? What is there about this practice that is the source of problems it cannot even begin to resolve, which do not appear as practical problems at all, but rather as philosophical problems? Already, these questions begin to indicate why instead of recommending an immediate turn to practice, Lukács offers a metacritique of philosophy in the course of which everyday practice too is subjected to critical analysis.

Reified thought arises from the practical confrontation of the individual and society. It is not confined to the bourgeoisie, but affects all classes in bourgeois society, including the proletariat. Not surprisingly, however, it is particularly suited to the life conditions of the bourgeoisie, which are essentially individualistic. Solidarity between members of the class has a very limited (primarily defensive) function. Their usual social and economic interactions are competitive and conflictual. Therefore, what the class creates in common, as a class, it generally accomplishes unconsciously, through mechanisms which work behind the backs of the individuals. Each capitalist is aware of the activity of the class as a whole, “as something external which is subject to objective laws which it can only experience passively.”⁷

These sociological considerations form the essential background to Lukács’s metacritique of philosophy. The antinomy of value and fact can serve here as an exemplary philosophical problem. Social reality is governed by a pitiless determinism, indifferent to the needs and values of the individual. Value stands opposed to fact, freedom to necessity. This correlation of inner freedom and outward necessity, of subjective value and objective reality is the immediate theoretical consequence of a practice that refuses all solidarity, all conscious collective *Aufhebung* of the unintended consequences of individual actions. The isolated individual is condemned to accept the existing social reality, free only to take up one or another attitude toward it.

The struggle of the individual with reified reality can play itself out in two complementary forms.

The reified consciousness must also remain hopelessly trapped in the two extremes of crude empiricism and abstract utopianism. In the one case, consciousness becomes 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.⁸

These two antinomic opposites reappear everywhere in reified theory, in an ethics of duty versus a psychology of adaptation, in the lawful course of history versus the role of great men and ideas, in environmental causes of behavior versus personal responsibility, and so on and so forth.

For the individuals, the dilemma is painful and inescapable. They may accept the given reality as is, and attempt to achieve a personally advantageous position within it. Freedom is now restricted to movement within the framework of the necessary laws of existing reality. No attempt can be made to transform or alter this world and what must necessarily come to pass within it. Resistance only leads to defeat. However, the psychic costs of “realism” have also been calculated from Stendhal to the modern critiques of conformism: society as a market, indeed, a racket in selfhood.

The other horn of the dilemma is a utopian struggle to realize higher values in the world. The individuals may refuse the existing reality and stand on principle regardless of consequences. The subject is split in half, its substance divided between empirical needs and desires that can best be satisfied by conformity, and the authentic selfhood that derives from moral law or some other transcendent source. This position, which Kant developed into a coherent ethical philosophy, is no more successful than realism in resolving the antinomy of value and fact. An unyielding reality, mechanistic in the unfolding of its autonomous course, proves unresponsive to utopian aspirations that it threatens in the inner citadel of the self. “Freedom,” Lukács writes, “is neither able to overcome the material necessity of the system of knowledge and the soullessness of the fatalistic laws of nature, nor is it able to give them any meaning.”⁹

With this argument Lukács arrives at a theory of alienation similar to that of the early Marx. He shows how, from the structure of everyday practice in capitalist society, “The activity of man, his own labor becomes something objective and independent of him which is submitted to the

alienated autonomy of the natural social laws.”¹⁰ This is the core of the Marxian critique of capitalism, the demonstration that even at his most active, man remains “object and not subject of events.”¹¹

THE REIFIED THEORY-PRACTICE RELATION

So far the discussion of Lukács’s metacritique of philosophy has shown that the antinomies of practical reason can be derived from the structure of practical activity in capitalist society. This is not surprising since practical reason is inevitably close to actual practice in its concepts and problems. However, the parallel demonstration that the antinomies of pure reason, specifically the antinomy of subject and object, can also be derived from this same structure is more challenging.

According to Lukács, the reified paradigm of knowledge is rooted in the practice of technical control that is the central project of the bourgeoisie from its origins as a class. More precisely, it is the universality of this project that distinguishes bourgeois thought. Precapitalist societies carved a narrow sphere of activity out of nature, frequently ascribing their power over this small, humanized enclave to divine intervention. Technical rationality was thus always bounded by another type of thinking reflecting the feebleness of the human species and its limited understanding of the world. Never before the emergence of capitalism did human beings see their destiny as the total and integral domination of nature.

In capitalist society the ancient impotence and restraint gives way to an ambition to overcome every residue of uncontrolled nature, and this new project completely transforms the concept of reason. Corresponding to the gradual fulfillment of this ambition, there is an increasing extension of reification that, projected to the limit, would make it possible to control every aspect of existence through a quantitative representation of its essence. The subject that is dialectically correlated with this concept of reality is an agent of individual technical practice. From this standpoint, the recognition of the inviolability of the impersonal, autonomous laws of reality is the very condition of the comprehension and domination of reality by the individual. Indeed, for reified thought, “only a reality caught in such concepts can really be mastered by us.”¹² For this thought the reified is the rational and therefore also the controllable.

The theoretical validation of bourgeois society requires the demonstration that the entire universe is rational and controllable in principle. The demonstration at first consists in the construction of formally rational models of the universe that reveal it to be available for domination. Capitalism was thus accompanied by attempts to validate its project on the basis of rationalistic metaphysics and mathematical science.

For reified thought the domination of nature, and that of the human species in general, is only possible insofar as nature conforms to reason. What exists as reality in the outer world must also exist as reason in the subject. “The salient characteristic of the whole epoch is the equation, which appears naïve and dogmatic, of formal, mathematical, rational knowledge both with knowledge in general and also with ‘our’ knowledge.”¹³ What is produced by “us” in thought as rational knowledge must prove itself as universal and objective. The principles of an autonomous and free reason must be shown to correspond with the nature of things. This is the original significance of the concept of the identity of subject and object.

Lukács points out that this rationalistic philosophy involves a curious reversal of perspectives. Practically, the subject stands in a contemplative relation to the world. It is on this condition that subjectivity can control its world under the horizon of reification. But theoretically, the subject claims to reproduce the world actively in thought. It is on this condition that reification appears as the essence of reality. Practical contemplation and theoretical activity compass this basic antinomy of reified thought.

Lukács summarizes the problem as follows:

The contradiction that appears here between subjectivity and objectivity in modern rationalist formal systems ... the conflict between their nature as systems “produced” by “us” and their fatalistic necessity as distant from and alien to man, is nothing but the logical and methodological formulation of the state of modern society. For, on the one hand, men are constantly smashing, replacing and leaving behind them “natural” irrational and factual bonds, while, on the other hand, they erect around themselves in the reality they have created and “produced by themselves,” a kind of second nature the operation of which opposes itself to them with exactly the same lawful necessity as was the case earlier on with irrational forces of nature (more exactly: the social relations which appear in this form). “To them, their own social action,” says Marx, “takes the form of the action of objects, which rule the producers instead of being ruled by them.”¹⁴

In capitalist society, then, the unmastered, alienated form of social life takes shape as the dictate, no longer of irrational religious powers nor even of human masters, but of “scientific” laws. Reified reason becomes an

expression of this alienation. No sooner achieved in pure theory, the identity of subject and object limits practice, confronting the individuals with a second nature, the laws of which they are impotent to change.

Reification's technical paradigm of subjectivity and objectivity presupposes an individual subject. The more or less unconscious collective practices in which capitalism really consists appear to reified thought to lie *on the side of the object*. What the individuals cannot consciously and individually accomplish is thus not "accomplished" at all, but rather suffered by them as a fate. Of course, the individuals do relate to the products of these unconscious activities, but not as to human products. Rather, all they perceive of the collective practice in which they are engaged is its results, and behind these its *form*, imprinted on their objects. This form appears as an impersonal and autonomous law that preexists and predetermines social behavior.

Lukács argues that it is only insofar as the object has been actively submitted to this form that it enters the circuit of capitalist technical domination. Thus priority would go to history in explaining social laws and not vice versa. Reified thought fails to see that social practice is the ground of reification. Instead, it believes that the result of reification, the construction of objects as technically manipulable, reveals their preexisting essence. For reified thought this essence is precisely that dimension of the object through which power over it can be achieved. The reified object surrenders its own vital mechanism to human control, revealing its truth as a potentiality for manipulation that has always slumbered within it. Lukács's point, once again, is that this way of representing the subject-object relation reverses the picture by occluding the unconscious social practice that "prepares" the object for instrumental manipulation, both materially and through the work of social signification in which it takes on a lawful form.

Reified practice is the basis of the antinomy of subject and object and the other antinomies of philosophy. These antinomies arise because the reified subject of practice treats the product of its combined action with other similar subjects as a law-governed, objective reality. It is the unconsciousness of their collective social practice that condemns these subjects to actively reproduce a world foreign to themselves and to their aims. Philosophy conceptualizes the reified form of objectivity of the objects of this practice. It cannot recognize its own limits because it treats

the most general consequences of a historical situation in which decision-making processes are separate as a metaphysical reality. In grasping these consequences as a law, it hypostatizes ontologically what is in reality due to a specific type of practice.

If philosophy arises from reification and reification itself arises from the unconsciousness of social practice, then could one not imagine a unique kind of “action” that would consist in bringing this social practice to consciousness and thereby changing the conditions of philosophical reflection? Might it not be possible to dereify the world, dissolving the social basis of the philosophical antinomies, simply by becoming aware of the unintended consequences of one’s actions, bringing these consequences within the domain of social choice?

This would be another basis for control of objects: not individual manipulation in conformity with laws but conscious collective decision about the laws themselves. Lukács suggests, following Marx, that the individuals might come together, under certain objective conditions, to make such decisions, thereby interrupting the feedback mechanism that chains them to the perpetual reproduction of their alienated condition. This is Lukács’s explanation of the Marxian idea of socialism as “human control of history.”

Here theory, as consciousness of reality, would become a practical act with real effects and would no longer be comprehensible on reified terms as value-free contemplation of reality from a mythic epistemological “beyond.” As Horkheimer puts a similar point, “in genuinely critical thought explanation signifies not only a logical process but a concrete historical one as well. In the course of it both the social structure as a whole and the relation of the theoretician to society are altered, that is both the subject and the role of thought are changed.”¹⁵ This conclusion describes Lukács’s agenda in the historical analysis of classical German philosophy.

FROM KANT TO HEGEL

At the center of *History and Class Consciousness* is an extraordinary discussion of the development from Kant to Hegel seen as steps in the intellectual progression leading to Marxism. That progression is explained as the gradual working out of Kant’s original intuition in ever more concrete, ever more adequate forms, culminating in the final recognition of

the social practice behind the reified appearance. In the course of this discussion, Lukács shows that Marxism is the veritable *Aufhebung* of classical German philosophy, arising from its inner dynamic on the basis of its results.

Lukács's argument in the second part of the essay on reification is presented as a quasi-history, behind which it is possible to identify a static model that in fact organizes his presentation. This model is the Kantian "system" with its threefold division into critiques of pure reason, practical reason, and judgment. The history of classical German philosophy, as Lukács presents it, is in fact the successive thematization of each of these three aspects of Kantian doctrine *qua* solution to the antinomies. This analysis yields three "demands of reason" that must be fulfilled to overcome reified thought. They are: 1) the principle of practice, 2) dialectical method, 3) history as reality. In this section and the next I will attempt to explain the response of classical German philosophy to these demands. As one attempt after another to fulfill them fails, the emphasis shifts, culminating finally in Marxism. All along the way, Lukács draws out the implicit conclusions established by this "philosophical experience," conclusions that later form the basis of a new concept of reason.

Lukács's conception of reified society as a "second nature," the laws of which are created by human beings but which appear as natural laws, suggests an important philosophical parallel. This is, after all, approximately the form of the Kantian theory of knowledge, the notion that experience is governed by laws imposed on it by the subject which, in turn, necessarily determine the knowledge of the subject. What is the significance of this parallel?

Lukács seeks the answer to this question in a metacritique of Kant's famous "Copernican Revolution." Note that metacritique is not ideology critique. Rather, Kant's theory is a rational way of understanding reified social reality, *under its horizon*, that is to say, as it appears to reified thought. More precisely, this means that when Kant founds the identity of "our" knowledge and objectivity in the concept of transcendental synthesis, he is not merely masking, but rather explaining the very same social reality Lukács also explains. It was thus Kant, in a sense, who first discovered the *process* of reification but only insofar as it can be understood speculatively as the result of an imaginary individual practice.

Kant's philosophy is an enormous theoretical advance over earlier rationalism that simply assumed the rationality of the universe without suspecting the constitutive function of the subject.¹⁶ Where earlier philosophy had, for the most part, taken for granted the objectivity of objects and the immediacy of experience, Kant shows that objectivity is the product of a synthesis performed by the subject on the raw materials of experience through the imposition of forms of objectivity such as space, time, and causality. The synthesis of experience consists in its submission to these forms without which it would not take shape as a coherent world of objects at all. This was Kant's "Copernican Revolution," which placed the subject at the center of the epistemological universe where formerly the object held sway. But this revolution had a surprising consequence. Recognizing the role of mental activity in perception gave rise to the notion of the thing-in-itself; Kant's successors focused on overcoming this paradoxically unknowable reality.

Lukács's interpretation of this problematic is quite unusual. Instead of regarding the thing-in-itself as beyond experience, he explains it in terms of the form-content distinction he found in the work of Emil Lask. Recall that the neo-Kantians distinguished between the realm of nature to which general laws applied and history, which was said to be made up of unique events. These phenomena were considered "irrational" insofar as they resisted explanation through law. They constituted a kind of intra-experiential thing-in-itself. Lask's contribution was situated in this context. He argued that the thing-in-itself should not be conceived as unknowable, nor as an exclusively historical phenomenon, but rather in terms of the relation of meaning or form to content in experience. Meanings apply to a meaningless "material," for example, the stuff of sensation which now stands in for the thing-in-itself in Lukács's appropriation of Lask. This shifts the emphasis away from the epistemological problem of how the mind produces representations in various fields. Instead, Lask focuses on the ontological question of meaning as a necessary feature of experience.

Lukács applies these concepts in his interpretation of Kant and his successors. He describes their challenge as explaining meaning in such a way as to demonstrate that it actually "penetrates" its content and shapes it to the core. Only thus would it be possible to prove that reality is not fundamentally meaningless. Subject-object identity thus does not erase the factual independence of reality, but rather comprehends reality through and

through. “Identity” signifies that reason can “produce” its objects in this special sense in theory and practice.¹⁷

But, Lukács argues, classical German philosophy is torn by the conflict of two principles. On the one hand, it demands that rationality overcome the contingency, the merely factual givenness of objects. This is the condition for founding a universal rationalism, unbounded by supernatural mysteries or unknowable realities. On the other hand, it assumes a reified, formalistic concept of reason that secretes contingency and facticity as the residue of the process of abstraction from concrete content in which rationality consists. Such a formalistic concept of reason can never unite fully with its objects.

Thus in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*, reified thought encounters the insurmountable contradiction between its ambition to produce its objects in thought by deducing them from their forms, and the impossibility of embracing the content of these forms with a formalistic concept of reason. Earlier dogmatic metaphysics had not even recognized the problem. Lukács argues, “it is evident that this principle of systematization [of rationalism] is not reconcilable with the recognition of any ‘reality,’ and ‘content’ which in principle cannot be deduced from the principle of form and which therefore has simply to be accepted as a facticity.”¹⁸

Kant’s thought is truly “critical” with respect to dogmatic rationalism to the extent that it recognizes the insuperable antinomy of form and content for a formalistic concept of reason. Finite understanding requires a material substratum of irreducibly contingent facts. With this the very notion of building a philosophical system on the model of mathematics collapses. Kant argues “that pure reason is unable to make the last leap toward the synthesis and the constitution of an object, and so its principles cannot be deduced ‘directly from concepts, but only indirectly by relating these concepts to something wholly contingent, namely possible experience.’”¹⁹ Because this “possible experience” cannot be produced by the subject, irrationality, in the form of the thing-in-itself, invades the terrain on which the traditional rationalist systems were constructed.²⁰

But, Kant is as uncritical and dogmatic as his predecessors in assuming that rationality is essentially formalistic. As we will see, Lukács regards the principle of identity as necessary for any consistent rationalism, including Marxism, but he argues that the reified paradigm of formal knowledge is tied specifically to capitalist society.

It is precisely because Kant both accepts reification and criticizes artificial solutions to the problems it raises that he is driven beyond the limits of earlier philosophy. Once the unity of reified thought and reality has been undermined, maintaining a concept of reason capable of “producing” its objects is only possible beyond the horizon of pure theory. The methodological validation of the power of reason must take place in another region of human existence.

Thus Kant was led to pose the fundamental demand of reason that preoccupied classical German philosophy thereafter, and led eventually to Hegel’s dialectic: the exigency of a “subject of thought which could be thought of as producing existence without any *hiatus irrationalis* or transcendental thing-in-itself.”²¹ Kant attempts to discover a level of reality at which the duality of subject and object is transcended, and starting out from which their empirical duality can be deduced. This exigency, in turn, can only be satisfied by abandoning the contemplative point of view, and discovering a practical subject that, in generating its own world of objects, transcends the rigid dichotomy of form and content. This new orientation toward practice is motivated by the desire to find a subject, the object of which is integrally and fully its own product. Lukács explains:

The very moment when this situation, i.e. when the indissoluble links that bind the contemplative attitude of the subject to the purely formal character of the object of knowledge becomes conscious, it is inevitable either that the attempt to find a solution to the problem of irrationality (the question of content, of the given, etc.) should be abandoned or that it should be sought in practice.²²

Responding to this dilemma, Kant turned from epistemology to ethics, from the thinking to the acting subject, to find the identical subject-object. Ethical action seems to transcend the empirical duality of subject and object. No merely given facticity, resistant to subjectivity and independent of it appears to trouble the production of ethical substance.

However, the ethical subject still confronts the reified reality described in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Its practice encounters a world in which “laws still operate with inexorable necessity.”²³ As we have seen in an earlier discussion of the value–fact antinomy, the subject divides into an empirical self, given over to the laws of this world, and a transcendental self, free to obey the ethical law. The ethical act assumes a phenomenal form determined by the laws of the world just like any other thing. It is perfectly integrated into the course of outer determinism, and thus there is a

sense in which no value enters experience through it. Rather, in passing from an intention of the will into the positive form of objective behavior, the higher values seem to be irretrievably lost. Only the inner form of the act in the mind of the actor distinguishes it from a non-ethical act; only the disposition of the will of the actor and not the act itself is ethical in essence. Lukács sums up this dilemma: “For precisely in the pure, classical expression it received in the philosophy of Kant it remains true that the ‘ought’ presupposes a being to which the category of ‘ought’ remains inapplicable in principle.”²⁴

Ethical practice does not successfully fulfill its function in the system. All ethics can show “is the point where the real interpenetration of form and content *should* begin, where it *would* begin if its formal rationality *could* allow it to do more than predict formal possibilities in terms of formal calculations.”²⁵ The actual identity of subject and object in the ethical act remains an unknowable thing-in-itself transcending experience. The ethical solution to the cognitive form–content problem has merely reproduced its terms.

Kant fails to discover what Lukács calls “the principle of practice,” the essence of which “consists in annulling *that indifference of form toward content* that we found in the problem of the thing-in-itself.”²⁶ The principle of practice requires the transcendence of the theoretical orientation toward reality in a practice that is “tailored to the concrete material substratum of action, in order to impinge upon it to some effect.”²⁷ Nevertheless, Kant’s move beyond knowledge toward practice opens the way to solutions his successors elaborated.

Kant’s aesthetics provides the starting point for these attempts. It includes the concept of the “creation of a concrete totality that springs from a conception of form oriented toward the concrete content of its material substratum.”²⁸ Kant develops this idea in terms of a hypothetical “intuitive understanding” that would transcend the gap between concept and sense intuition by actually creating the objects of its knowledge. He contrasts this intuitive understanding with human reason as follows:

In fact our understanding has the property of proceeding in its cognition ... from the analytical-universal (concepts) to the particular (given empirical intuition). Thus, as regards the manifold of the latter, it determines nothing, but must await this determination by the judgment of the subsumption of the empirical intuition ... under the concept. We can, however, think an understanding which being not like ours, discursive, but intuitive proceeds from the synthetical-universal (the intuition of whole

as such) to the particular, i.e., from the whole to the parts. The contingency of the combination of the parts, in order that a definite form of the whole shall be possible, is not implied by such an understanding in its representation of the whole.²⁹

The intuitive understanding is not a theoretical subject, incapable of penetrating the content of its objects. On the contrary, it synthesizes theory and practice. Its “content is not given but ‘created.’ The intuitive understanding is, in Kant’s words, spontaneous (i.e., active) and not receptive (i.e., contemplative) both as regards knowledge and intuitive perception.”³⁰ Adumbrated in this concept is the speculative notion of the practical production of reality that so influences later thinkers. While Kant himself did not so employ it, his successors, notably Schiller and Fichte, believed it could resolve the antinomies of philosophy.³¹

According to Lukács, German philosophy after Kant used the concept of an intuitive understanding to radicalize Kant’s epistemological revolution. The subject was to play the chief role not only in epistemology, but in ontology as well by constituting not only the forms of knowledge but also the content, the thing-in-itself, which for Kant lay irrevocably beyond knowledge. The Kantian concept of synthesis is thus transformed into a metaphysical principle of world constitution.

In Schiller the problem of the production of objective reality in thought is approached through a new problem of a similar type that arises in relation to the subject. Both the philosophical and the real social development increasingly fragment the subject into opposed faculties that no longer form a unity. The rigid specializations of bourgeois social life penetrate the subject and interrupt communication between the different aspects of the self. The comprehension of the totality can no longer proceed through the deduction of reality from the subject, a task the limits of which have been revealed by Kant. Instead, Schiller proposes the deduction of the unity of the subject as a whole from the aesthetic subject, operating as an intuitive understanding in the perception-creation of itself.

The aesthetic subject cannot reconcile the faculties of the mind without being generalized beyond the sphere of artistic production. This Schiller does in his theories of the “instinct of play” and aesthetic education. The aesthetic principle then reconciles all the contraries of human nature, both in theory and practice, and shows the way back to a unified and total humanity. But this attempt to employ a non-formalistic intuitive understanding modeled on aesthetic practice is unsuccessful. Outside the

sphere of actual artistic production, it ceases to be a true subject of *practice*. Schiller generalizes it by taking up an aesthetic *attitude* toward the existing world, an attitude that reproduces the world in thought as a finished work of art, in this way apparently overcoming its reified facticity. But here the “action” of the subject is reduced to yet another form of contemplation, not calculating reason, but aesthetic appreciation.

Fichte, who also attempts to construct a new concept of reason on the basis of the intuitive understanding, transforms it into a transcendental faculty of the mind from which proceeds the empirical subject and the entire existing world. Now philosophy turns not toward an attitude, as with Schiller, but toward a renewal of speculative metaphysics. But this position too falls short of practice. The activity that was to unite the faculties, subject and object, form and content, turns out to be no more than another form of contemplation, a “speculative mythology.”

In one important respect, however, Schiller and Fichte do represent an advance over Kant. Although they no more than he discover the true principle of practice, they finally challenge the dogmatic assumption that formalistic knowledge is the only kind of knowledge. With Hegel this challenge is brought to fruition in dialectics. His unique contribution is the historical approach to overcoming the irrationality of the contents of knowledge. He attempts to embrace the material substratum of thought through dialectics, to create a logic of the concrete concept, a logic of the totality.

HEGEL'S HISTORICAL DIALECTIC

Hegel realizes that the principle of practice cannot be fulfilled starting out from the individual subject and a formalistic paradigm of knowledge. The dialectical unification of subject and object requires a subject that is also an object, a subject commensurate with the reality it knows. This is the demand that the “subject be substance.” Lukács explains:

Only if the subject (consciousness, thought) were both producer and product of the dialectical process, only if, as a result the subject moved in a self-created world of which it is the conscious form and only if the world imposed itself upon it in full objectivity, only then can the problem of dialectics, and with it the abolition of the antitheses of subject and object, thought and existence, freedom and necessity, be held to be solved.³²

In sum, the antinomies must be resolved not by a mythologized transcendental subject modeled on the individual, but by a principle immanent to the world.

To establish that principle, Hegel takes the Kantian construction of the subject–object relation and shatters its ontological basis in the traditional concepts of subject and object, which Kant and his followers presupposed.³³ If thought and things are no longer defined as ontologically independent domains of being, in what form can they be grasped? Hegel proceeds to “release” the correlated attributes of subjectivity and objectivity from their reification in the hypostasized individual subject and object. Once released from the grip of their traditional ontological base, the attributes of thought and things are thematized in new combinations in a dialectical ontology.

In this ontology, functions of the subject, such as reflection, appearance, synthesis, and abstract form are transferred to the real where they organize its dialectical movement. As Marcuse puts it, “Formulated paradoxically, human consciousness does not grasp objectivity, not even in its transcendental form; rather, conceiving is the doing and essence of objectivity itself. Conceptual activity and human concepts can be true and reach the essence of objectivity only because conceptual activity constitutes the essence of objectivity.”³⁴ The traditional subject and object no longer appear in antinomic opposition, but are now derived from a more basic unity.³⁵ Hegel was thus finally able to discover a way of uniting form and content, the rational categories of philosophy and their material substratum. This is the significance of the dialectic.

In contrast with the formalistic notion of explanation through classification under universal concepts, dialectical mediation unfolds the implicit meaning of its immediate starting point. In a sense, then, the immediate is always already mediated if only inarticulately. There are no things-in-themselves, “sense data” or other preconceptual entities that are given form for the first time by thought since the essential element in which thought moves, meaning, is already implicit in its “material” presupposition.

In Hegel the object of knowledge is neither an inert unreflected substance nor is it created by a transcendental subject. As Robert Pippin shows, Hegel’s project radicalizes

critical philosophy's attempt at reason's reliance on itself alone in accounting for experience or evaluating action, but it attempts to do so ... by avoiding or denying any assumption that such self-determination should be understood as "imposing itself" on a foreign manifold or object ... Whatever comes to count as a constraint or limit on thought's self-determination is itself viewed as a kind of product or result, a higher or more comprehensive level, of thought's self-determination.³⁶

Given this approach, the system cannot be explicated *more geometrico* because it depends on a process. That process is a mediation rather than a demonstration. It is narrated rather than deduced. History is the ontological region uniquely suited to such a process of mediation. In history the alterity of the object is time-bound rather than metaphysical. Time belongs to the unfolding process of meaning-making. It separates the implicit from the explicit meaning and the gap between them is overcome in time. Thus Hegel treats *history as reality*, as ontologically fundamental.

Hegel's turn toward history marks a sharp break with rationalism. Rationalism finds in history its least suitable object because history involves newness and qualitative change. Formal reason can only grasp history in terms of a system of foreseeable possibilities derived from abstract, atemporal laws. But history as a process of concrete becoming escapes it. By contrast, history is the ideal object of dialectics. It embodies a type of objectivity that lends itself to explanation in terms of a non-formalistic concept of reason.

But, Lukács argues, for history to provide a solution to the problems of classical German philosophy, it would be necessary to discover the subject of history not only speculatively but in fact, to find the real "we" whose action is history. Hegel's version of the historical subject is the Spirit of Peoples. But peoples do not understand the significance of their own action. They are not conscious of the truth of their deeds, which can only be comprehended once completed, once history has passed on to a new stage and the past is delivered over to philosophical reflection.

A mediation that transcends history stands between the activity of the historical subject and the meaning of its acts. Hegel conceptualizes this mediation as a second collective subject, the World Spirit, which uses the Spirit of the Peoples to attain ends the latter does not understand. (Hence the phrase "cunning of reason.") Lukács concludes that Hegel's subject of history can never claim its acts as its own. It is not the master of its own process, the "subject as substance" that, in achieving self-consciousness, transcends the antinomies of reified thought in the theoretical and practical transformation of reality.

History itself never achieves self-consciousness. Only the World Spirit can accomplish this as it comes to self-awareness in the head of the philosopher at the “end” of history. Reason thus fulfills itself in history only by transcending history. As a result, “History is not able to form the living body of the total system: it becomes a part, an aspect of the totality that culminates in the ‘absolute spirit,’ in art, religion and philosophy. But history is much too much the natural, and indeed the uniquely possible life-element of the dialectical method for such an enterprise to succeed.”³⁷

This, according to Lukács, explains why Hegel is obliged to confront the antinomies of classical German philosophy outside of history in the realm of absolute spirit. As soon as dialectics deploys itself in that timeless realm the problems of form and content arise once again. The dialectical categories continue to “develop” in the theory of absolute spirit and in pure logic, but as eternal forms detached from the real becoming of the world. This dialectical process is purely ideal, no longer corresponding to the real time of historical action.

Hegel’s work is the culmination of classical German philosophy, drawing the logical conclusions from its various experiments and discoveries. In spite of his limitations, Hegel did discover two essential conditions of the principle of practice, the dialectic, and the special affinity of dialectics for history. However, until the actual subject of this practice is also discovered reason cannot be founded rationally. This, Lukács believes, awaited the Marxist theory of history. Marxism arises directly on the soil of the Hegelian system, but informed by a far deeper insight into the empirical stuff of history. In Marxism the speculative character of the Hegelian approach is finally overcome in a correct understanding of history. “In this sense Marx’s critique of Hegel is the direct continuation and extension of the criticism that Hegel himself leveled at Kant and Fichte.”³⁸

THE PRINCIPLE OF PRACTICE

Lukács’s discussion of Hegel completes his venture into “philosophical experience.” It demonstrates that classical German philosophy cannot fulfill the requirements of its own principle of practice. The practical contradictions arising objectively from capitalist reification, between individual and social law, between this law itself and the content that it determines, between, in short, the historical subject and object, cannot be

transcended from within reification. Instead, reified thought produces more and more complex speculative mediations uniting the antinomic opposites, mediations that are pure mental constructions. Lukács calls this “conceptual mythology,” i.e., “the failure to understand a fundamental condition of human existence, one whose effects cannot be warded off.”³⁹

Even where this philosophy strives hardest to base itself on a practical principle, it remains in a contemplative attitude because it can offer no real challenge to the fixed and finished character of the capitalist world. Its very concepts of subject and object, of thought and being, express the rigid oppositions of this world. Objectivity can only be united with subjectivity in a speculative manner because no real practical unity can be conceived in the untranscended framework of capitalist society. As Lukács writes, “But how to prove this identity in thought and being of the ultimate substance?—above all when it has been shown that they are completely heterogeneous in the way in which they present themselves to the intuitive, contemplative attitude?”⁴⁰

Nevertheless, Lukács concludes, within these limits classical German philosophy does succeed in indicating the direction in which a solution to its problems can be found. What Lukács calls “the grandiose conception that thought can only grasp what it has itself created” leads to the demand to “master the world as a whole by seeing it as self-created.”⁴¹ This ambition is frustrated by the contingency of content, as we have seen. The response of classical German philosophy to this problem was the search for a type of practice giving access to that content. This practice would not presuppose reification as its horizon but would transcend this horizon and change reality itself.

But this search fails because the philosophers attempt to go beyond reification theoretically, through resolving its contradictions in thought. The thing-in-itself inevitably confronts the subject of science and technology. Ethics, aesthetics, and the wisdom of the philosopher at the end of history all suffer from an implicit acceptance of reified reality, toward which they adopt an attitude rather than effecting a change. At every stage one dimension of reified thought is surmounted from the point of view of another, theoretical contemplation by ethical practice, ethics by aesthetics, formal rationality by a dialectic cut off, in the last analysis, from history. And precisely because the higher level from which the lower is deduced is

itself reified, the original problems of the lower level simply reappear at the higher one in new forms.

The principle of practice not only requires a move beyond theory, it also requires a type of practice that affects “reality” as a whole and not just marginal aspects of it. Artistic practice, to give a counter-illustration, fails because it has so little impact on the social world that is founding for it. What is needed is a practice that is “total” in the sense that it is unbounded by a dimension of reality it cannot alter and that, therefore, persists as a reified residuum, a thing-in-itself.

History remains as the only domain in which to find a practice that can affect not only superficial traits of reality, but the very essence of the phenomena. Since, unlike nature, history is the product of human action, it is conceivable that here self-change could be an objective change in reality as the principle of practice requires. Furthermore, history is not a mere sector among others, but is the primary and basic reality. All other subject–object relations can be derived from that of the historical subject and object and interpreted through their historical dimension. Lukács takes Hegel himself as the demonstration *in contrario* of this claim, for the unhistorical residue remaining in Hegel’s system becomes the point at which the reified subject–object relation is reintroduced.

But the practical production of reality is no Heraclitean flux. The study of history must explain the relation between the “*évènementiel*” and institutions, practices, and culture. Lukács formulates this requirement as the coincidence of historical action and the structuring of experience through the imposition of a form of objectivity. The process of “synthesis” of the real, its “logical genesis” at the level of the categories, must be identical with the practical production of social reality by its subject. Then form and content, philosophy and reality can be united and the antinomies that emerge in the Kantian system finally overcome. As Lukács explains it:

To go beyond ... immediacy can only mean the genesis, the “production” of the object. But this assumes that the forms of mediation in and through which it becomes possible to go beyond the immediate existence of objects as they are given, can be shown to be the *structural principles of construction and the real tendencies of the movement of the objects themselves*, that therefore intellectual genesis must be identical in principle with historical genesis.⁴²

With this rather puzzling methodological requirement, Lukács wants to avoid two correlated errors: either explaining history in terms of non-historical categories or abandoning historical explanation in the face of the

“irrationality” of individual events. Between these extremes lies a type of explanation that draws its categories from the events. As Rockmore explains, Lukács’s approach is “an effort to reconcile a categorical perspective that denies the sufficiency of immediate, intuitive experience with an insistence that the categories emerge directly out of experience.”⁴³

In sum, the world is not merely there in its facticity nor is it literally manufactured by the proletariat. The world—and this includes the proletariat—is bursting out of its reified form of objectivity. The violent actions in which that explosion consists realize the objective tendencies Marx identified. In so doing those acts also construct a new social world that alters the functional relation of the elements of society. The acts in which the revolutionary proletariat shatters its reified form of objectivity open up a new way of being in the world, a new realm of meaning. And thus the structures of meaning inherited from capitalism are transformed and made adequate to the life process they form. The “indifference of form toward content” is overcome.

Lukács argues that the antinomies of value and fact, knowledge and reality would finally be resolved for a self-conscious collective subject of history. It would unite theory and practice: its self-understanding would have immediate repercussions on its behavior, abolishing the gap between “mind” and “matter,” and creating a new type of practice different from reified technical practice. The “contemplative” limits of the traditional philosophical subject would be transcended, as would the rigid opposition of subject and object, value and fact. In *knowing*, this subject would be *producing* the object of its knowledge or, more precisely, changing its form of objectivity by overcoming its own immediacy. This would be a Kantian “intuitive understanding” based not on a mythic principle, a transcendental ego or a hypothetical god, but on actual finite subjects in the world. This is what it really means to claim that the proletariat is the legitimate heir of the idealist program.

MEDIATION

Marx describes the historical tendencies leading to socialism emerging within the capitalist economy as tensions, breakdowns, crises. These crises reveal the limits of reification not only as a social form but as a form of rationality. The transcendence of capitalism in socialist revolution is also

the transcendence of its philosophical limits, the resolution of the antinomies. For Lukács as for the early Marx revolution is method, the solution to the antinomies of bourgeois thought.

Lukács works out the implications of this position in the third part of the Reification essay, but the argument is developed in scattered passages that omit important themes and problems. He explains the historical mediation of social forms by their contents, but he fails to apply the concept of mediation to the antinomy of society and nature. Instead he offers bold statements claiming that the proletariat is the identical subject-object. This makes for several confusing ambiguities I will examine in more detail in the remainder of this chapter and the next.

In brief it is unclear if the identical subject-object is a particular entity, the proletariat as a class, or a process of mediation engaging the whole society in which the proletariat plays an essential role. In the former case, there is little to be said in defense of the theory today. In fact this is a commonplace interpretation; Lukács is supposed to have described the proletariat as a kind of romantic subjectivity writ large. This interpretation, which I will call “metaphysical,” makes of him a voluntarist in relation to society and a subjective idealist in relation to nature. Here is an example of the sort of lyrical passage that seems to confirm this image of Lukács:

Man must be able to comprehend the present as a becoming. He can do this by seeing in it the tendencies out of whose dialectical opposition he can *make* the future. Only when he does this will the present be a process of becoming, that belongs to *him*. Only he who is willing and whose mission it is to create the future can see the present in its concrete truth. As Hegel says: “Truth is not to treat objects as alien.”⁴⁴

The alternative interpretation of subject-object identity as a process of mediation belongs to a theory of dialectical rationality. This theory has suggestive implications for us even though our context is very different from that of Lukács in the early 1920s. Mediation has not disappeared along with the revolutionary proletarian movement but has simply changed purpose and form. The important point is that mediation is a process, not a thing. The continuation of the passage quoted above confirms this interpretation. Lukács goes on:

Thus thought and existence are not identical in the sense that they “correspond” to each other or “coincide” with each other (all expressions that conceal a rigid duality). Their identity is that they are aspects of one and the same real historical and dialectical process. What is “reflected” in the consciousness of the proletariat is the new positive reality arising out of the dialectical contradictions of capitalism. And this is by no means the invention of the proletariat, nor was it “created” out of the

void. It is rather the inevitable consequence of the process in its totality; one which changed from being an abstract possibility to a concrete reality only after it had become part of the consciousness of the proletariat and had been made practical by it. And this is no mere formal transformation. For a possibility to be realized, for a tendency to become actual, what is required is the objective overthrow of society, the transformation of the function of its moments and with them the structure and content of every individual object.⁴⁵

What is happening in these passages? Here Lukács condenses two radically different discourses, the idealist discourse of classical German philosophy and the Marxist critique of political economy. The performative power of thought drawn from the one discourse is joined to the concept of economic evolution of the other. Simply put, history moves forward through the realization of its objective tendencies but the tendencies can only be realized when they are seized and appropriated by consciousness. Has Marxism ever said anything else? But in Lukács's version of this thesis something new is implied, for the concept of mediation implicates the fate of reason in social theory.

Here I will review some of the passages in which Lukács explains the concept of mediation underlying his theory of dialectical rationality. They are of more than historical interest. If we abstract from certain Marxist references more relevant in 1923 than today, they suggest a dialectic of reification and resistance, structure and agency. Anticipating my conclusion, I will argue that the notion of mediation supports a non-essentialist interpretation of the role of the proletariat in the resolution of the antinomies. In the remainder of this section I will focus on five passages that reveal the implications of Lukács's theory.

1. The proletariat cannot create a new society *ex nihilo*, but must start out from the capitalist heritage. The transcendence of reification in proletarian class consciousness implies no epistemological withdrawal to a free *cogito*, to a pure undetermined ground. Its precondition is capitalist society itself, its culture, its forms of thought that can only be transcended through a reflection in which they are criticized and comprehended historically. Reification is the foundation of true knowledge of society precisely insofar as it is relativized dialectically.

Proletarian thought does not require a tabula rasa, a new start to the task of comprehending reality and one without any preconceptions ... [but] conceives of bourgeois society together with its intellectual and artistic productions as the point of departure for its own method ... It implies that the "falseness" and the "one-sidedness" of the bourgeois view of history must be seen as a necessary factor in the systematic acquisition of knowledge about society.⁴⁶

Why? Because “it is just in this [bourgeois] objectification, rationalization and reification of all social forms that we see clearly for the first time how society is constructed from the relations of men with each other.”⁴⁷ Where precapitalist societies saw the work of God, capitalist societies recognize the human hand, if in an alienated form. This explains why Marxist economic theory is a critique rather than a positive statement free of reference to “error.”

2. The proletariat is the subject of history but it is not an idealist subject. It is determined as much as determining, and cannot freely create a world after its own designs.

It is true that the proletariat is the conscious subject of total social reality. But the conscious subject is not defined here as in Kant, where “subject” is defined as that which can never be an object. The “subject” here is not a detached spectator of the process. The proletariat is more than just the active and passive part of this process: the rise and evolution of its knowledge and its actual rise and evolution in the course of history are just the two different sides of the same real process.⁴⁸

Lukács further clarifies this proposition, writing that the “identity” of thought and existence means not that the subject creates the object but “that they are aspects of one and the same real historical and dialectical process.”⁴⁹

3. History must be explained through human action, but human action itself is as much product as producer of history. “Man has become the measure of all (societal) things,” and the understanding of history consists in the “derivation of the indissoluble fetishistic forms from the primary forms of human relations.”⁵⁰ “Man is the measure” specifically in opposition to all attempts to “measure” history from “above” or “outside” of history, i.e., from a god, nature, or transhistorical laws conceived as founding for history. Yet this is no humanism in the sense of a doctrine that would derive history from a prior concept of man, or from a quasi-theological creative power attributed to the human species.

For if man is made the measure of all things, and if with the aid of that assumption all transcendence is to be eliminated without applying the same “standard” to himself or—more exactly—without making man himself dialectical, then man himself is made into an absolute and he simply puts himself in the place of those transcendental forces he was supposed to explain, dissolve and systematically replace.⁵¹

4. Lukács develops this argument further in a passage that shows that the transcendence of the antinomies is not a one-sided predominance of the

subject.

The dialectical process, the ending of a rigid confrontation of rigid forms, is enacted essentially *between the subject and the object* ... [Only if] the relativizing or the interpenetration of the subject and the object themselves ... only if “the true [were understood] not only as substance but also as subject,” only if the subject (consciousness, thought) were both producer and product of the dialectical process, and if, as a result the subject moved in a self-created world of which it is the conscious form and only if the world imposed itself upon it in full objectivity, only then can the problem of dialectics, and with it the abolition of the antitheses of subject and object, thought and existence, freedom and necessity, be held to be solved.⁵²

Lukács’s rejection of the voluntaristic notion of the proletariat as a free agent overcoming all structure comes through clearly in these passages. Instead, he affirms that the proletariat is objectively structured and that only as such is it an agent of structural transformation. Its objectivity is the condition of its subjectivity while also limiting its agency.

5. This position seems incompatible with the notion that reification characterizes only the bourgeois era and can be wholly eliminated under socialism. Given the dialectic of reification and mediation, the elimination of the former would eliminate the latter. Insofar as the truth is discovered dialectically, reification is a necessary moment in the process of discovery. Reification is, in sum, not the “opposite” of dialectics, but a moment in it. Nevertheless, the position of the reified moment in the totality may change in the course of history. Lukács himself says something like this in a passage that shows he was aware of the danger of a utopian interpretation of his theory:

At the same time it is clear that from the standpoint of the proletariat the empirically given reality of the objects does dissolve into processes and tendencies; this process is no single, unrepeatable tearing of the veil that masks the process but the unbroken alternation of ossification, contradiction and movement; and thus the proletariat represents the true reality, namely the tendencies of history awakening into consciousness.⁵³

Again, Lukács concedes that “even the proletariat can only overcome reification as long as it is oriented toward practice. And this means that there can be no single act that will eliminate reification in all its forms at one blow; it means that there will be a whole host of objects that at least in appearance remain more or less unaffected by the process. This is true in the first instance of nature.”⁵⁴ I will come back to this reservation concerning nature in the next chapter.

Konstantinos Kavoulakos reasonably asks, “How ‘identical’ is then this subject-object of history, which is pervaded by internal ruptures, by internal divisions that impel it to a constantly renewed search for its identity? We should rather think of it, ultimately, as an open process rather than as ... the completion of the Hegelian ‘absolute spirit.’”⁵⁵ These remarks are anticipated by Marcuse in an early text in which he credits Siegfried Marck with having “put to an end the primitive ‘critique’ according to which Lukács’s analysis can be refuted by calling it a ‘metaphysics.’”⁵⁶

THE DIALECTIC OF REIFICATION

Out of these scattered passages a theory emerges that Lukács himself did not articulate in a coherent fashion. This theory helps us to understand how he could have believed his position was truly dialectical rather than a replay of the old transcendental tune or a regressive return to *Gemeinschaft*. It gains in plausibility to the extent that it deflates his rhetorical appeal to the creative power of the subject. But the dialectic seems to concern only society. The theory does not directly address the ontological issues raised by the critique of classical German philosophy. Furthermore, it has implications that do not square easily with Marxism.

Because he relates reification to commodity fetishism, Lukács cannot admit that it persists under socialism *in principle* rather than as vestige. He makes a similar assumption concerning bureaucracy, law, and technology, all of which are reified under capitalism and presumed to be dereified under socialism. But this seems to leave socialism without an institutional structure, a conclusion Lukács nowhere reaches. So what is his alternative?

One sees him attempting to find the alternative in a passage in which he remarks that

the world which confronts man in theory and in practice exhibits a kind of objectivity which—if properly thought out and understood—need never stick fast in an immediacy similar to that of forms found earlier on. This objectivity must accordingly be comprehensible as a constant factor mediating between past and future and it must be possible to demonstrate that it is everywhere the product of man and of the development of society.⁵⁷

It is hard to see the difference between this good “objectivity” and the persistence of something like reification in a context where it has become more malleable instead of rigidly determining for the human lives it shapes.

If this theory remains implicit this is because the Marxist tradition holds no place for it. The elimination of the commodity form would seem to eliminate its effect, reification. For Marx the alternative is planning of some unspecified sort under the control of the “assembled producers.” But Lukács has read Weber and knows that planning requires administration, which is just another instance of reification. He cannot consider the state as a simple institutional solution to the problem of reification. His later book on Lenin suggests a combination of the Soviets and a more or less conventional state apparatus under party control, but his analysis is brief and inconclusive, and history has refuted it at least in the form it took in the Soviet Union.⁵⁸ Nevertheless, this speculation on the socialist state shows how Lukács intended his theory of rationality to be realized in the practice of the “identical subject-object.”

All this suggests a very different image of socialist revolution from the classic one derived from the French and Russian experiences. Those revolutions are generally understood as one-time breaks in the continuity of history. Although this idea still influences Lukács’s notion of historical development as a sudden reversal—how could it not in 1923?—his theory implies an evolutionary pattern in which reification and its overcoming stand in a permanent relationship of ever renewed conflict and resolution, beginning before the overthrow of capitalism and continuing long afterwards. The “revolution” would alter the conditions of that conflict, favoring agency over structure. But it would do no more than institute new terms of struggle.

Human action in modern societies, whether capitalist or socialist, continually constructs reified social objects out of the underlying human relations on which it is based. The reified form of objectivity of these objects gives a measure of stability and control while at the same time sacrificing significant dimensions of the human lives they structure. The chief difference between capitalism and socialism is not that the one is reified and the other dereified, but rather that the one stands or falls with reification while the other can support a continual mediating and transforming of reified social objects in order to realize the potential of those sacrificed dimensions. This approach implies a theory of modernity as a differentiated social formation with two variants, a capitalist one in which reification is predominant and resistances suppressed, and a socialist one in

which resistances modify malleable reified systems subject to continuous revision.

The theoretical possibility of a socialist variant undoes the most important consequence of reification, namely, the misrecognition of its own social contingency. Once that possibility is established, reification appears not as a “second nature” alien to subjectivity, but as a mediated product of subjectivity, “properly understood.” Society is no longer seen as subordinate to laws it cannot change, because those laws are revealed as social products. This perception subverts the functional role of reification under capitalism that consists precisely in blocking consciousness of the productive power of collective action.

What are the philosophical implications of Lukács’s dialectic? The basic “demand of reason” is that knowledge and action stand in essential relation to reality itself. Reified rationality and its technical practice cannot fulfill this demand because it cannot “penetrate” the contents of its forms, specifically, the life process underlying capitalism. By contrast, dialectical rationality and the proletarian revolution that corresponds to it reach down into those contents by modifying their form of objectivity, hence also their function in the social totality. This is not a superficial change in quantity or quality but a fundamental change in meaning, in nature. Nor is it the full-blown constitution of reality by a social version of the transcendental subject. Rather, subject-object identity is achieved in society through a process of mediation. But the question remains: can that process of mediation be extended beyond society, specifically, to nature? Unless subject and object can be united in every domain, the demands of reason are not fulfilled. Lukács’s attempt to address this problem is the subject of the next chapter.

¹ Étienne Gilson, *The Unity of Philosophical Experience* (New York: Scribner’s, 1937).

² *HCC*, xlv.

³ Engels still could say of the petty bourgeoisie, “Let [them] cast in their lot with the anti-Semites until they have convinced themselves that they get no help in that quarter.” Frederick Engels, “The Peasant Question in France and Germany,” in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* (New York: International, 1969), 648.

⁴ HCC, 110 and 187–8. It was Nietzsche who first attempted a general critique of rationality as an expression of the will to power, identifying conceptual generality with hierarchy, control, and domination. The Frankfurt School continues some aspects of this critique, which it enriches and concretizes in terms of the Lukácsian critique of reification. See Stefano Giacchetti Ludovisi, “The Over-Bourgeois and the Dissolution of Subjectivity: Adorno as Nietzsche’s Scholar,” in Stefano Giacchetti Ludovisi, ed., *Nostalgia for a Redeemed Future* (Rome: John Cabot Press, 2009).

⁵ Quoted by Lukács in HCC, 141. The passage is from *Die Differenz des Fichteschen und Schellingschen Systems*. In its entirety it reads: “The antitheses ... which used to be expressed in terms of mind and matter, body and soul, faith and reason, freedom and necessity, etc., and were also prominent in a number of more restricted spheres and concentrated all human interests in themselves, became transformed as culture advanced into contrasts between reason and the senses, intelligence and nature and, in its most general form, between absolute subjectivity and absolute objectivity. To transcend such ossified antitheses is the sole concern of reason. This concern does not imply hostility to opposites and restrictions in general; for opposites and the totality of life, at its most intense is only possible as a new synthesis out of the most absolute separation.”

⁶ HCC, 121.

⁷ Ibid., 63.

⁸ Ibid., 77. Lukács had already treated this dilemma in *The Theory of the Novel* before becoming a Marxist. That early work, which contains Lukács’s critique of romanticism and ethical idealism, concludes with a chapter on the “transcendence of social forms of life.” The messianic-utopian stage in Lukács’s thought lies here, in the idea of the creation of a new epic community through the dissolution of all social conventions and constraints in Dostoevskian soul-to-soul encounters. The theory presented in *History and Class Consciousness* is quite different despite the formal similarity to messianism, as I will show in the conclusion of this chapter. For more on Lukács’s messianism, see Michael Löwy, *Pour une Sociologie des Intellectuels Révolutionnaires* (Paris: PUF, 1976).

⁹ HCC, 134.

¹⁰ Ibid., 87.

¹¹ Ibid., 135. It is important not to confuse reification with objectification as such. Reification is a particular type of alienated objectification in which the alienated human powers appear as formal rational laws. Hence dereification is a disalienation and not the abolition of objectification as the later Lukács charged in his critique of his own early work. See HCC, xxiv.

¹² Ibid., 129 (translation modified). The similarity of this argument to Heidegger’s later discussion of technology is striking. See Martin Heidegger, *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. W. Lovitt (New York: Harper, 1977).

¹³ HCC, 112.

¹⁴ Ibid., 128.

¹⁵ Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. M. J. O’Connell (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 211. Subject–object identity in this sense is clearly quite different from the kind of identity rejected by the Frankfurt School. Cf. Martin Jay, “The Frankfurt School’s Critique of Marxist Humanism,” *Social Research*, Vol. XXXIX, No. 2 (1972). See also John Grumley, “Adventures of the Concept of Totality: Thoughts on Martin Jay’s *Marxism and Totality*” *Thesis Eleven*, No. 15 (1986), 111–21.

¹⁶ Lukács’s interpretation of Kant is developed further in Lucien Goldmann, *Mensch, Gemeinschaft und Welt in der Philosophie Immanuel Kants* (Zürich: Europa Verlag, 1945) and Georg Lukács, *The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relations between Dialectics and Economics*, trans. R. Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1975).

¹⁷ HCC, 116. Lukács was influenced by Emil Lask’s *Fichtes Idealismus und die Geschichte* (Tübingen, Germany: Mohr, 1902.) For the neo-Kantian background, see Guy Oakes, *Weber and Rickert: Concept Formation in the Cultural Sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1988).

¹⁸ HCC, 117 (translation modified).

19 HCC, 116.

20 Ibid., 115.

21 Ibid., 122.

22 Ibid., 126.

23 Ibid., 124.

24 Ibid., 160.

25 Ibid., 134.

26 Ibid., 126.

27 Ibid., 126.

28 Ibid. 137.

29 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. H. H. Bernard (New York: Hafner, 1951), 255. The centrality Lukács attributes to the idea of an “intuitive understanding” in the development of classical German philosophy follows closely on Hegel’s interpretation. In *Glauben und Wissen*, Hegel even asserts that “*die Idee dieses urbildlichen, intuitiven Verstandes ist im Grunde durchaus nichts anders als dieselbe Idee der transzendentalen Einbildungskraft*” G. W. F. Hegel, *Glauben und Wissen* (Hamburg, Germany: Felix Meiner, 1962), 33. This identification also underlies Lukács interpretation of Fichte and Hegel.

30 HCC, 138. Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, 255.

31 HCC, 138.

32 Ibid., 142.

33 The accuracy of this interpretation of Kant is not the issue here since this was in fact how Hegel understood critical philosophy. cf. Hegel, *Glauben und Wissen*, 20–1.

34 Herbert Marcuse, *Hegel’s Ontology and the Theory of Historicity*, trans. S. Benhabib (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 118.

35 See *ibid.*, 36–8 and especially 118–19.

36 Robert Pippin, *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem: On the Dissatisfactions of European High Culture* (New York: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 67.

37 HCC, 147.

38 Ibid., 17.

39 Ibid., 18.

40 Ibid., 201.

41 Ibid., 121–2.

42 Ibid., 155.

43 Tom Rockmore, *Irrationalism: Lukács and the Marxist View of Reason* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 137.

44 HCC, 204.

45 Ibid., 204–5.

46 Ibid., 163.

47 Ibid., 176.

48 Ibid., 21.

49 Ibid., 204.

50 Ibid., 185.

51 Ibid., 187.

52 Ibid., 142.

53 Ibid., 199.

54 Ibid., 206.

55 Konstantinos Kavoulakos, “Back to History?” in M. Thompson, ed., *Georg Lukács Reconsidered: Essays on Politics, Philosophy and Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 164.

56 Herbert Marcuse, *Heideggerian Marxism*, ed. R. Wolin and J. Abromeit (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 67. Marck writes, “Das Existenzproblem soll *an Stelle* des

Seinsproblems in den Mittelpunkt treten, die Fragen des gesellschaftlichen *Daseins* die metaphysischen Probleme durch ihre Vermenschlichung und Entfetischisierung lösen.” Siegfried Marck, *Die Dialektik in der Philosophie der Gegenwart* (Tübingen, Germany: Verlag von J. C. B. Mohr, 1929), 130.

⁵⁷ HCC, 159.

⁵⁸ Andrew Feenberg, “Post-Utopian Marxism: Lukács and the Dilemmas of Organization,” in John McCormick, ed., *Confronting Mass Technology and Mass Democracy: Essays in Twentieth-Century German Political and Social Thought* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 45–69.

CHAPTER SIX

The Controversy Over Subject-Object Identity

THE ANTINOMY OF SOCIETY AND NATURE

The discussion of Marx's *Manuscripts* in [Chapter 3](#) concluded with a critique of his solution to the antinomy of society and nature. His early philosophy of praxis reduced nature to society, both practically and theoretically. In his later work he turned away from this approach. We have now seen that Lukács's interpretation of classical German philosophy leads to the similarly ambitious claim that the identical subject-object will overcome reification, the form of objectivity of both nature and capitalist society. This would seem to imply the incorporation of nature into society, as in Marx's *Manuscripts*.

Lukács was a product of an intellectual environment that favored the idea of independent *Geisteswissenschaften* based on methods different from those of the natural sciences. He was its representative on the left, defending *Geist* against theoretical reification by bourgeois social science and vulgar Marxism. He develops the argument with natural science in familiar terms. While the logic of his position seems to demand that he reduce nature to history, he never goes so far. There are several passages in *History and Class Consciousness* in which he affirms the independence of nature and the validity of the sciences that study it. His argument is thus either more complex or less consistent than Marx's. His critics have focused on the resulting contradictions ever since. While it is all too easy to caricature Lukács's position, I will propose a charitable interpretation in this chapter.

The interpretive challenge is twofold. As we have seen, the second part of the reification essay ends with Lukács's argument that classical German philosophy fails to resolve the antinomies of bourgeois thought. He promises a Marxist resolution, but the third part of the essay does not deliver it. Instead, it presents a rather disorganized exploration of the social

implications of the identical subject-object and proletarian revolution. This leaves the impression that Lukács is caught between the poles of an antinomy dividing society and nature. In addition, Lukács's *Defence of History and Class Consciousness* purports to explain his position but actually shifts the focus significantly through the introduction of a more conventionally Marxist perspective on the determining role of the economy. He drops references to the concept of reification and instead draws on its sources in Marx's mature work and Hegel's dialectic of essence for a different and presumably more "orthodox" vocabulary. Nevertheless, the *Defence* is helpful for understanding his position. In it he argues rather obscurely for an absolute historicism that is more plausible than Marx's version. This chapter will consider the implications of these texts for Lukács's early Marxism, and once again relate his position to Marx's *Manuscripts*.

The issue turns on the meaning of Lukács's concept of subject-object identity. This concept is a particular target of attack for critics ranging from the Althusserians to the Frankfurt School. The former explains Lukács's identity philosophy as a consequence of his supposed "romantic" rejection of natural science; the latter claims that identity philosophy is rooted in the Promethean project of domination of nature, and asserts the insuperable separation of subject and object. In contrast to all these critics, I will argue that the theory is neither romantic nor Promethean. Puzzling as is his concern with the concept of subject-object identity, Lukács has good reasons for not simply abandoning it as a historical curiosity. In the context of philosophy of praxis it signifies the rationality of reason, the universality of its claims and the freedom of the human species from mystical powers.

The previous chapter summarized the theoretical exigencies that the identical subject-object is supposed to satisfy: *the principle of practice*, *history as reality*, and *dialectical method*. The identical subject-object satisfies the demand of the principle of practice that the action of the subject "penetrate" the object, leaving no thing-in-itself untouched; it posits history as reality in the sense that the subjects and objects of all cognitive domains are explained through their function in the historical totality; and it involves dialectical method insofar as historical subject-object identity is understood not as immediate but as mediated in an interaction of theory and practice, subjectivity and its objectifications.

Bourgeois identity philosophy establishes only a commonality of form of subject and object. Lukács's metacritique aims to go beyond this toward a deeper unity based on the production of the object by the subject. But what is the meaning of Lukács's concept of "production?" As we have seen in the last chapter, the text appears to supply not one but two answers. I will review them both here as they relate to the problem of nature.

Lukács's principle of practice is sometimes explained as the creation of the object by the subject or its absolute reduction to human relations. This is Lukács's later interpretation of *History and Class Consciousness*, which he considered more Fichtean than Hegelian.¹ In this quasi-Fichtean interpretation, the identity of subject and object implies the preeminence of the subject in a radically different form of society transparent to human knowledge and will. This resembles Marx's speculative notion of labor in the *Manuscripts*. In that early text, the ontic power of labor to create is granted ontological significance as the fundamental access to being. In the last chapter, I argued that Lukács holds a properly Hegelian view based on the concept of mediation so far as society is concerned, but he insists that nature has a quasi-independent status. He thus avoids a transcendental humanism in which the creative power of the divinity would be exercised by human agents. His saving inconsistency is his explicit recognition that finite human subjects cannot constitute nature as they have history.

Furthermore, even in the passages that appear most productivist, where Lukács exaggerates the role of the proletariat, he is careful to qualify the argument, to note that the subject of practice operates under given historical conditions that determine the limits of its agency. In these passages practice does not create but rather mediates the object. Here the subject in no way resembles a collective *cogito*, a transcendental ego outside a world it constitutes. The subject does not posit society but is a moment of society, determined as well as determining. Such a subject "penetrates" its objects by altering their form of objectivity in accordance with their real potentialities. This ontological interpretation of subject-object identity establishes the unbounded reach of rationality at the level of function and meaning.

This second approach is elaborated in a dialectical theory of rationality according to which the proletariat constitutes itself as a subject through a continuing process of mediation of its own reified form of objectivity. Subjective and objective dimensions are united through an active process

and not simply identified conceptually. The argument is Hegelian: reason arises from understanding, and dialectics from analytic rationality.

Perhaps the ambiguity in Lukács's notion of production can be traced back to Hegel. There are two patterns of dialectical development in Hegel. In one pattern a synthesis leaves behind its contradictory origin by creating a third entity. This is the pattern exemplified by Hegel's view of historical development. Generalized, this pattern leads to a metaphysical interpretation of Hegel's thought in which, for example, the system culminates in a panlogical God of some sort.

But there is another pattern in which a continuing mediation between contradictory entities transforms or defines them without dissolving them into a third. This pattern is exemplified in Hegel's notion of "being at home in the other as such." It is the pattern of life, which objectifies itself in its environment, transforming object and subject without abolishing their difference.² This is the implicit pattern of the *Logic* in which successive concepts represent possible ways of knowing and being. The sequence of these concepts reflects increasing complexity and completeness, not the results of a production process in the usual sense.

Marx followed the tendency of Hegel's historical writings in imagining a third; communism would leave capitalism and its proletariat behind in the creation of a new form of society. The abolition of the commodity form would once and for all transcend the contradictions of capitalism. But once capitalism is conceived as a rationalized society and the Marxist critique generalized to the forms of rationality, the revolution cannot culminate in a third. Socialism can no longer pretend to restart the clock of history because the past is ever renewed in the rationalized social institutions at the basis of modernity.

Lukács's identical subject-object looks like the impossible third in his more florid descriptions of its revolutionary power. But his version of dialectics describes a relation between rational form and its objects or contents. He repeatedly states that the theory is about the tension between those contents, the life process of the proletariat, and economic, bureaucratic, and technological rationality. It is unclear how that tension could be definitively resolved.

A quasi-Fichtean interpretation makes the utopian claim that reification can be wholly overcome in a future socialist society. Even allowing for the persistent reification of nature, as Lukács does, this is a puzzling view.

Lukács is supposed to have imagined an identical subject-object the actions of which would have no objective limits and no unintended consequences. With the complete abolition of reification, the subject would be free to create the world according to its arbitrary will. Whether or not Lukács intended his theory to be taken to such an extreme as his critics usually assume, it is fair to say that he left himself open to misinterpretation.

In fact, his early philosophy of praxis was immediately criticized both on these grounds and for its inability to give a consistent account of the concept of nature. I will review several of these original critical arguments here, as well as more recent ones. They concern Lukács's supposed idealism and romanticism, the false identification of objectification and alienation in his concept of reification, and his unacceptable dualism of society and nature. I will argue that these criticisms overlook the dialectical theory of rationality. In the conclusion of this chapter I will consider whether that theory offers resources for resolving the antinomy of society and nature haunting his claim that revolutionary action can realize philosophy.

THE CRITIQUES

Abram Deborin and Laszlo Rudas wrote two of the major early critiques of *History and Class Consciousness*; they accuse Lukács of idealism from a Leninist perspective and introduce the main themes of later critique, particularly “orthodox” Marxist critique.³ Deborin and Rudas claim that Lukács sets Engels against Marx in order to substitute his own idealistic dialectic for their materialistic dialectic. In a footnote to the first essay of *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács does actually reject the application of dialectics to nature, and offers an interpretation of historical dialectics he distinguishes rather sharply from that of Engels.

It is of the first importance to realize that the method is limited here to the realms of history and society. The misunderstandings that arise from Engels' account of dialectics can in the main be put down to the fact that Engels—following Hegel's mistaken lead—extended the method to apply also to nature. However, the crucial determinants of dialectics—the interaction of subject and object, the unity of theory and practice, the historical changes in the reality underlying the categories as the root cause of changes in thought, etc.—are absent from our knowledge of nature.⁴

This seems to imply that nature and society are separate domains to which correspond separate methods of study. Rudas writes, “If the dialectic is restricted to society, then two worlds exist, with two quite different sets

of laws: nature and society. In nature phenomena are undialectical, in society they are dialectical ... According to L. the world is dualist.”⁵ Deborin calls this “a new conception of dialectical method ... a conception which contradicts that of Marxism.”⁶

Deborin goes on to argue that Lukács is an idealist who “sees in the category of *knowledge*, in a certain sense, the substance or truth of reality.”⁷ In his dialectic, practice and historical reality are supposedly *aufgehoben* in knowledge. Hence, “according to Lukács praxis is *overcome* only through theory, only through knowledge, and not through the self-development of reality, of which knowledge is simply a part.”⁸ Deborin sees Lukács as a traditional idealist, completely overlooking his revision of the subject-object concept. “The object,” Deborin declares, “is swallowed by the subject.”⁹

Deborin concludes by contrasting this theory with orthodox Marxism. Knowledge, he objects, is never identical with its objects but tends asymptotically toward accurate representation. The true unity of subject and object is to be found in the domain of labor practice, not in revolutionary class consciousness. The object with which Marxism is specifically concerned is nature, the substratum of human life, the subject is labor, and their unity (not identity) is the process of production.

Like many later critics of Lukács, Deborin misses the point because he does not grasp the originality of Lukács’s concept of consciousness which is not identifiable with “knowledge” in the usual sense. Merleau-Ponty clarifies Lukács’s distinction between consciousness and knowledge. “In the proletariat, class consciousness is not a state of mind or a knowledge, nor yet is it a theoretical construction, because it is a praxis, that is to say less than a subject and more than an object.”¹⁰ More precisely, class consciousness denotes the inner tendency of the “historically significant actions of the class as a whole” in which it enacts new meanings in conflict with capitalist society.¹¹ These new meanings are not thoughts in the heads of the proletarians but functional shifts in the totality. It is thus incorrect to argue that for Lukács consciousness “transcends” practice, or that the subject “swallows” the object. Lukács’s goal is to overcome the opposition of theory and practice, subject and object, in a region of historical reality where they stand in essential and necessary relation. But by defining the

Lukácsian subject as a knower, Deborin forces the theory back into a traditional idealistic framework it is designed to escape.

In his new foreword of 1967, Lukács himself discusses these problems, and suggests another critique that is surely unique as an example of philosophical self-misunderstanding. He describes how the reading of Marx's 1844 *Manuscripts* finally convinced him of the ontological priority of objectivity and the universality of objectification; therewith, says the older Lukács, his early Marxist work became completely "alien" to him.¹² He dismisses his own identity theory as an "attempt to out-Hegel Hegel."¹³ Many other critics have similarly charged the early Lukács with confounding, as did Hegel, objectification with alienation in the concept of reification.¹⁴

This is the line taken in Adorno's influential critique. This critique carries the imprimatur of a great thinker. It is elaborated against a sophisticated theoretical background and represents the tradition of the Frankfurt School, which shared Lukács's ambition to construct a Marxist philosophy on the ruins of German idealism. Adorno claims that Lukács lapsed into idealism, believed the proletarian subject could constitute social reality independent of any institutional framework or objective constraint on its action, and idealized immediacy and precapitalist society. Quite a program! And Adorno does not hesitate to associate his critique with that of the Stalinists who first denounced Lukács, including presumably Deborin and Rudas.¹⁵

There is a good deal of irony in the fact that the brutal and primitive functionaries who more than forty years back damned Lukács as a heretic, because of the reification chapter in his important *History and Class Consciousness*, did sense the idealistic nature of his conception ... If a man looks upon thingness as radical evil, if he would like to dynamize all entity into pure actuality, he tends to be hostile to otherness, to the alien thing that has lent its name to alienation, and not in vain.¹⁶

Unfortunately, Adorno's critique is no better than the Stalinist ones. Like them, he addresses a straw man. He claims that reification, which he too interprets as a cognitive phenomenon, is overcome by the dereification of consciousness rather than concrete social change in the real world of "non-identical" objects. "The cause of human suffering, meanwhile, will be glossed over rather than denounced in the lament about reification."¹⁷

To make matters worse, Adorno considers the critique of reification to be a version of romantic anxiety over the distancing effect of rationality.

Blaming all problems on reification implies that immediacy is the solution. Reduced to the thesis that in criticizing reification, he is criticizing the very independence of the object, Lukács seems to call for assimilating things to the stream of consciousness or action. So Adorno writes, “The liquefaction of everything thinglike regressed to the subjectivism of the pure act.”¹⁸ The reference here is at once to a kind of existentialist decisionism and to the Fichtean *actus purus* in which the world is “posited” by transcendental consciousness. Versions of this critique abound in the literature and after becoming acquainted with them few readers bother to go back to the original, much less read it with fresh eyes.

But in the first pages of his book Lukács warns the reader that the concept of “totality” under which he conceives social reality “does not reduce its various elements to an undifferentiated uniformity, to identity.”¹⁹ This reservation is confirmed elsewhere in the text despite the often overblown language in which Lukács describes the identical subject-object. Under the rhetorical surface his views depend on a rather conventional Marxism, not the rehash of subjective idealism and naïve romanticism Adorno attributes to him.

In sum, Marx, not Heraclitus or Bergson. It is certainly worth questioning whether this is coherent, but it is hardly idealist. What requires understanding is Lukács’s purpose in producing this strange hybrid of classical German philosophy and the Marxist critique of political economy. We need to know whether he accomplished anything of interest in doing so. Ignoring the complexity of his thought is not helpful for this purpose.

LUKÁCS AND FICHTE

These considerations take us to the heart of the problem. Lukács never entirely bridges the enormous gap between the two poles of his argument, classical German philosophy and Marxism. Curious exaggerations expose him to easy criticism. Axel Honneth notes the coexistence of a hopelessly idealistic “official” line and a more “moderate” “unofficial” line that can provide the basis for a recovery of his contribution.²⁰ We differ on the nature of that unofficial line but not on the interest in pursuing the ambiguities of Lukács’s argument.

Lukács’s ambition is to demonstrate that “the core of being stands revealed as a social process.”²¹ He can only achieve this if, as Fichte would

have it, he can “exhibit the subject of ‘action’ and, assuming its identity with the object ... comprehend every dual subject-object form as derived from it, as its product.”²² According to Tom Rockmore, Fichte is the source of the emphasis on activity not only in Lukács but in Marx as well. This would explain why Lukács has recourse to the decidedly non-materialist notion of an identical subject-object.²³

Lukács’s views on nature are incompatible with this interpretation, but there are occasional passages in *History and Class Consciousness*, such as the one cited above, which seem to support it. Sometimes the critique of reification seems to extend to the reified form of objectivity of nature as well as society, and there are borrowings from contemporary critiques of natural science. Several critics leap at the bait and argue, with Alfred Schmidt, that nature in Lukács is “totally dissolved into the historical processes of its appropriation in respect of form, content, extent and objectivity.”²⁴

Surprisingly, no one has gone on to complete the critique of Lukács implicit in such assertions. If Lukács really believed that the revolution would overcome all objective being in overcoming reification, his theory would be both rigorously consistent and obviously absurd.²⁵ Then nature would be “posited” by the identical subject-object of history, and in overcoming social reification the proletariat would transform nature itself. This “Fichtean” interpretation of Lukács’s theory rests on the following propositions, which outline an ontology and epistemology in conformity with the critics’ image of Lukács, if not with Lukács’s actual views.

1. Nature is a purely social category, and the natural world therefore has no independence of humanity and human understanding.
2. Nature is essentially reified under capitalism.
3. The identical subject-object of history is also the identical subject-object of nature.
4. Proletarian revolution therefore overcomes the reified objectivity of nature in overcoming capitalism.
5. Since the existing natural sciences are reified, and therefore conditioned by capitalist society both in their genesis and their validity, proletarian revolution also overcomes these sciences in overcoming capitalism.

This summary of Lukács’s theory is immensely overdrawn, but it has the virtue of rendering one commonplace interpretation rigorously

consistent. If the critics are correct in attributing some such view to Lukács, then they are also right to tax him with idealism; in this theory the entire existing world is a product of human activity. All that would distinguish Lukács's "Marxism" from other forms of idealism would be his insistence that this constituting activity is social in character.

But does this construct really concern theses sustained in *History and Class Consciousness*? Or even its distant implications? The careful reader discovers no significant support for this interpretation, while there are numerous positive statements to the contrary. This is, in fact, the "myth" of Lukács's famous book that prejudices the very reading of the text.

What is Lukács's concept of nature? Let us begin with the passage usually cited in support of the interpretation sketched above. Lukács does say that "nature is a social category," but he proceeds immediately to qualify this statement. The entire passage reads:

Nature is a social category. That is to say [*D.h.*], *what passes for nature* [*als Natur gilt*] at a determinate stage in social evolution, the constitution of the relation between *this* [*dieser*] nature and man and the form in which the confrontation of man and nature takes place, in short, what nature *signifies* [*bedeuten*] in its form and its content, its range and its objectivity, are all socially conditioned.²⁶

The opening sentence of this passage is often quoted to show that Lukács believed nature in itself, without qualification, to be a social product. But the second sentence is quite careful to discuss not nature as such, but only "what passes for nature." And surely Lukács intends this qualification, since he introduces the second sentence with "that is to say," as equivalent to but more precise than the preceding one.²⁷ In the *Defence* the distinction is explicit: "I talk always (on two occasions!) only of *knowledge of nature* and not nature itself."²⁸ Already the first and the third theses of the construct have fallen, for now nature itself, if not the knowledge of it, is independent of man and cannot possibly be "posited" by society. And then, of course, the fourth thesis is also untenable, for under these conditions proletarian revolution cannot transform nature.

Nevertheless, Lukács continues to affirm if not exactly the second and fifth theses, something quite similar. He says, "it cannot be our task to investigate the question of the priority or the historical and causal order of successions between the 'laws of nature' and capitalism. (The author of these lines has, however, no wish to conceal his view that the development of capitalist economics takes precedence.)"²⁹ In addition, at the end of the

reification essay, when Lukács concedes that there is an objective dialectic of nature, he distinguishes it from the dialectic of subject and object in history. He notes that “the growth of *knowledge* about nature is a social phenomenon and therefore to be included in the second dialectical type.”³⁰ Thus the fate of the natural sciences and that of capitalism would still seem to be intimately intertwined. (Just how intimately only becomes clear in the *Defence*, to be discussed below.)

These statements, combined with the critique of reification, have been used by Colletti and others to build an image of an irrationalist, “Bergsonian” Lukács.³¹ Yet Lukács himself rejects irrationalism as an immediate reflex of reification. “The value of formal knowledge in the face of ‘living life’ may be questioned (see irrationalist philosophies from Hamann to Bergson),” but, Lukács writes, reification is not thereby transcended: “Whether this gives rise to ecstasy, resignation or despair, whether we search for a path leading to ‘life’ via irrational mystical experience, this will do absolutely nothing to modify the situation as it is in fact.”³² Another significant passage makes clear Lukács’s disagreement with the irrationalist attack on the natural sciences. After a lengthy and apparently “Bergsonian” critique of the application of natural scientific method to society, a critique that seems at points to cast doubt on the validity of science in general, Lukács states: “When the epistemological ideal of the natural sciences is applied to nature it simply furthers the progress of science. But when it is applied to society it turns out to be an ideological weapon of the bourgeoisie.”³³

Lukács’s precise attitude toward the fifth thesis should now be clear. He does believe the rise of capitalism to have stimulated the growth of modern natural science, but he nowhere proposes that it is therefore false or that proletarian revolution will abolish it. The validity of natural science and of the reified concept of nature seems to be independent of the conditions of its creation. Here Lukács is in agreement with the views of the later Marx and Engels.

After examining all these passages in detail, one is astonished to discover that nothing remains of the image of Lukács as a subjective idealist at the level of the collective “I” of the proletariat, Lukács the irrationalist, the Bergsonian, an image that begins with Deborin in 1924 and continues to contemporaries such as Colletti. While Rockmore may be right to suggest that Fichte’s activist conception of subjectivity influenced

Lukács, Lukács was no Fichtean. In fact the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness* has a quite banal respect for the natural sciences. He nowhere denies the independence of nature or the validity of the sciences that study it. But this raises other questions.

Lukács's goal is to overcome the antinomy of subject and object and restore their unity through action in history. But how can reason be founded on the identity of subject and object in history while nature "in itself" remains beyond the scope of human action? To the extent that nature is conceived as irreducible and non-social in a dualistic worldview, the whole theoretical superstructure collapses. Steven Vogel has made this dualism of nature and society the centerpiece of his critique. Vogel focuses on Lukács's failure to incorporate nature into his social theory. The distinction between knowledge of nature and "nature itself" seems a regression to Kantianism. What is this nature that by definition lies beyond knowledge if not the old thing-in-itself?

Unless the identity of subject and object in nature can be established, its identity in history appears as a purely contingent feature of the universe. Another type of rationality with its own objectivity arises alongside history, and there subject and object can never be united. Reason remains permanently caught in the antinomies of reified thought in its relation to nature. The Kantian construction of rationality now returns in full force, bringing in its train all the untranscended antinomies Lukács set out to resolve. It would seem that Lukács is saved from his critics only to fall into self-contradiction.

Vogel claims that Lukács confuses an epistemological distinction with an ontological one. Lukács distinguishes between a reified, contemplative conception of knowledge that resembles positivism, and a self-conscious, dialectical conception. This epistemological distinction is independent of the distinction between nature and society. However, since Lukács accepts a contemplative conception of knowledge of nature that he rejects in the case of society, he concludes that nature and society are ontologically distinct domains. Vogel objects to the very notion of a contemplative epistemology, arguing that post-empiricist philosophy and sociology of science demonstrate that the subject of knowledge is practically implicated in the construction of scientific facts and theories. The dereifying critique of social science Lukács pursues can thus be extended to natural science as

well. Knowledge of nature, like social knowledge, is dialectical. There are no epistemological grounds for distinguishing their objects.

Vogel argues that if there is something in nature that is not socially produced, then history is not “reality,” not the fundamental ontological domain from which all others are derived. Unless some solution can be found, Lukács’s philosophy of praxis will collapse into a limited methodological preliminary to historical research. It could no longer pretend to solve ontological problems, but only epistemological problems of historical knowledge. Reason would not be implicated in revolution, only in social theory. This is in fact the position adopted by Lucien Goldmann, Lukács’s most important follower.³⁴ Vogel is more critical; he writes that this “solution” to the contradiction has a comic character since Lukács will have “labored long and hard and brought forth a mouse.”³⁵

CONTEMPLATIVE AND TRANSFORMING CONSCIOUSNESS

Many critics agree with Rudas and Vogel that the methodological split between society and nature in *History and Class Consciousness* gives rise to serious problems for Lukács’s philosophy of praxis. However, it is not uncommon for the critics, including the later Lukács himself, to fail to notice that this split refutes the idealistic identification of his concept of objectivity with Hegel’s concept of alienation. For, if nature is not posited by society, as Lukács seems to assert, and if it is not transcended in the revolution, then clearly Lukács’s philosophy is not hostile to objectivity *per se*, and is not idealist. The critics produce an empirically accurate image of the various strands of Lukács’s thought, but at the expense of a theoretically inconsistent critique. Lukács is charged with the contradictory vices of identifying what should be separated (alienation and objectivity) and separating what should be identified (nature and history).³⁶

Lukács’s dilemma arises from the apparently incompatible solutions to the two problems the identical subject-object is supposed to solve. In the first place, Lukács explains social change through the concept of social self-consciousness. This notion is loosely based on the Marxist theory of the proletariat and its place in capitalist society: the class “in itself” becomes the class “for itself.”³⁷ The self-consciousness of the proletariat transforms its immediate form of objectivity and therewith society. In the second place, Lukács proposes an integrally historical ontology that can resolve the

antinomies of classical German philosophy. But proletarian self-consciousness cannot transform the immediate form of objectivity of nature. This is what it means to argue that nature is essentially reified as Lukács implies in several of the passages cited above. The dilemma appears inescapable until one grasps the full import of Lukács's dialectical theory of rationality.

Most readings of Lukács accuse him of inflating the subject at the expense of the object. But the theory of rationality emphasizes the objectivity of the proletariat and the limits of its action. Proletarian practice does not create social reality but rather mediates it. Since all mediation begins with a presupposition, an immediate of some sort, this raises the question of the nature of the presupposition in the case of the proletariat. If the presupposition is wholly extrinsic to its action, then the problem of the thing-in-itself does indeed return. This describes reified technical practice that acts on an alien object. Reification cannot be defeated by such practice. But if the mediated lies wholly within the subject of mediation, then is not its alterity abolished in a perfectly idealist manner? This describes psychoanalysis in which the object of practice is actually an unconscious aspect of the subject. As I showed in the previous chapter, Lukács is aware of the dilemma and attempts to conjure it away in the reification essay.

He argues that reification is gradually overcome in a long-term process and not dissolved in a sudden recovery of absolute agency. This process is not technical but transformative, in the sense that it does not merely use the "law" of its objects to advantage, but alters that very "law." Nor is it therapeutic; Freud's version of self-consciousness is impossible in a social context where objective constraints arise from the institutional heritage and the interactions of the individuals.³⁸ But human freedom and initiative can increase relative to the structural impediments of a rationalized society as the proletariat initiates the transition to socialism.

Lukács makes this point repeatedly in different ways throughout the third section of the reification essay, but never applies the argument to the problematic of classical German philosophy analyzed earlier in the essay. He writes, for example, that "Proletarian thought does not require a *tabula rasa*," but rather starts out from reification that, for the first time, makes it possible to understand that society is a human product.³⁹ Socialism is a reorganization of the society around a dialectical mediation of the reified capitalist inheritance. He argues further that reification is never completely

eliminated but that it is repeatedly overcome in an “unbroken alternation of ossification, contradiction and movement.”⁴⁰ And he rejects the humanist tendency to make man himself into an absolute “in place of those transcendental forces he was supposed to explain, dissolve and systematically replace.”⁴¹ The proletariat does not constitute or posit reality from some transcendental beyond. “It is true that the proletariat is the conscious subject of total social reality. But the conscious subject is not defined here as in Kant, where ‘subject’ is defined as that which can never be an object.”⁴² Lukács invokes Hegel’s famous principle that “the true [be understood] not only as substance but also as subject.” Like the Hegelian absolute, the proletariat too “moves in a self-created world” but that world simultaneously “imposes itself upon [it] in full objectivity.”⁴³ The reference to the ambitious notion of a “self-created world” is thus instantly deflated by the “full objectivity” explained in Marxist social theory.

Since Lukács does not show how these considerations apply to the problem of nature, his critics doubt he can fulfill the promise to transcend the antinomy of subject and object. But there is a hint of a solution in the very terms on which Lukács questions the dialectics of nature. As we saw earlier, he is saved from idealism by the dualism of nature and history implied in the claim that nature lacks the most important determinations of dialectics, namely, the unity of theory and practice and the interaction of subject and object. Later in *History and Class Consciousness* and in the *Defence*, Lukács refers to an “objective dialectic” of nature corresponding to Hegel’s objective dialectic of the categories of thinghood such as quantity and quality.⁴⁴ He reiterates that this level of the dialectic lacks the all-important interaction of subject and object of the social dialectic.

Although the distinction between nature and society is apparently ontological it is presented twice in these passages in methodological terms. This suggests a very different reading of Lukács. He is not telling us what kind of *being* nature is but on what terms it can be *changed*, on what terms the proletariat as subject can interact with this object. The argument is thus not about the difference between the essence of society and nature but about their different relation to practice. Forms of consciousness follow from this distinction. Lukács distinguishes between contemplative and transforming consciousness, the one suited to knowledge of nature, the other to knowledge of society. There is a realm in which consciousness is practice,

in which we can transform our objects by becoming socially self-conscious, and alongside it, there is another realm in which our action will always be contemplative, i.e., technical. The first realm is society, the second is nature. Lukács claims that we need not organize our whole social life through technical control of some human beings by others, as capitalism requires, but that we will always stand in a technical relation to nature.

The concept of “contemplative” consciousness is essentially constructivist despite the usual meaning of the word. Lukács’s constructivism operates at the abstract level of the form of objectivity rather than focusing on particular social influences on the content of knowledge as do Marx’s occasional remarks on science. For example, Lukács writes in *History and Class Consciousness* that “it is in the nature of capitalism to process phenomena” in such a way as to generate “facts.” And he concludes, “The unscientific nature of this seemingly so scientific method [of bourgeois social science] consists, then, in its failure to see and take account of the historical character of the facts on which it is based.”⁴⁵ As we saw in [Chapter 4](#), factuality is a social product, not an immediate given. What Lukács calls “contemplation” hides the social practices that institute the facts.

Reified social reality is a “second nature” with laws that appear as rigid as those of the first nature described by natural science.

Man in capitalist society confronts a reality “made” by himself (as a class) which appears to him to be a natural phenomenon alien to himself; he is wholly at the mercy of its “laws”, his activity is confined to the exploitation of the inexorable fulfillment of certain individual laws for his own (egoistic) interests. But even while “acting” he remains, in the nature of the case, the object and not the subject of events.⁴⁶

The three principal bases of a modern society, the economy, the technology, and the administrations, are reified objects of contemplation in the sense that the individual cannot alter the laws of the system “made by himself (as a class),” but only understand and manipulate those laws to personal advantage.⁴⁷ But in these social instances a collective practice based on the self-consciousness of the social subjects can transform the laws themselves.

It is obvious that nature, at least in the form in which it is encountered in natural science, does not form a fourth system contingent on capitalism for its existence and immediately transformed by the collective consciousness *qua* practice in which capitalism is overthrown. This is so

even if we accept Lukács's constructivist interpretation of contemplation according to which it masks an underlying practice. To be sure, contemplation of nature is not truly passive but, unlike in the social case, dereifying consciousness of the scientific construction of nature does not necessarily alter the "facts" of nature itself.

This distinction is clarified by Paul Dumouchel's revision of systems theory.⁴⁸ He distinguishes two types of spontaneous orders or systems constituted by agents who each follow a rule of action individually. Some spontaneous orders are "rational" in the sense that they are stable in the face of the agents' discovery of the rule of the system. Competitive games are examples of rational orders: the players' willingness to play by the rules is not normally affected by their knowledge of the rules. But there are also spontaneous orders that are "irrational" in the sense that when the agents come to understand the rule of their action, they will necessarily modify it.

Dumouchel offers the example of sacrifice or scapegoating, considered by René Girard to provide a basic mechanism of social solidarity. The sacrificial logic cannot withstand the revelation that the rule of scapegoating is the random or arbitrary choice of the victim—the object of the sacrifice is an ordinary person, as guiltless as those who kill him. Sacrifice is cancelled by the self-consciousness of the sacrificial community.

In Dumouchel's scheme the passage beyond irrationality through consciousness can lead to the creation of a rational order governed by new rules, or a "reasonable" order based not merely on individual action but planned collectively in terms of such explicit norms as justice.

On these terms, reified social forms constitute irrational orders that can be transformed once the agents understand their logic. The capitalist system is not based on rationality in Dumouchel's sense, but on blindness. It cannot withstand the discovery of its own inner logic by those who enact it. The alternative suggested by the mediation theory is the institution of a permanent system of transitions from the irrational to the rational and the reasonable. But the relation to nature is not irrational in Dumouchel's sense. It is not generally modified by consciousness of its reified form. It is thus *essentially* reified and knowledge of it is destined to remain permanently "contemplative."

Instead of a one-time and total dereification of the sort promised by the idealist version of the identical subject-object, the theory of rationality proposes a more nuanced interpretation that leaves room for objectivity. A sliding ontological scale includes aspects of the objective world that are more or less resistant to dereification. Some of these, the ones that are specifically social such as wage labor, are susceptible to much more radical transformation than others, such as the nature studied by the natural sciences. Other objects, such as art and technology, and the lived nature of everyday experience stand in between the extremes, more contingent on human action than the nature of natural science but less so than social institutions.⁴⁹ In each case subject and reified object interact as moments in a “totality.”

This version of subject-object identity abolishes the thing-in-itself not by reducing it to the subject but by mediating objectivity in a never-ending process. But this means that the identical subject-object is not a substantial “thing” in the usual sense of the word, identical to itself and enduring through change. Rather, the identical subject-object is a process of self and social transformation that appears and fades with the rhythms of the historical struggle.

This interpretation of subject-object identity can provide a framework for understanding Lukács’s response to the various criticisms described above, especially if the more elaborate arguments of the *Defence* are taken into account. In the *Defence*, Lukács goes beyond the few brief comments on science in *History and Class Consciousness*. However, this text is an unfinished first draft, not a polished publication. Its significance is obscured by Lukács’s avoidance of his own philosophical terminology. He no longer refers to “forms of objectivity” and “reification,” presumably because he does not think such concepts acceptable in the new Soviet context of the debate.⁵⁰ He writes instead about the “metabolic interaction of man and nature.” By this he means the labor process that mediates the natural world. He also refers to the “appearance” of society and to the mode of “perception” determined by the level and type of metabolic interaction. The emergence of new appearances and perceptions under socialism seems a euphemism for the transformation of the reified form of objectivity discussed in *History and Class Consciousness*.

Although this change in terminology is confusing, other arguments in the *Defence* clear up ambiguities in *History and Class Consciousness*.

Vogel concludes from Lukács's distinction of nature and society that he accepts internalism and realism. But this is actually the view Lukács attributes to Rudas in his *Defence*. He writes, for example, that "Comrade Rudas assumes an immanent development of the natural sciences."⁵¹ Both Deborin and Rudas claim that science yields knowledge of things-in-themselves, as Engels famously argued in a discussion of the significance of synthetic chemistry and scientific experiment.⁵² This implies that science engages humanity in a direct relation to nature.

Lukács argues that humanity is not the subject of scientific knowledge; humanity is merely an abstraction from the concrete social subjects that interact with nature in history. The cognitive relation to nature depends on the form of the labor process, the "metabolic interchange with nature" imposed by the dominant economic system. He thus proposes a kind of perspectivism according to which economic systems open up ways of knowing. He points out, furthermore, that Marx himself interpreted certain scientific discoveries in terms of their social background. For example, Marx claimed that Darwin's theory of evolution reflects capitalist competition. According to Lukács this view does not lead to relativism since real progress can be observed in the development of the forces of production to which corresponds cognitive progress in the understanding of nature.

The argument from progress is weak and Lukács does not follow it up in a very coherent manner, although he does make a few other suggestive remarks that conform with his theory of dialectical rationality. As we have seen, the capitalist system structures appearances in such a way as to privilege ahistorical facts. The socialist challenge to capitalism creates new cognitive possibilities. Lukács writes,

It is altogether possible that the present crisis of the natural sciences is already a sign of the immanent revolutionizing of its material basis and not merely a reflex of the general ideological crisis of capitalism in decline.

However, as long as we are not in a position to demonstrate concretely the historical genesis of the emergence of our perceptions out of their material basis, i.e., not only *that* they are, but *what* they are, and *how*, etc., as Marx accomplished for our socio-historical perceptions, our mode of looking is lacking an important *objective* moment of the dialectic: history.⁵³

This passage and the discussion it introduces are peculiarly ambiguous. The ambiguity attaches to the word "history." Does Lukács mean that scientific research will identify historical aspects of its object that are

currently overlooked? Or does he mean that science as a process of inquiry will become reflexive, aware of its own historical conditioning? Both interpretations are implied once again in the following passage.

To what extent all knowledge of nature can ever be transformed into historical knowledge ... cannot be raised here because even where it seems to us that historical developments have occurred their historical character can now be grasped only to a very small extent ... [This] is because the capacity to discover the material foundations of knowledge, and to derive knowledge from this material basis dialectically, has not yet up until this point been produced by objective real developments.⁵⁴

In fact Lukács seems to want to affirm both the ambiguous senses of “history” in these passages. Here is a fuller account of these alternatives.

1. Lukács entertains the possibility of a “new science” emerging from the socialist transformation of the labor process. There is a basis for this view in a comment in *The German Ideology*: “Even this ‘pure’ natural science receives its aim, like its material, only through commerce and industry, through the sensuous activity of men.”⁵⁵ This comment is a pale reflection of some of the most adventurous speculations of the *Manuscripts* reviewed in [Chapter 3](#) of this book. There Marx writes, for example, that “Industry is the actual historical relationship of nature, and thus of natural science, to man.”⁵⁶ The progress of industry is thus also progress in the human relationship to nature, i.e., sense experience. Objective human powers develop through the maturation and humanization of the senses in the course of history. “The supersession of private property is, therefore, the complete emancipation of all the human qualities and senses.”⁵⁷ As experience is enhanced, science will be transformed. “Natural science will one day incorporate the science of man, just as the science of man will incorporate natural science; there will be a single science.”⁵⁸

Lukács proposes a somewhat similar but more modest theory in *History and Class Consciousness*. Experienced nature is no poetic *schwärmerei*, distinguished from the prose of machines and laboratory experiments by the absence of thought and reflection. The perception of nature is not immediate, but is always already mediated, informed by the “metabolism” of man and nature, sensed and comprehended through social forms of objectivity. The reference to changed perceptions and their effects on scientific knowledge, translated into the terminology of *History and Class Consciousness*, means that everyday experience will be reshaped by a new form of objectivity as capitalism’s rigid opposition of factual form and

living content gives way to the fluid interaction between them under socialism.

This notion offers a basis for understanding the possible evolution of science. Lukács argues in the *Defence* that new “perceptions” will open a historical perspective on nature. Once human beings know that there are no eternal laws of society, and institute that knowledge in a dynamic and self-conscious production system, they will also be predisposed to conceive nature in historical terms. Just as historical elements have already entered some fields of natural science through evolutionary theory and thermodynamics, so every branch of science will someday become historical. A new historically informed science will yield new results reflecting the new structure of interchange with nature under socialism and the “perceptions” or form of objectivity that accompany it.

2. The second possible interpretation of Lukács’s reference to a new science concerns inquiry itself rather than its results. The new perceptions introduced by socialism involve a continual alternation of dereification and stabilization in society at large. This might also describe a new and more dynamic process of research in which a continual deconstruction of the reified heritage of earlier socially biased results would constitute the motor of scientific progress.

Lukács admits that up to now reflexivity has not been required to produce good research. Specialized knowledge of the highest quality has been and still is obtained by researchers with no special insight into their own social and historical situation. Indeed, contemplative epistemology and the correlated reification of nature represent a progress over earlier mythological forms of objectivity and their usefulness is not exhausted. Furthermore, he does not even deny the contribution of reified contemplation to social knowledge prior to the development of the Marxist approach.

But despite these concessions, Lukács suggests the usefulness of social critique of science where its concepts retain traces of an obsolete mode of production. Such critique, he argues, “will probably show that some categories that appear today as ‘eternal,’ as categories directly taken from nature, e.g. work in physics, are actually historical, determined by the specific exchange of matter between capitalist society and nature.”⁵⁹ The mechanical view of nature might be an example.

According to Lukács's reflexive account, a dereifying process of self-discovery can thus affect natural science. The theorist should become "conscious that the categories in which he conceives objective reality (society and nature) are determined by the social being of his present moment, that they are only mental summations of this objective reality. (Categories are 'forms of existence, conditions of existence'—Marx.)"⁶⁰ But the outcome of such dereification of nature is quite different from the dereification of society. Since nature as a system or totality does not depend on the unconsciousness of the practices in which it is understood, self-consciousness does not overthrow its reified form of objectivity although some results of scientific research may indeed be overthrown.

Conceivably, the accumulation of new theories arising from an ideology-critique of science could lead to a new science. But little can be said of such a new science in this transitional period. Lukács writes that "Just how deeply the historically changing, therefore historically ephemeral process of *capitalist* exchange of matter with nature determines our present knowledge of nature, and where those categories that determine the metabolic exchange of *any society* with nature begin, are questions for individual research."⁶¹

The dereification of scientific knowledge would not transform nature into a human product in the usual ontic sense of the term. Insofar as the self-critique of science effects scientific change, it issues in a new positing of "objective nature" indeed, the hallmark of scientific advance is that it gives access to a law that resists modification through self-consciousness. The reified dimension of nature on which natural science is based cannot be cancelled by a historical progress that would reveal its truths as human activity.

Lukács seems to be arguing two apparently contradictory points: social critique shows that the form of objectivity of nature is historically bound, while scientific research establishes the transcendence of particular facts and theories, at least while they prevail. The conceptual framework in terms of which we identify nature is socially contingent, but knowledge of nature refers to objects independent of us, that is, to presuppositions and not results of our practices. The success of a scientific fact in escaping critique need not be eternal to serve the purpose of the argument. Nature is a moving target; as Marcuse says, "nature is not a manifestation of 'spirit,' but rather its essential limit."⁶² And the position of that limit changes in

history. Scientific knowledge is always already subject in principle if not in present practice to a critique that would refute particular results while establishing new ones as the new “nature itself.”

These two points seem incompatible because we assume that if our conception of nature in general is socially conditioned, then all the results of research carry the stigma of a social origin and cannot yield knowledge of an independent reality. But Lukács argues that it is senseless to conclude from a social critique of the general concept of nature that particular results are merely relative. This would be to confuse social theory with research and to make of the former a “systematic locus” of absolute knowledge. Finite knowledge is bound to a context. In the context of research, critique does not stand alone but is a moment in a process leading to a new posit of reality. Removed from that context, it cannot serve in a general argument for relativism or the existence of the thing-in-itself. Modern science knows the truth of nature in the only meaningful sense of the word. This is so even though the conceptual framework within which nature is known is reified, hence conceived in a socially relative perspective on the world.⁶³

I think this is what Lukács means in the passage cited above by the need for “individual research” into the extent of social determination, in opposition, presumably, to general speculation. This is a Lukácsian version of the finite horizon Marx deployed in 1844 to block the cosmological argument, as we saw in [Chapter 3](#). In support of his position Lukács refers to Hegel’s argument according to which the Kantian thing-in-itself is a pure thought object, an abstraction from all concrete existence. As such it cannot be the ultimate reality because it depends on the subject of the process of abstraction.

Under the finite horizon, history, not nature or the thing-in-itself, is ultimate reality. The reification of nature is a moment of the historical process in which the experience, knowledge and technical control of nature develop. The social totality contains a reified moment—nature—that is not cancelled by self-consciousness, but which rather opens a realm of irreducible facts and theories. Nature may not be dereified by human practice on the same terms as society, but its participation in the dialectic reveals it to be fundamentally historical.

It is time to draw the conclusions of this argument. The concepts of dereification and subject-object identity do not belong to a Fichtean metaphysics. These concepts are essentially methodological and not

substantive. This is shown by Lukács's constant emphasis on the importance of methodology. Indeed, on the first page of *History and Class Consciousness*, he claims that Marxist "orthodoxy refers exclusively to *method*."⁶⁴ As Gillian Rose puts a similar point, "Lukács turned ... the logic of constitutive principles, away from a logic of identity in the direction of a theory of historical mediation."⁶⁵ He means for us to take him literally when he describes "proletarian thought," i.e., Marxism, his own theory, as "a theory of practice that only gradually transforms itself into a practical theory that overturns the real world."⁶⁶

As we saw in the case of the social application of the theory of dialectical rationality, this position is incompatible with the notion that reification characterizes only the bourgeois era. Given the internal link between reification and dialectics in the concept of mediation, it is impossible to eliminate the former without also eliminating the latter. Insofar as the truth is discovered dialectically, reification is a necessary moment in the process of discovery. Reification is, in sum, not the "opposite" of dialectics, but a moment in it. "For, if concepts are only the intellectual forms of historical realities then these forms, one-sided, abstract and false as they are, belong to the true unity as genuine aspects of it ... Insofar as the 'false' is an aspect of the 'true' it is both 'false' and 'non-false.'"⁶⁷

What may nevertheless change radically in the course of history is the position of the reified moment in the totality to which it belongs. István Mészáros writes, "Granting that it is unthinkable to supersede ... all possible dangers and potentials of reification is fully compatible with conceiving '*Aufhebung*' as a succession of social enterprises of which the later is less ... alienation-ridden than the preceding one."⁶⁸ Lukács's argument for a historically self-conscious science is an example of such an advance.

METHODOLOGICAL UNIVERSALISM

Modern thought claims universality for its science by contrast with culture that is relative to a local situation, a history. Science achieves universality by transcending such contingencies. The crisis of modern knowledge arises when it too is situated historically. This relativistic turn is often traced to Nietzsche's perspectivism. As we saw in [Chapter 3](#), it

forbids a naïve acceptance of the discontinuity between knowledge and culture. This makes it difficult to distinguish the claims to truth of modern science from similar claims of any other “ethnoscience” in any other culture.⁶⁹ This raises important questions about the global impact of the West that can be addressed with Lukács’s concepts of reification and dereification, although he himself did not so address them.

Relativism seems to imply that the global triumph of Western science cannot claim to be based on epistemological superiority but exclusively on military supremacy. But this is not the whole story. The success of Western modernity is not merely military but depends on its critical force as well. It is at that level that something like the universality of modernity can be defended. But as Lukács argues, this universality is fraught with an internal contradiction. It suffers a tension between two forms of knowledge, a reifying and a dereifying form. Dereification too is the basis of a modern way of knowing. It too is a critical method, although it operates in very different ways and circumstances from science. The tension between them reflects the imbrication of nature and history, the full complexity of which is first appreciated by the Frankfurt School.

It is the critical method of science and not an absolute truth content that qualifies it as universal. In one sense, this is obvious since no scientist claims to possess the absolute truth and one and all expect the current scientific representation of nature to be overthrown in some future scientific revolution. Most scientists would say the scientific universal is the method of observation, experiment, and specific types of abstraction such as quantitative measurement and calculation. Understood epistemologically, these features of modern science organize the discovery of “truths,” or at least what scientists use for truths while they last. But understood in ontological terms, something very different is involved, not the construction of a more or less true representation but the constitution of a specific object, the modern concept of nature. The universality of modern science lies in this process of ontological construction, not in any particular truth.

The natural scientific idea of nature systematically negates lived experience; this is the downfall of Bacon’s idols. It strips away the embodied and imaginative relation to the objects of experience central to all non-modern forms of knowing, to all cultures. This negation enters experience as disenchantment and authorizes the exploitation of nature as mere raw material. To the extent that modern societies realize this negation

in their mentalities and institutions, they undermine their own basis in the natural world with the consequences we now recognize as impending environmental catastrophe. This has been the tendency of Western culture for several centuries and it is now a global tendency.

Reification and dereification are characterized by their destructive relation to immediate experience and the cultures that arise from it. It is their negativity that ensures their universality. They do not posit absolute truths, but their relative truths flow from the application of methods that know no limits. Although they arise in the capitalist West, they are capable of undermining all cultures all over the world. This conception of modern knowledge suggests an explanation for the success of science in displacing other knowledge traditions as well as an account of the corrective force of dereifying historical knowledge.

Just as the nature of modern science emerges through the negation of the lived experience of nature in the West, so it can negate other experiences of nature, other ontologies, and establish its supremacy on a global scale. The effectiveness of its technology is especially persuasive, but the nature it “conquers” is tailored to culturally relative expectations and denies many aspects of nature more adequately represented in other cultures and in our own past.

Lukács argues for the congruence of the scientific-technical reification of experience and capitalism. As science undermines the lived experience of nature, so the market erodes customs and traditions. Together they project certain basic features of Western culture globally while opening up the entire planet to exploitation. The cultural bias of technology is tied up with capitalist development that mobilizes a similar negative force through the market. I explain this culturally specific aspect of Western universalism in the next chapter in terms of the concept of “formal bias.”

The process of disenchantment provokes counter-tendencies that reveal its bias. The universality of science and technology meets a limit in the harm that goes along with capitalist development, most obvious today from such problems as the intensive exploitation of factory labor, massive pollution, and unprecedented urban squalor. These side effects of progress first appear in the condition of the proletariat in Western capitalism but today are found in exaggerated forms in the developing world.

Lukács shows that Marxism is based on the critical relation of the proletariat to its reduction to wage labor. This reduction negates the lived

experience of the working class under capitalism. The reifying logic of scientific-technical rationality here applies beyond nature to human society. What in relation to nature was the construction of the abstract object of scientific rationality becomes in social terms the imposition of an abstract economic form on living human beings.

Resistance to this imposition reveals society as a unique object with a different structure from nature. It is composed of individuals possessed of consciousness and will. The universal destructiveness of reification is now met with another universal, the struggle to reestablish the human dimension of experience cancelled by reification. And like natural science, the dereifying theory of society constructs an object through specific methodological procedures. Lukács summarizes these procedures as knowledge of the totality, that is, as the reduction of every apparently substantial social object to its functional relation to the whole of society and to the practices that support that relation. Marxism exemplifies this methodology.

The dereifying reduction Marxism applies to capitalism has the paradoxical effect of validating aspects of the lived experience of the working class. Capitalist forms are contrasted with the social content on which they are imposed. The effect of reification is thereby cancelled and transcended. The immediacy of capitalist experience is overcome just as capitalism itself overcame the immediacy of the lived experience on which it was imposed. Now lived experience returns not as a narrow local culture, a tradition, but as a futural demand for the material conditions of a decent life. This demand may be inflected culturally, but such basic elements as adequate sustenance, shelter, medical care, education, dignity and respect, opportunities to develop and apply capacities, qualify it as relatively universal, at least in a modern or modernizing context. These are, so to speak, the “primary qualities” of a humane world. Like science, technology, and capitalism, dereification can travel wherever they intrude. This is the methodological basis of Marxist universalism.

LUKÁCS’S “CONSTRUCTIVISM”: OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

Many of the issues discussed in this chapter receive a very different treatment in a very different language in recent science and technology studies. In this concluding section I will formulate and respond to some of the objections a constructivist scholar might address to my presentation of

Lukács's views on science.⁷⁰ While I do not claim that Lukács anticipates constructivism, I do believe he is closer to it than might seem possible on a superficial reading.

Objection 1. *It is confusing to qualify the objects of natural science as “really” or “essentially” reified since reification is an illusion that hides the social processes underlying all objects, whether natural or social. Like social objects, natural objects are grounded in the practical activities in which they are constructed. They have a processual character as intrinsically bound up with these activities. Distinguishing them from social processes as essentially reified confuses reification with objectivity.*

It is true that “real” in the usual sense contrasts with illusion and certainly reification is illusory in at least one aspect. However, the sense in which the nature of natural science is *really* reified is not this usual one. We saw in [Chapter 5](#) that reification is neither a mental state nor a thing but is the thing-like appearance of the system of practice. Reification is “real” to the extent that this appearance has real consequences. The difference between the reification of nature and society has to do with these consequences.

Lukács accepts that there are several ways of being an object and many kinds of objectivity that are not reified. Reification is only one way with a very specific meaning. It is not identical with objectivity in general. A reified object is one that has the *form* of an *independent fact governed by laws*. All four terms are important. A reified object has a form in the sense that it is measurable and isolable. As we saw in [Chapter 4](#), factuality is not the only such form, but is a specific way in which objects present themselves. A reified object is governed by laws in the sense that a rule can be found explaining its motion, whether it be a natural law or the logic of a system of social interactions. Its apparent independence means that whatever social processes were involved in its institution are occluded. To argue that certain types of objects are “really” or “essentially” reified does not mean that no such processes underlie their existence, but that their reified form is unalterable in practice. In such cases it is possible to reveal the process of reification of the object theoretically but with no effect on the object itself. This distinguishes natural scientific objects, which are not undermined by learning how they were “discovered,” from certain social objects that cannot withstand self-consciousness.

Objection 2. *The main feature of reification is the unconsciousness of the practices in which objects are constituted. Dereification consists in the discovery of the constituting practices. Were scientists to become conscious of the constructive role of their practices science would be dereified even without refuting any specific theory. Such a dereification would have a general transformative impact on research.*

This is not quite Lukács's understanding of reification. While it is true that unconsciousness of reifying practices is a necessary condition for the constitution of reified social objects, these objects are dereified not simply in the knowledge of the practices but in the effects of that knowledge on the practices. Knowledge of nature simply does not respond to self-consciousness. In fact scientists are fully aware of the practices in which they construct their objects without that changing the nature of the objects one iota. This is the meaning of the constructivist methodological rule: "follow the actors." Such knowledge is not a dereification in the full sense since scientists continue to represent nature as a factual, law-governed realm independent of the observer. To cease to do so and to tie research to its specific practical basis would undermine the knowledge claim characteristic of science. It would be inconsistent with the constructivist analysis itself because it would systematically re-modalize and localize factual propositions laboriously constructed as independent of the observer and universally valid regardless of local context.⁷¹

Objection 3. *These arguments set up all sorts of dualisms, a dualism of knowledge of objects and objects "in themselves," a dualism of scientific nature and nature in everyday experience, and a dualism of nature and society. Are these defensible claims?*

Are objects identical with our knowledge of them since we have no other access to them? Claiming the contrary seems to imply a god's-eye view from nowhere. But this radical constructivist notion is politically dangerous as it leaves no grounds for contesting the current state of knowledge in the name of the way things "really" are. Knowledge of objects and objects themselves can be distinguished without assuming an absolute observer in terms of the incompleteness of all human knowledge. We do not need to know what things are independent of our knowledge of them to know that we do not know them completely and to suspect that we do not even know them correctly.

How can the reified nature of natural science be both independent of the observer and only one perspective from which to perceive nature, alongside another perspective that would be that of everyday experience? Is a nature that is relative to a perspective truly independent? Operational definitions are necessary here to block metaphysical assumptions. On Lukács's terms, to say that the nature of natural science is independent of the observer is to say no more than that it is not transformed by self-consciousness, i.e., by knowledge of the practices in which it is constituted. This is compatible with the relativity of scientific nature to a specific perspective.

How can we distinguish essentially reified nature from the contingent reification of society given the imbrication of society and nature in technology? It is important to bear in mind that the reified "nature" in question is that of natural science, not the nature we directly experience in the lifeworld. The natural scientific concept of nature is an abstract object of theoretical representation, not a concrete reality. Observation and experiment and the technology employed in research all serve in the construction of such a representation. Its reification is essential because natural science casts everything into the form of factuality in order to know it. The knowledge associated with technology, such as engineering knowledge, is also reified. But actual technologies are more complex than these theoretical representations. They belong to the lifeworld and therefore to society. Although they have a reified aspect, they are not *essentially* reified.

Objection 4. *Lukács claims that scientific and technical practice are "contemplative" rather than transformative. This is paradoxical since nothing has changed the world more than science and technology. Marx's notion of transformative practice is unalienated labor in which nature and society mediate each other mutually, not a purely social self-consciousness distinct from nature.*

Lukács's critique of what he calls "contemplative" practice concerns modern technical control in accordance with reified law. Science and technology are contemplative in the sense that they alter only superficial features and not the "law" of the object. They presuppose that law as the basis from which to modify those features. In the case of action on nature, this is inevitable. One cannot act on the laws of nature, only discover and use them to act on the objects they govern. In the case of society, the matter stands differently. The "laws" of social interaction that govern systems of

practice such as the market can be changed by the coordinated efforts of the individuals who enact them. This is “transforming practice.”

Marx’s concept of unalienated labor is also transformative, but this is not the only kind of transformation he recognized. Revolution is also transformative and this is what Lukács attempts to explain with his theory of reification and dereification. But, admittedly, the relation between the two types of transformative practice is complicated. What Lukács understands by dereification extends in principle to the labor process and technological artifacts, but he does not explain how. To do so he would have to distinguish between two related dimensions of work and technical artifacts, their social meaning and the control of nature they make possible. These two dimensions are confounded under capitalism but they must be distinguishable if socialism is to overcome reification.⁷²

¹ HCC, xxiii.

² I discuss Marcuse’s interpretation of this aspect of Hegel’s *Logic* in Andrew Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 62–5.

³ See John Hoffman, *Marxism and the Theory of Praxis* (New York: International, 1975). There are also several Althusserian critiques of Lukács in English which belong to the same general tendency. See Gareth Stedman Jones, “The Marxism of the Early Lukács: An Evaluation,” *New Left Review*, No. 70 (1971), 27–64; and John Horton and Fari Filsoufi, “Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder in Theory and Method,” *The Insurgent Sociologist*, Vol. VII, No. 1 (1977). Both these articles mistakenly identify Lukács’s turn to “orthodoxy” with the writing of his little book on Lenin in 1924, even though several major essays developing the viewpoint expressed in *History and Class Consciousness* are written in the years that follow. The question of political Leninism was simply not the touchstone of philosophical “orthodoxy” for Lukács that these critics make it out to be. (See the [Appendix](#) to this book.)

⁴ HCC, 24 n6.

⁵ Quoted in Lukács, *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness*, 146.

⁶ Abram Deborin, “Lukács und seine Kritik des Marxismus,” in Abram Deborin and Nikolai Bucharin, *Kontroversen über dialektischen und mechanistischen Materialismus* (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp: 1968), 192.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 214.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹⁰ Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Les aventures de la dialectique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 66. See the [Appendix](#) for further discussion of this concept.

¹¹ HCC, 51.

12 Ibid., xxxvi.

13 Ibid., xxiii.

14 For a balanced discussion of this commonplace charge, see Andrew Arato, “Lukács’s Theory of Reification,” *Telos*, No. 11 (1972), 42–3.

15 Adorno was a disappointed admirer. This may explain some uncharitable readings. See Detlev Clausen, *Theodor W. Adorno: One Last Genius*, trans. R. Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), 84.

16 See Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury, 1973), 190–1. For my critique of Adorno’s critique of Lukács, see Andrew Feenberg, “Reification and Its Critics,” in M. Thompson, ed., *Georg Lukács Reconsidered: Essays on Politics, Philosophy and Aesthetics* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 172–94.

17 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 190.

18 Ibid., 374.

19 HCC, 12.

20 Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 27; Cf. Andrew Feenberg, *Lukács, Marx, and the Sources of Critical Theory* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield 1981), 124–32. For my critique of Honneth’s critique of Lukács, see Andrew Feenberg, “Rethinking Reification: On Axel Honneth’s Reading of Lukács,” in T. Bewes and T. Hall, ed., *The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence: New Essays on the Social, Political and Aesthetic Theory of Georg Lukács* (New York: Continuum, 2011), 101–20.

21 HCC, 19 (translation modified).

22 Ibid., 123.

23 Tom Rockmore, “Lukács and Marx after Marxism,” in Thompson, *Georg Lukács Reconsidered*, 46–8.

24 Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, trans. B. Fowkes (London: New Left Books, 1971), 70. Jindřich Zelený carries the misunderstanding still further, writing that Lukács interprets Marx’s first thesis on Feuerbach to call for “a reduction of all reality to practical human activity.” See Jindřich Zelený, *Die Wissenschaftslogik bei Marx und Das Kapital* (Vienna: Europa Verlag, 1968), 302.

25 Steven Vogel finds this Fichtean interpretation superior to Lukács’s own hesitations on the question of nature. See his *Against Nature: The Concept of Nature in Critical Theory* (Albany, NY: SUNY, 1996), 31 and 180n.

26 HCC, 234 (translation modified). Cf. Georg Lukács, *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (Neuwied und Berlin: Luchterhand, 1968), 410.

27 Andrew Arato argues for a similar conclusion in “Lukács’s Theory of Reification,” 41–2. Lukács insists on this point in *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness*, 97.

28 Ibid., 97.

29 HCC, 131.

30 Ibid., 207.

31 See Lucio Colletti, *Il Marxismo e Hegel* (Bari, Italy: Laterza, 1969), 317–56. This chapter is titled, significantly, “Da Bergson a Lukács.”

32 HCC, 110.

33 Ibid., 10. Stedman Jones quotes part of the second sentence of this passage to prove Lukács’s hostility to natural scientific method *in general* (“The Marxism of the Early Lukács: An Evaluation,” 20). Such crudely selective use of quotations is evidently compatible with the “scientific” objectivity Jones boasts in his article!

34 Lucien Goldmann, *Sciences Humaines et Philosophie* (Paris: PUF, 1952), 17.

35 Vogel, *Against Nature*, 29.

36 For an example of this approach, see Giuseppe Bedeschi, *Alienazione e Feticismo nel Pensiero di Marx* (Bari, Italy: Laterza, 1968), 177–207.

- 37 Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (New York: International Publishers, 1963), 173.
- 38 This is so notwithstanding Habermas's important discussion of the efficacy of therapeutic self-reflection in Freud in *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. J. Shapiro, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), Chapter 10, especially 231ff.
- 39 HCC, 163.
- 40 Ibid., 199.
- 41 Ibid., 187.
- 42 Ibid., 21.
- 43 Ibid., 142.
- 44 Ibid., 207.
- 45 Ibid., 6.
- 46 Ibid., 135.
- 47 Ibid., 89, 97–8.
- 48 Paul Dumouchel, "Systèmes sociaux et cognition," in *Introduction aux sciences cognitives*, ed. D. Andler (Paris: Gallimard, 1991).
- 49 HCC, 193.
- 50 Michael Löwy discusses possible reasons for Lukács's failure to finish and publish this interesting text in "Revolutionary Dialectics against 'Tailism': Lukács's Answer to the Criticisms of *History and Class Consciousness*," in Thompson, *Georg Lukács Reconsidered*, 66.
- 51 Lukács, *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness*, 95. "Rudas would appear to understand objective as meaning the opposite of socially determined" (Ibid., 102).
- 52 Frederick Engels, "Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), 605.
- 53 Lukács, *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness*, 117. The original passage is found in Georg Lukács, *Chvostismus und Dialektik* (Budapest: Aron Verlag, 1996), 63.
- 54 Lukács, *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness*, 118. The original passage is found in Lukács, *Chvostismus und Dialektik*, 64.
- 55 Karl Marx, "The German Ideology," in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, trans. and ed. L. Easton and K. Guddat (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 418.
- 56 Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, trans. and ed. T. B. Bottomore (London: C. A. Watts, 1963), 163.
- 57 Ibid., 160.
- 58 Ibid., 164.
- 59 Lukács, *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness*, 131.
- 60 Ibid., 105.
- 61 Ibid., 131.
- 62 Herbert Marcuse, "Nature and Revolution," in *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 69.
- 63 Similarly, the fact that one sees an object from a contingent perspective does not generally refute propositions about what is so seen. Husserl explained this strikingly, commenting on the perspectival character of vision. "Thus we see that not only for us human beings, but also for God—as the ideal representative of absolute knowledge—whatever has the character of a spatial thing, is intuitable only through appearances, wherein it is given, and indeed must be given, as changing 'perspectively' in varied and yet determined ways, and thereby presented in changing 'orientations.'" Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology*, trans. W. R. B. Gibson (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 386.
- 64 HCC, 1.
- 65 Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (London: Athlone Press, 1981), 28–9.
- 66 HCC, 205.
- 67 Ibid., xlv–xlvii.

68 István Mészáros, *Marx's Theory of Alienation* (New York: Harper and Row, 1970), 249.

69 Philippe Descola calls this a “relative universalism.” For Descola’s conception, see his *L’écologie des autres: L’anthropologie et la question de la nature* (Versailles: Editions Quae, 2011). For a discussion of Descola’s theory, see Andrew Feenberg, “Reflections on *L’écologie des autres: L’anthropologie et la question de la nature*, by Philippe Descola,” available at www.journaldumauss.net. For texts challenging a Eurocentric concept of science, see Sandra Harding, ed., *The “Racial” Economy of Science: Toward a Democratic Future* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, IN: Indiana University Press, 1993).

70 With thanks to Steven Vogel whose comments on this chapter helped me to write this section.

71 This is not to deny that scientific facts can be re-modalized under specific circumstances. It is the specificity of the circumstances that is important. A general re-modalization on philosophical or sociological grounds would devalue scientific knowledge. Bruno Latour’s discussions of modality have led to such a relativistic conclusion, but he himself rejects it in ways too complicated to discuss here. See Bruno Latour, *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 296. For a critical discussion of Latour’s approach, see Hans Radder, *The World Observed / The World Conceived* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), Chapter 14.

72 I refer readers to my formulation of the critical theory of technology that attempts to fill in this lacuna in the theory. See Andrew Feenberg, *Transforming Technology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), [Chapter 7](#).

CHAPTER SEVEN

From Lukács to the Frankfurt School

THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

Among many other influences, the critical theorists of the Frankfurt School were inspired by the philosophy of praxis as they discovered it in the early work of Marx and Lukács. Marx's concept of nature and Lukács's theory of reification are fundamental to the thinking of Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse.¹ The distinction between traditional and critical theory flows directly from the revival of dialectics in the work of Lukács, Korsch, Bloch, and others writing in the early 1920s.

There is a deeper connection than simple influence between the Frankfurt School and the philosophy of praxis. We have seen that Marx and Lukács engage certain themes that hang together in a specific figure of thought. At its core is the metacritique of philosophy, the notion that the typical binary oppositions of the tradition such as the split between subject and object, fact and value, reason and life, constitute antinomies that depend ultimately on the structure of society and that can be overcome through social change. This turn away from philosophical speculation toward action implies an absolute historicism without which social change would not have ontological significance. "Absolute" in this context means all-embracing. Nature is thus incorporated into history by one or another conceptual means. All these themes reappear in the Frankfurt School, elaborated in original ways.

It is not necessary to assume the direct influence of *History and Class Consciousness*, although that can by no means be excluded. The Frankfurt School develops its characteristic positions in opposition to both Soviet "dialectical materialism" and Western academic philosophy. In pursuing this project, it simply takes for granted many of the themes explored by Lukács, Bloch, and Korsch, themes that are also found in texts of the early

Marx the significance of which becomes clear with the publication in 1932 of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*.

In the judgment of the Frankfurt School, Lukács's version of the philosophy of praxis fails in its main project, the *Aufhebung* of philosophy in an identical subject-object. This judgment is sometimes based on simple misinterpretation. This is especially clear in Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, which addresses an obvious straw man, as I argued in the previous chapter. Apart from interpretive failure, there are deeper reasons behind the rejection of Lukács's thought. Lukács shares the ambition of classical German philosophy to construct a universal rationalism, although he intends to reach that goal through social theory rather than through philosophical speculation. This ambition appears excessive and dangerous to the philosophers of the Frankfurt School.

The very idea of a universal rationalism seems obviously to overreach the possibilities of finite human understanding. And yet there are risks in accepting the obvious in this case, for the irrational does not simply stay in its cognitive place as the unknown X. It invariably intrudes on practical life under the guise of religion, tradition, racist or nationalist prejudice, even a *Führer*. The Enlightenment attempted to conjure away such threats with a rationalism that degenerates, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, into a totalitarian instrumentalism entwined with other irrational forces it cannot control. Lukács's theory of reification is a first critique of the instrumentalist degeneration Horkheimer and Adorno denounce. His solution is a non-instrumental practice that transforms social meanings from within, a practical version of immanent critique. This practice is supposed to overcome the irrationality of existence, "the indifference of form and content." But once it fails, the problem of rationalism reappears in all its tragic glory.

The Frankfurt philosophers reject rationalism in the mutilated form in which it has come down to them. They see in Lukács's theory a continuation of the naïve productivist attitude toward nature characteristic of both capitalist society and traditional Marxism. They put the domination of nature on the Marxist agenda for the first time, radicalizing the Marxist critique of science and technology that begins in Lukács but that he does not carry through to its logical conclusion.

Lukács addresses the problem of *social* domination. The concrete content that breaks out of the conceptual straitjacket of reification is the

laboring human being, not nature. For the Frankfurt School this is no minor omission. They argue that the central issue of the twentieth century is the domination of nature. This realization requires a certain humility. As a natural being, the conqueror of nature is himself among the conquered. Marx promises a completely humanized nature but that project culminates in the atomic bomb, not utopia. Lukács promises a “totality” in which objectivity is transparent to the social subject, but the outcome is totalitarianism. Critical Theory struggles against these utopian promises.²

The rejection of Lukács’s version of the philosophy of practice is also motivated by the breakdown of the unity of theory and practice, that is, the idealized relation of Marxism to the proletariat.³ Theory and practice can only be united where the crisis tendencies identified by Marxism open a breach in the reified forms, and where the proletariat enters that breach. Lukács believes in this prospect in the early 1920s. He notes that the proletariat is “free” to reject its own revolutionary potential, but he shares the optimism of the post–World War I revolutionary upsurge. Furthermore, he is confident that the economic laws of capitalism will continually reproduce revolutionary conditions even if this upsurge fails. The Frankfurt School forms later, at a time when the unity of theory and practice is broken. The revolution is an abstract possibility rather than a real force—so the Frankfurt School philosophers concluded, at first tentatively and then, during and after World War II, more and more unreservedly. With the breakdown of revolutionary expectations, Lukács’s rationalism appears as an illusion entertained in an exceptional historical moment.

If Lukács failed to anticipate the breakdown of the unity of theory and practice, this is due not only to historical circumstances but to the rather small place occupied by technology and social psychology in his argument. For obvious reasons he lacks a media theory. He does note the reifying consequences of mechanization briefly and mentions the reification of the subjectivity of journalists and other middle-class employees. While conceding that immediate experience is reified for all classes in capitalist society, he considers workers partially exempt due to the mechanical nature of their labor. This is more or less the sum total of his dealings with the factors the Frankfurt School holds responsible for the failure of the revolution.

Lukács argues that the imposition of a narrow reified rationality is met by resistance from below. This dialectic institutes another, higher form of

rationality. The Frankfurt School by contrast focuses on the consequences of the failure of resistance and the regressive forms of irrationality associated with it. The unifying theme of its analysis is the growing power of technology to control the social and natural worlds in an increasingly exploitative pattern signified by the concept of “domination.” Freudian ideas about repression and character structure, new approaches to authoritarianism and a radical critique of the psychic impact of regimentation at work, abundance of consumer goods, media propaganda, and so on, explain the effectiveness of the new system.

By the time he finally realizes that the revolution is not about to overtake the advanced countries of Europe but will remain confined to Russia for a long time to come, Lukács reasons about politics in Leninist terms. He can no longer draw on the resources of his earlier work to deal with the new problems emerging in advanced societies. As a result, he does not elaborate an independent theory of the failure of the revolution in the West.

Of course, the theory of reification can be deployed for this purpose, and that is precisely what the Frankfurt School does. It is in recognition of this that Adorno calls Lukács’s early book “important” despite his harsh critique, and elsewhere praises him as “the first dialectical materialist to apply the category of reification systematically to philosophy.”⁴ In addressing the role of reification in the failure of the revolution the Frankfurt School makes a definite advance.

The loss of revolutionary prospects has philosophical as well as political implications. According to Lukács’s metacritique, the tension between the reified form of the society and its living human content is not only social but also appears in classical German philosophy as a fundamental and unsurpassable irrationality, signified by the concept of the thing-in-itself. Lukács’s resolution of this tension depends on the unity of theory and practice. To the extent that the Frankfurt School accepts Lukács’s metacritique, its rejection of his solution reverberates through every level of its approach, from political theory to ontology.

The decisive turning point for the Frankfurt School comes with Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In that book they concede the collapse of socialist hopes. The total reification of consciousness, which Lukács had attributed to the bourgeoisie and the middle strata, now extends to the working class as well. Instrumental reason

erodes everyday experience and replaces a rich and complex relation to reality with simple manipulation. No meaningful world is possible anymore. The principle of life that in Lukács undermined the reified forms has been cancelled in a mechanistic universe.

The redemptive promise of rationality no longer lies in the socialist future but is reconstructed around the role of reflection in recognizing the limits of human technical powers over both inner and outer nature. “Nature” now stands in for the life process Lukács identified with the proletariat. However, this nature is not a positive force but names what is repressed by technological domination. It is the object of a reflective retrieval aimed at bounding technology and the competitive forces that deploy it in order to allow other dimensions of existence to flourish. Respect for these other dimensions is tied up with compassion, solidarity, and happiness.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Adorno’s later writings, this critique of instrumentalism does not quite culminate in a positive concept of rationality capable of replacing the reified one. Negative dialectics is not such a concept. It does not resolve the antinomies but rather identifies them as such and suspends all premature resolutions. It is the logic of immanent critique and not a constructive alternative.⁵ For the alternative implied by the critique to emerge, a social change would be required that Adorno neither describes nor predicts. But Adorno hints tantalizingly at more than this. A society reconciled with nature would be a utopia, albeit an unusual one. This utopia is not an alternative rational plan of existence but can only be indicated negatively, as *not* this or that contemporary horror. As Adorno writes, “the true thing determines itself via the false thing.”⁶

Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man* continues this argument while attempting to construct a positive notion of dialectical rationality. The modern differentiation of imagination from instrumental rationality denies the potentialities of people and things. Those potentialities can be grasped imaginatively and incorporated into a new concept of reason. Marcuse draws on Marx’s *Manuscripts* for the idea of lived nature, a Marxist version of the phenomenological *Lebenswelt*, which he contrasts with the stripped-down quantified nature of science and technology. Following the early Marx, Marcuse ontologizes the human relation to this lived nature. Reality is not the indifferent object of an abstract cognitive subject, but confronts the human subject as a subject in its own right.

The distance between this version of the Frankfurt School approach and the early Marx and Lukács is not so great. In place of Adorno's negative utopia, Marcuse attempts to specify the broad outlines of a future alternative. The idea of potentiality is developed in Hegelian terms as the determinate negation of the capitalist system. It remains fairly abstract at first but acquires content through the struggles of the New Left. Nature now appears not just negatively as the repressed, but concretely as the natural environment and in expressions of the human needs for peace, beauty, meaning, and love. At this point Marcuse's theory shows itself to be an original version of the philosophy of praxis. Through a long detour, the Frankfurt School returns to its sources.

In this chapter and the next I will trace these developments, weaving back and forth between the negative dialectics of Adorno and Marcuse's "two-dimensional" ontology. This chapter will begin by considering some implications of the concepts of nature and rationality in Horkheimer and Adorno and conclude with considerations on the political impasse they reach. [Chapter 8](#) then shows how phenomenological themes in Marcuse's theory of experience led him to a far more positive evaluation of utopian prospects. In conclusion I will show how the idea of the liberation of nature figures in the philosophy of praxis of the Frankfurt School. Along the way I will develop several themes from my own critical theory of technology that address deficiencies in the original Frankfurt School approach.

FORMS OF RATIONALITY

The path from Marx's theories of commodity fetishism and alienation through Lukács's theory of reification to the Frankfurt School's critique of domination is a winding one but it must be followed to understand the fate of the philosophy of praxis. Marx's theories of commodity fetishism and alienation depend on each other in important ways. They intersect in the concept of wage labor, the transformation of work into a market good. This transformation awaits the generalization of commodity exchange that is sharply restricted in precapitalist societies to exclude most land and labor. The wage system sets in motion the process leading to the deskilling and mechanization of labor. Through that process capitalism develops a technology uniquely suited to its requirements. That technology reduces the worker to an appendage of the machine.

I have shown earlier that Lukács's metacritique of reified rationality invokes both components of Marx's theory. He argues that the commodity form is the model of all forms of subjectivity and objectivity in capitalist society, and also claims that the relation of the worker to the machine realizes that form in the technical subject-object relation. Accordingly, reified rationality has two aspects: the quantitative or formal laws under which things are grasped, and the reduction of the subject of action to a manipulator of things in accordance with those laws. Each aspect derives from one or the other component of Marx's theory, abstraction from commodity fetishism and technical subjectivity from alienation. Lukács's metacritique of reified rationality grounds a dialectical alternative.

Under the influence of Hegel, Marx, and Lukács, the philosophers of the Frankfurt School develop a similar conception of dialectics. However, their emphasis is different. Marx and Lukács were primarily interested in the domination of human beings by the capitalist system. But neither realized that insofar as the dominated human being is reduced to a natural object, all of nature is implicated in the social critique. This is the chiasmus through which the Frankfurt School transforms Marxism into a critique of the domination of nature. Its reformulation of Marxism thus goes beyond the critique of capitalism to take in the very concept of progress, understood as the "conquest of nature."

There are some subtle and some not-so-subtle differences in the formulations of this theme in the Frankfurt School. This is not an obstacle to broad-brush treatments, but it makes for difficulties in characterizing its position with precision. To begin, here is a sketch of some of the commonalities based primarily on Horkheimer's early book, *Eclipse of Reason*.⁷

Horkheimer's metacritique of rationality resembles Weber's distinction between formal and substantive rationality. Reason is not "pure" but is always socially embedded in one of two ways. Substantive rationality, which Horkheimer calls "objective reason," incorporates a goal in its structure. It is not merely a means but also includes an "objectively" valid end. At the origin, that end is simple self-preservation. Later, religion and culture supply premodern societies with a variety of such ends, but their claims are no longer convincing. In modern society rational means are value-free. All that remains to guide their application is the struggle for existence, which eliminates all restraint on competition and on the

exploitation of nature. And since human beings are natural beings, they, too, fall victim to their own technology. Horkheimer introduces the concept of “subjective reason” to describe the instrumental rationality of a system of pure means, without a substantive end beyond the increase in its own power and range.

Modernity is characterized by the complete triumph of subjective rationality and the consequent “catastrophe of Enlightenment,” the disappointed hope in reason. The conflicts of human beings and societies pursuing their individual and national self-preservation with the tools of modern technology now threaten their survival as much as raw nature ever did. Furthermore, technical progress goes along with increasing psychological repression. Control of inner nature is the condition of effective control of outer nature. Under the conditions of class society both forms of control overshoot their mark, producing individual and social pathologies.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno protest the untrammelled pursuit of technical power, which they regard as the irrational core of rationalism.

In class history, the enmity of the self to sacrifice implied a sacrifice of the self, inasmuch as it was paid for by a denial of nature in man for the sake of domination over non-human nature and over other men. This very denial, the nucleus of all civilizing rationality, is the germ cell of a proliferating mythic irrationality: with the denial of nature in man not merely the *telos* of outward control of nature but the *telos* of man’s own life is distorted and befogged. As soon as man discards his awareness that he himself is nature, all the aims for which he keeps himself alive—social progress, the intensification of all his material and spiritual powers, even consciousness itself—are nullified, and the enthronement of the means as an end, which under late capitalism is tantamount to open insanity, is already perceptible in the prehistory of subjectivity.⁸

Horkheimer argues that only a generalization of the will to self-preservation can save humanity from self-destruction. This requires a reflective recovery of the original meaning and purpose of rationality. Reason is not truly value-free but has always included a reference to self-preservation that it can now achieve only as a *human* goal. Control of the natural world must be guided by respect for human nature and greater reliance on the intrinsically life-affirming aspects of natural growth.

Dialectic of Enlightenment develops this argument. The solution the authors propose is obscurely hinted at in scattered passages throughout the book. In one such passage, they remark: “By virtue of this mindfulness [*Eingedenken*] of nature in the subject, in whose fulfillment the

acknowledged truth of all culture lies hidden, enlightenment is universally opposed to domination.”⁹ And they go on to suggest that domination can only be dissolved when it is recognized as “unreconciled nature.”¹⁰ This unreconciled nature cannot be conquered and absorbed but must be accepted through a process of reflection. It is such reflective acceptance that really challenges power. “Dominant practice and its inescapable alternatives are not threatened by nature, which tends rather to coincide with them, but by the fact that nature is remembered [*erinnert*]”¹¹

PARTICIPATION IN NATURE

These ideas lie in the background of Adorno’s later work. There his critique of society unfolds with a slightly different emphasis than Horkheimer’s and Marcuse’s. The difference corresponds to the emphasis placed on each of the two sources of the notion of reification in Marx. Adorno draws primarily on the theory of commodity fetishism. What most impresses him is the notion that abstract quantity replaces quality as immediate appearance throughout society. He generalizes this notion as Lukács had proposed as the universal “model” of all forms of objectivity and subjectivity. But unlike Lukács, Adorno presents this thesis programmatically as a critique of rational conceptualization. His term for his approach is “non-identity” of concept and object. This suggests an irrationalist hostility to concepts, but Adorno is not an irrationalist.¹²

A Marxist account of knowledge must begin with the fact that experience is a socially mediated relation to real objects. Adorno’s emphasis on mediation responds to the suspicion that experience has been reified by capitalism. This is one way of interpreting commodity fetishism: we no longer relate immediately to the reality—the use value—of the object but to an abstraction projected in the market. What Adorno calls “identifying thought” imagines that it has understood what it names in classifying it. In this respect it resembles commodity fetishism that reduces objects to a narrow and abstract “meaning,” i.e., price. Classification is unable to penetrate the veil of reification since it ignores the history and connections of the things classified. Overcoming immediacy is a necessary theoretical task beyond the scope of mere classification.

Lukács explains reification in terms of the form of objectivity through which he distinguishes between the rational form and lived content of

experience. Although he does not employ Lukács's terminology, Adorno's concept of identifying thought and its material consequences in the domination of human beings and nature also describes the formal structure of reification in tension with its content. Recovering reality therefore requires recognition of that content, the "priority of the object," relative to identifying thought.

The "non-identity" of concept and object is the difference between that aspect of the particular that can be completely subsumed under a universal and other aspects that escape simple subsumption. True understanding is not based on classifying what immediately appears but respects the intrinsic complexity of its objects. That requires many different conceptual probes that mediate the multiple aspects of the phenomena. Adorno writes, "By gathering around the object of cognition, the concepts potentially determine the object's interior. They attain, in thinking, what was necessarily excised from thinking."¹³

Adorno calls this procedure the construction of a "constellation." This aspect of Adorno's theory is roughly similar to the Hegelian concept of the concrete, as discussed in [Chapter 4](#). Objects are not isolated and self-contained; they are functional components in the social totality. Their truth is revealed in assemblages of concepts that articulate their various connections with other objects. These assemblages reveal the object's contingency, lack of unity, contradictory nature. They expose its potentialities as well as its history and thereby achieve a "rational identity" that adequately represents the object as a mediated whole. The conceptual mediations articulate real mediations constitutive of the object and driving its development. In this sense the constellation transcends the givenness of the thing. However, Adorno also asserts the transcendence of the thing, as material, with respect to its concept.

What does this puzzling insistence on the material reality of the object really mean? Adorno surely does not intend to remind us of the simple fact that things are not thoughts. This is a trivial point Dr. Johnson settled long ago.¹⁴ But he does insist that thoughts are not things in the sense that there is always more to reality than is reflected in our comprehension of it; every universal concept, indeed even every constellation of such concepts, is incomplete.

This ultimate non-identity is not trivial since it signals the methodological requirements of openness and revisability of knowledge.

However, Adorno goes further than this. It is not just that things are infinitely complex, but that the relatively indeterminate character of reality is opened to us through our bodily contact with it. This is the properly materialist dimension of non-identity.

Subjects are not abstract *cogitos* but embodied persons to whom things are present physically and not just conceptually. Adorno thus finds himself in agreement with those passages in Marx's *Manuscripts* that emphasize the sensuous, material reality of both subject and object in opposition to Hegelian idealism. As Marx says, we are real, natural entities and only as such can we have real entities as our objects. Experience is most fundamentally an encounter, not a consciousness.

Adorno conceives materiality as a preconceptual fact. While this sounds a bit like phenomenology, Adorno rejects both Husserl's concept of consciousness and Heidegger's ontologized version of it as "being-in-the-world." He argues that phenomenology is a positivism of the immediate facts of consciousness. His concept of experience includes aspects slighted in one way or another by phenomenology, such as the distortion of immediacy by commodity fetishism, and the potentialities of things revealed in their constellations. Adorno's critique is justified to the extent that phenomenology has no account of these aspects of experience.

Having rejected phenomenology, Adorno does not propose some sort of causal account of perception *à la* Locke. The somatic basis of perception is not reducible to naturalistic physiology. In all such accounts a meaningless object, which Adorno charges is actually an abstract posit of thought, somehow produces an effect of meaning in the subject. Rather, one must start from the actual experience that is a complex of so-called secondary qualities, meanings, and values along with direct physical interaction with the world. The experiential encounter with the concrete is not reducible to knowledge of objective facts, but is qualitative and value-laden. Adorno claims that all this is "real," not a subjective illusion or mental projection. The contribution of the subject to experience is not a source of error but an essential constituent. Through it alone the objects of experience take on meaning. In interpreting the meaning of the object in these terms, the constellation tells us about reality and not about ourselves.

But this interpretation of non-identity pushes the problem back a step; for now, to make sense of his claim that we are material things interacting with other material things, we must understand what Adorno means by a

“material thing.” Unfortunately, this aspect of his theory is underdeveloped. Scholars have suggested a variety of interpretations of his implicit ontology. For example, Brian O’Connor argues that despite significant differences, Adorno’s theory has much in common with phenomenology, while J. M. Bernstein relates it to the concept of material inference.¹⁵ But whatever their interpretation, the commentators reaffirm the basic structure of philosophy of praxis: a deeper unity of subject and object underlies the historically evolved split due to the reifying dynamics of capitalism and exemplified by the philosophical tradition. A thinking that restores those suppressed dimensions can also claim to be rational in a different sense from instrumentalism. Instrumental rationality arises through abstraction and reduction of this richer original experience. Its objects come to it with a history and with connections to other objects that it strips away to arrive at a quantitative, manipulable remainder. Adorno’s “anthropomorphic” concept of experience prescind from the effective disenchantment of the world by modern scientific-technical thinking.¹⁶

However, here the story gets complicated. Although the truth of sensation is the mutual mediation and interdependence of subject and object as revealed in the unreduced experience, this truth is ever less accessible in modern society. The prevailing instrumentalism is not merely theoretical but affects experience itself. The diminished experience available in this society constitutes a particularly pernicious real abstraction, one that endangers rationality itself by reducing it to its purely instrumental aspect. From this reduction spring the various antinomies of philosophy, the split between subject and object, value and fact, and so on. The unity (if not identity) of subject and object in experience is blocked by a social phenomenon, the disenchantment process, and can thus only be recovered through social change. The pattern established in this analysis of experience is the familiar one of philosophy of praxis: desublimation of the philosophical categories, transposition of their relations in idealist philosophy to their desublimated surrogates, and resolution of the antinomies in history.

Adorno’s critique of the overextension of instrumental rationality appears similar to Habermas’s colonization thesis. Like the colonization thesis, this argument depends on a notion of appropriate balance between different world relations, lost in the course of capitalist development. But Adorno anticipates Habermas’s formulation and rejects it in advance. In

“On Subject and Object” he criticizes as “shameful” the concept of communication as “imparting information between subjects ... because it betrays what is best—the potential for agreement between human beings and things.” This is a peculiar phrase: in what sense can human beings and things “agree”? Adorno goes on to explain that “Peace is the state of differentiation without domination, with the differentiated participating in each other.”¹⁷

These passages occur in a speculative ellipsis Adorno “allows” himself exceptionally. He quickly moves on to other subjects without explaining properly what he means. When scattered passages throughout his work are compared, certain ideas come through that help to interpret his intent. Nature and history are not independent of each other, but must be understood in their inseparable connection. In modern societies a historically sedimented “second nature” of dead conventions and institutions occupies the place of mythic fate that unmastered nature once signified for primitive peoples. Natural beauty, especially where human artifacts have been harmoniously integrated into it, prefigures a redemptive future in which the “wounds” of nature will heal and life will flourish in peace, i.e., mutual participation of “differentiated” human and natural being. Nature, in one of Adorno’s interpretations, thus holds a utopian promise.¹⁸

That promise is the deepest connection between the Frankfurt School and the philosophy of praxis. What is this harmonious relation to nature if not the transcendence of the antinomy of subject and object in which that philosophy culminates? The connection to the early Marx is obvious. It is true that at points the *Manuscripts* affirm the unlimited transformative power of labor, yet there are other passages in Marx’s text that emphasize less the *humanization* of nature *by* man than the *participation* of man *in* nature.¹⁹

The notion of participatory identity makes room for the sheer naturalness of nature in a way the theory of the humanization of nature through labor does not. In claiming that human needs are correlated with their objects ontologically, Marx asserts an ultimate harmony joining the human being as a natural being with the nature in which its human nature is fulfilled. Nature is not merely the object of the subject because the subject is itself a natural object. The consubstantiality of subject and object supersedes the contingent relation between them assumed by modern

philosophy since Descartes. The existing scientific-technical rationality, based on the most extreme separation of subject and object, is condemned as an alienated expression of rationality. Human beings participate in the world in other ways that are less reductive and more firmly based in concrete experience.

But for Adorno, the participation of the differentiated is not identity. He explains that “it would be impossible to conceive that state as either undifferentiated unity of subject and object or their hostile antithesis; rather, it would be communication of what is differentiated.”²⁰ But Adorno holds back at the decisive moment. He famously argued that the world is properly understood in the light of redemption but that ultimate prospect serves only to devalue the given. Redemption does not actually enter history as he conceives it.

THE RATIONAL CRITIQUE OF RATIONALITY

The Frankfurt School argues that rationality is entangled in a paradox: its progress leads not to freedom but to domination. Science, democracy, and prosperity were all made possible by rational critique of the myths and ideologies that supported the *ancien régime*. This is what Habermas calls the “Enlightenment project.” It promises that domination will recede as rationality advances. The failure of this happy prospect has led to two different critiques of the Enlightenment. On the one hand, romantic critique calls for a retreat from rationality and all its works. On the other hand the Frankfurt School proposes a “rational critique of reason.” These two styles of critique imply different politics and it is therefore important to distinguish them clearly.

The romantic critique of reason begins in the late eighteenth century, accompanied by an idealization of the past. In literature the critique opposes passion to bourgeois calculation and social conformism. The familiar image of life versus mechanism captures the essence of the romantic critique. Modernity is often rejected in the name of traditional values.

This critique appears to be verified by the twentieth-century catastrophes of reason. Wars, concentration camps, nuclear weapons, and now environmental crisis threaten the Enlightenment project not from without but from within. But it is difficult to believe that the full content and significance of rationality is exhausted by its role in these disasters. The

romantic critique is right to challenge a rationalism that blindly submits everything to markets and technology, but it goes too far when it rejects reason as such. Surely reason has self-critical and self-corrective potentials. This is the argument of the Frankfurt School's critique of rationality. The Frankfurt School hopes to construct a coherent basis for a critical theory of modernity out of the flawed inheritance of the Enlightenment.

The Frankfurt School's method was anticipated by Marx's economic critique of capitalism. Capitalism claims to be a rational economic system. The market appears rational but, strangely, trading goods for money leads to inequality. This inequality escapes Enlightenment critique because it is not justified by narrative myths, as was feudalism, but by the exchange of equivalents—wages for labor.

The French anarchist Proudhon famously claimed that “property is theft.” He treated the market as a fraud rather than as a coherent system. This is the economic equivalent of romantic critique in literature.²¹ Marx was a more rigorous thinker. He realized that a system as complex and successful as capitalism could not be based on mere fraud. The origin of inequality would have to be found in the very rationality of the market. The equal exchange of wages for labor disguises the role of the length of the working day in determining the rate of exploitation. The deeper problem is not the unfairness of this system, but the larger consequences of capitalist management of the economy, such as the deskilling of work and economic crises. With this argument Marx showed that rational systems can be oppressive and he extended this type of critique to technology as well, although that aspect of his thought lay dormant until Lukács and the Frankfurt School revived it.

The methodological significance of Marx's analysis lies in combining the apparently contrary notions of rationality and bias. This is precisely what the Frankfurt School does much later in its critique of the technological consequences of Enlightenment. The point of that critique is not to blame technology for social ills, as does romantic critique, nor to appeal to technological rationality as an antidote to the inefficiency of capitalism, as does traditional Marxism, but to show how technology has been adapted *in its very structure* to an oppressive system.

In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* this approach is expressed in a passage in which the authors describe the ambivalence of the machine as both representative of humanity as a whole and an instrument of domination.

The thing-like quality of the means, which makes the means universally available, its “objective validity” for everyone, itself implies a criticism of the domination from which thought has arisen as its means. On the way from mythology to logistics, thought has lost the element of reflection on itself, and machinery mutilates people today, even if it also feeds them. In the form of machines, however, alienated reason is moving toward a society which reconciles thought, in its solidification as an apparatus both material and intellectual, with a liberating living element, and relates it to society itself as its true subject ... Today, with the transformation of the world into industry, the perspective of the universal, the social realization of thought, is so fully open to view that thought is repudiated by the rulers themselves as mere ideology.²²

The alienated reason embodied in machines is an objective reality and as such refers to a universal subject and not simply to its owners. The very objectivity of the machine implies that it should be controlled by all in the interests of all. This would be the “universal, the social realization of thought,” which is obstructed by the existing capitalist society. The availability of the apparatus for this purpose is now so obvious to the simplest reflection that the “rulers” must reject thought itself to maintain their power. The critical standard in terms of which rational achievements are measured is not extrinsic, as in romantic critique, but is contained in the implicit *telos* of rationality itself. Rationality supplies its own standard of self-critique.

In sum, the universal character of rational achievements promises universal benefits, but the promise is betrayed as the technical realization of rationality is biased toward domination. Adorno makes a similar argument with respect to the market: equal exchange promises a fairness belied by the actual realization of the market under capitalism.²³

This is the paradox of rationality: economic and technological progress have gone hand in hand with the progress of domination. To understand the paradox without romantic subtexts we need a concept of *social* bias appropriate for the analysis of *rational* systems. The Frankfurt School intended just such an analysis but developed only the rudiments of a method for performing it. This is why its style of critique is often confounded with romantic anti-modernism.

The difficulty lies in the departure from the usual concept of bias that is closely associated with prejudice. But bias in a less familiar sense appears in other spheres as well. For example, because right-handedness is prevalent, many everyday objects are adapted to right-handed use. This, too, could be called a bias but it does not involve prejudice. Rather it is built into the design of the objects themselves. In this it resembles the kind of bias exhibited by technology and other rational systems under capitalism.

The issue can be clarified by distinguishing what I call “substantive” bias from “formal” bias. Enlightenment critique addresses the more familiar substantive bias. Eighteenth-century philosophers were confronted with institutions that claimed legitimacy on the basis of stories about the past and religion. The Enlightenment judged according to facts and arguments and this was fatal to the *ancien régime*. Later, a similar critique attacked race and gender bias again in the name of rational ethical principles and scientific knowledge of human nature. I call the bias criticized in such cases “substantive” because it is based on pseudo-facts and emotions, specific contents that motivate discrimination.

But, as the Frankfurt School argues, technology and markets also discriminate in modern rational institutions. Prejudice is not involved. A biased technology is still rational in the sense that it links cause and effect efficiently. It appears “value-neutral,” since it is not an expression of belief and emotion. Indeed, it is often innocent, as in the case of right-handed tools. Nevertheless, some cases are far from innocent. These are cases involving the asymmetrical distribution of power through technical or economic arrangements. For example, when the division of labor is technologically structured in such a manner as to doom subordinates to mechanical and repetitive tasks with no role in managing the larger framework of their work, their subordination is technologically embedded. Inequality is enforced by the very rationality of the machine. This sort of bias is properly called “formal” because it does not violate formal norms such as control and efficiency under which technology is developed and employed.

Formal bias can arise from the relation of technologies to their context and it can also enter into the design of devices. Thus Adorno writes:

It is not technology which is calamitous, but its entanglement with societal conditions in which it is fettered ... Considerations of the interests of profit and dominance have channeled technical development: by now it coincides fatally with the needs of control. Not by accident has the invention of means of destruction become the prototype of the new quality of technology. By contrast, those of its potentials which diverge from dominance, centralism and violence against nature, and which might well allow much of the damage done literally and figuratively by technology to be healed, have withered.²⁴

As technologies develop, their social background is forgotten, covered over by a kind of unconsciousness that makes it seem as though the chosen path of progress was inevitable and necessary all along. This is what gives

rise to the illusion of pure rationality. That illusion obscures the imagination of future alternatives by granting existing technology and rationalized social arrangements an appearance of necessity they cannot legitimately claim. Critical theory demystifies this appearance to open up the future. It is neither utopian nor dystopian but situates rationality within the political where its consequences are a challenge to human responsibility.

But what if the masses fail to accept the responsibility the theory thrusts upon them? Critical theory establishes the possibility in principle, indeed the urgent necessity, of a social transformation it regards as extremely unlikely.

THEORY AND PRACTICE²⁵

The Frankfurt School recapitulates many of the themes of philosophy of praxis. Marx's metacritique reconstructed the concept of need in the forms of rationality, overcoming their antinomial opposition in traditional philosophy. The Frankfurt School's metacritique of value-free technological rationality achieves a similar result: reason is once again tied essentially to need, the need for self-preservation. Lukács's theory of reification is a direct and acknowledged influence. The Lukácsian dialectic of form and content, and its consequences in the antinomies of philosophy, has its parallel in the Frankfurt School's critique of the cultural effects of commodity fetishism. And like Marx and Lukács, the Frankfurt School argues that capitalism contains the potentiality for a socialist society that would transcend alienation and reification.

But there is a characteristic difference in emphasis that distinguishes Adorno's philosophy especially from philosophy of praxis. In Marx and Lukács, potentialities are manifest in social struggle and realized through the immanent transformative effects of proletarian consciousness and action. In the absence of such historical manifestations of real potentiality, Adorno explains it as an objective striving in things themselves toward their own perfected forms. The "damaged life" of modern capitalist society, not only in persons but also in nature, aspires more or less unconsciously to a full and flourishing life possible only under socialism.²⁶

Once it no longer appears in the struggles of the dominated, this aspiration risks tipping over into outright re-enchantment of the disenchanted world of modernity. To avoid this facile outcome, Adorno

argues that potentialities are revealed negatively in the structure of damaged life through immanent critique and art. Potentialities are no longer manifested in the experience of a revolutionary class, but depend now on the critical consciousness of the intellectual or artist. Adorno of course wishes that critical consciousness were more widely shared but he does not expect this to happen any time soon and certainly does not attribute it to an active historical subject.

The conditions of Lukács's "principle of practice" are no longer fulfilled. The realization of philosophy is no longer a historical task. In a late lecture, Adorno says, "What is at stake is that, given that philosophy is faced with the challenge of transcending itself, if I can put it in this somewhat portentous way, this task should not simply be reflected on, but should really be carried out rigorously through the medium of thought."²⁷ Note: *thought*, not practice as in Marx and Lukács.

Does this represent a regression to the sort of moralizing critique Hegel and Marx overcame with the historical concept of potentiality? Brecht ridiculed the last critics in his *Tui Roman* and Lukács admonished Adorno for abandoning history for the "Grand Hotel Abyss."²⁸ The Frankfurt School philosophers would deny that charge. Their critical standpoint is historically justified by the quasi-dystopia of rational domination that emerges from the failure of the revolution. But this conclusion threatens the structure of an argument developed from the premises of the philosophy of praxis.

Before their final renunciation of the revolution, Horkheimer and Adorno searched hopelessly for a solution. In 1956 they engaged in a dialogue on the theme of "a new manifesto."²⁹ This dialogue is easily dismissed as an aberration among their works, but it is symptomatic of a fundamental problem. The dialogue presupposes the logic of Lukács's interpretation of the theory–practice relation. Here one can see how Horkheimer and Adorno hang in suspense on the results of the philosophy of praxis in which they no longer quite believe. Their dialogue reveals the consequences of the breakdown of the third moment of the philosophy of praxis, the historical resolution of the antinomies. That breakdown blocks the production of the manifesto and determines the peculiar tone of the dialogue.

The pretension to update the *Communist Manifesto*, written by Marx and Engels in 1847, is astonishing, particularly given the silliness of much

of the 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 worker's 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 communist alternatives that nevertheless symbolically represent 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 mocks his friend: "Teddie wants to rescue a pair of concepts: theory and practice. These concepts are themselves obsolete."³⁰ Instead, he 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."³¹ 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.

In this situation Horkheimer asks, "In whose interest do we write?"³² "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?"³³ 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 programs when they are rubbish."³⁴ 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."³⁵

My description of Horkheimer and Adorno's dialogue may seem unfair. Do they deserve mockery? "Yes and no," to quote Horkheimer. In one sense

their dialogue is already self-mocking. 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 lighthearted tone reveals the contradiction between the existential situation of the speakers and their project.

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 Hegelian-Marxist historicism and substitute a transcendental 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.”³⁶ But how can critique negate the given society when 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 the Frankfurt School end up in such a bind? The answer to this question leads back to Marx and Lukács. *History and Class Consciousness* contains the most influential reflection on the relation of theory and practice in the Marxist tradition. Lukács renewed the Hegelian-Marxist historicist critique of abstract ideals that underlies the dilemma at the heart of the dialogue. This argument was known to Horkheimer and Adorno and its impact on their reflections in the *Manifesto* discussion is obvious.

As we saw in [Chapter 2](#), Lukács introduces the problem of theory and practice through a critique of an early text in which Marx demands that theory “seize the masses.” Instead, philosophy must proceed from the living contradiction of ideal and real. The 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. “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.”³⁷ Lukács elaborates these

Marxian ideas in a critique of Kantian ethical idealism echoed in Horkheimer's statement that "reality should be measured against criteria whose capacity for fulfillment can be demonstrated in a number of already existing, concrete developments in historical reality."³⁸ As Marx writes, "It is not enough that thought should seek to realize itself; reality must also strive toward thought."³⁹ Theory must be tied to practice, to real historical forces.

But, Adorno argues, Marx did not live in a world in which utopia is blocked by the very working class he had charged with realizing it. Now that the revolution has failed, there appears to be no way out of the trap set by the tension between norm and history. Under these conditions, the speculative temptation beckons, but the pressure to satisfy the Hegelian-Marxist historicist criterion blocks the further progress of thought. It is impossible to return to what Marx once called the "roasted pigeons of absolute science," that is, to some sort of utopian or transcendental thinking.

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, that "Theory is theory in the authentic sense only where it serves practice. Theory that wishes to be sufficient unto itself is bad theory."⁴⁰ He 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.⁴¹ This yields what he calls "a curious waiting process," which Adorno defines as, "in the best case ... theory as a message in a bottle."⁴²

Marx and Lukács establish the methodological horizon of Marxist politics for the Frankfurt School. Horkheimer and Adorno discuss their new manifesto under that horizon. They accept the critique of pure theory and ethical idealism; 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 Horkheimer 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?"⁴³

THE POSSIBILITY OF AN ALTERNATIVE

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 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."⁴⁴ 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."⁴⁵ But again Horkheimer rejects the hope of a less repressive future and even ridicules Marcuse, claiming that he expects a Russian Bonaparte to save the day. Finally, there is a passage in which Adorno seems to be seeking an appropriate style for the manifesto. He says, "You have to find the point that wounds. Offending against sexual taboos." And Horkheimer immediately calls him to order: "Marcuse, take care."⁴⁶

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 history with the New Left. Where Horkheimer and Adorno ultimately rejected the New Left, Marcuse took the Hegelian–Marxian–Lukácsian plunge back into history. He was well aware that the New Left was no equivalent of Marx's proletariat, but he tried to find in it a hint of those "objective oppositional forces" of which Adorno spoke in 1956. Marcuse's important innovation was to recognize the prefigurative force of the New Left without identifying it as a new agent of revolution. In this way theory might be related once again to practice without concession to the existing society, although also with no certainty of success.

This formulation still reflects the duality of theory and practice that Lukács resolved in the revolution. But no such resolution is possible for the Frankfurt School. Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse all agree that philosophy and art conserve the transcending content of experience. This content also comes to the surface periodically in social struggles that attempt to realize it in reality. The two sources of transcending content

remain separate, independent of each other. And yet they can and do communicate on occasion. The later argument between Adorno and Marcuse was over whether such communication had taken place in the New Left.⁴⁷

Adorno's position is explained at length in a 1969 essay entitled "Marginalia to Theory and Practice."⁴⁸ Amid much interesting discussion of the nature of theory and practice, Adorno indulges in a polemical attack on the New Left, which he dismisses repeatedly as a pathetic caricature of real political resistance. He insists on the importance of rational, theoretically informed practice and measures the New Left by that standard. This text rejects his earlier assumption in the *Manifesto* dialogue that the unity of theory and practice is desirable and necessary. Now, faced with an actual practical movement, Adorno discovers the virtues of their separation.

Marcuse was predisposed to a more positive evaluation of this historical experience than Adorno. In earlier writings he had praised the twentieth-century avant-gardes for attempting to overcome the separation of art and life. He interpreted this as a salutary challenge to the affirmative culture of the nineteenth century. The much overrated religion of art called forth the mockery of Dada and the *cadavres exquis* of surrealism.⁴⁹

When the New Left emerged, Marcuse interpreted it on the model of the early avant-gardes as an attempt to realize the imagination in reality. Although Adorno was at first sympathetic, he soon came to the conclusion that the movement was simply a scene on which the "pseudo-activity" of a psychologically damaged youth played itself out. And certainly the narcissism and reification Adorno complained of were manifest in many aspects of the New Left. He was not entirely wrong to argue that the society had corrupted its adversaries.⁵⁰

Marcuse was far from uncritical and constantly insisted that the New Left base its actions on theory and solidarity rather than wishful thinking and impulse.⁵¹ But he did so in dialogue with the New Left and not as a hostile critic. On the whole he considered the New Left as a popular breakthrough to a critical relation to advanced capitalism. Critique was historical once again, no longer only philosophical and artistic. What impressed him most were manifestations of solidarity and the rejection of consumerism, the principal glue holding the one-dimensional society together. Marcuse recognized what we now accept as a commonplace,

namely, that despite its flaws the New Left redefined the possibilities and goals of the opposition to advanced capitalism. It introduced a new form of radicalism freed from vanguardism and workerism. In Marcuse's thought this conclusion was associated with a quasi-Hegelian teleology reinterpreted non-dogmatically: freedom is not the necessary outcome of history, but when struggles for freedom do occur they can be recognized as contributing to a possible destiny humanity may yet fulfill.

Marcuse's interpretation of the New Left depends on a theory of experience that has a certain similarity to Lukács's theory of consciousness. Recall that in *History and Class Consciousness* the proletariat is able to transcend its reduction to a commodity because of the gap it recognizes between its reified form as wage labor and the concrete life conditions that depend on the rate of wages. The mismatch between these two determinations, the one stemming from the commodity form and the other from concrete experience, gives rise to an original practical mediation that is the basis of the revolutionary movement and of Marxist dialectical method as well.

Marcuse argued that the New Left was rooted in a radical form of experience that mediates the reified, one-dimensional reality of capitalism. That mediation results from the recognition of the unrealized technical potential of the production system, chained by capitalism to waste and war when it could easily supply all the needs of the population. Poverty and the competitive struggle for existence are now technologically obsolete. Recognition of this gap between the potential and the existing reality, like that which Lukács identified in the case of the proletariat, is not merely a matter of opinion but, Marcuse claims, has the force of a somatic necessity for the youthful revolutionaries.

Marcuse offers revealing examples of such recognition, and argues that it corresponds to a generalized aesthetic sensibility that finds beauty in the affirmation and flourishing of life. He explains that this "new sensibility" achieves a partial desublimation of libido and a redeployment of erotic energy beyond the bounds of sexuality as a generalized aesthetic relation to reality. The new sensibility promises to rejoin reason with life in a new science and technology. It overcomes the restrictions Horkheimer and Adorno believe block access to an experience of potentiality. This would be the realization of the Frankfurt School's dream of a truly enlightened reason

able to reflect on itself and to motivate solidarity with humanity and nature. I will have more to say about these radical ideas in the next chapter.

¹ Horkheimer was less influenced by Lukács than Adorno and Marcuse. See John Abromeit, *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011). Accordingly I will focus primarily on the latter two.

² One is reminded of Nicholas Berdiaeff's epigraph to Huxley's *Brave New World*: "Les utopies apparaissent bien plus réalisables qu'on ne le croyait autrefois. Et nous nous trouvons actuellement devant une question bien autrement angoissante: comment éviter leur réalisation définitive ? ... Les utopies sont réalisables. La vie marche vers les utopies. Et peut-être un siècle nouveau commence-t-il, un siècle où les intellectuels et la classe cultivée rêveront aux moyens d'éviter les utopies et de retourner à une société non utopique moins 'parfaite' et plus libre." ("Utopias appear much more realizable than used to be believed. And we now find ourselves faced with a still more agonizing question: how to avoid their definitive realization? ... Utopias are realizable. Life is marching toward utopias. And perhaps a new century is beginning, a century in which the intellectuals and the educated class will dream of means to avoid utopias and to return to a less 'perfect' and freer non-utopian society.")

³ For Lukács's theory of the unity of theory and practice, see the [Appendix](#).

⁴ Theodor Adorno, "Reconciliation Under Duress," in E. Bloch, G. Lukács, B. Brecht, W. Benjamin, T. Adorno, *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. R. Taylor (London: New Left Books, 1977), 151.

⁵ Stefano Petrucciani, *Introduzione a Adorno* (Rome: Editori Laterza, 2007), 127. "In quanto sta dentro la totalità falsa, però, la dialettica negativa non può essere già questo 'altro pensiero'; ciò che può fare è soltanto evocarne la figura." ("Insofar as it lies within the false totality, however, the negative dialectic cannot already be that 'other thought'; what it can do is only to evoke its outlines.")

⁶ Ernst Bloch, "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing," in *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature*, trans. J. Zipes and F. Mecklenburg (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 12.

⁷ Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Seabury Press, 1947).

⁸ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. J. Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), 54.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 40 (translation modified). The German text is to be found in Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (Amsterdam: Querido Verlag, 1944, reprint n.d.), 55.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 41 (55).

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 255 (305). It is in this context that they claim that "All reification is a forgetting" (230, translation modified).

¹² Habermas and his followers have been particularly active in pursuing the irrationalism issue. See also Anke Thyen, *Negative Dialektik und Ehrfahrung* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1989), 245–67, and J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 266–8.

¹³ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury, 1973), 162.

¹⁴ The non-identical in this crude sense is an immediate particular that transcends all mediation. Without confounding this notion with Adorno's deeper intent, Robert Pippin has mocked it as

“asterisk” philosophy: every time a universal appears, it should be accompanied by an asterisk sending readers to the bottom of the page where they will be informed that particulars are always more and other in some respects than the concepts under which they are classified. See “Adorno on the Falseness of Bourgeois Life,” in Robert Pippin, *The Persistence of Subjectivity: On the Kantian Aftermath* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 105.

¹⁵ See Brian O’Connor, *Adorno’s Negative Dialectic: Philosophy and the Possibility of a Critical Rationality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2004); Bernstein, *Adorno*.

¹⁶ This is the theme of Bernstein’s, *Adorno*.

¹⁷ Theodor Adorno, “On Subject and Object,” in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. H. W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 247.

¹⁸ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. R. Hullot-Kentor (London and New York: Continuum, 1997), 46–7, 68. For a comprehensive account of Adorno’s ideas on nature, see Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (Durham, NC: Acumen Publishing, 2011).

¹⁹ Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts,” in *Early Writings*, trans. and ed. T. B. Bottomore (London: C. A. Watts, 1963), 206–8.

²⁰ Adorno, “On Subject and Object,” 247.

²¹ See Andrew Feenberg, “Marxism and the Critique of Social Rationality: From Surplus Value to the Politics of Technology,” *Cambridge Journal of Economics*, Vol. 34, No. 1 (2009), 37–49.

²² Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 29–30.

²³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 147.

²⁴ Theodor Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, trans. E. Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 161–2, n15.

²⁵ A longer version of this section is published as “Waiting for History: Horkheimer and Adorno’s Theatre of the Absurd,” available at platypus1917.org.

²⁶ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 66, 68.

²⁷ Theodor Adorno, *History and Freedom*, trans. R. Tiedemann, ed. R. Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 170.

²⁸ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. A. Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968), 22.

²⁹ Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, “Towards a New Manifesto?,” trans. R. Livingstone, *New Left Review*, No. 65 (September–October 2010). I am well aware that this text does not represent Horkheimer and Adorno at their best. Perhaps that is one of the reasons it is so interesting. Their unguarded comments reveal much that is masked in more polished presentations.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 36.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 53.

³² *Ibid.*, 44.

³³ *Ibid.*, 46–7.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 48–9.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 61.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.

³⁷ Karl Marx, “Letter to Ruge,” in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, trans. and ed. L. Easton and K. Guddat (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 213.

³⁸ Adorno and Horkheimer, “Towards a New Manifesto?,” 55.

³⁹ Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction,” in *Early Writings*, 28.

⁴⁰ Adorno and Horkheimer, “Towards a New Manifesto?,” 58, 52.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 56.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 58.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 44.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 46.

⁴⁷ For their differences, see “Correspondence on the German Student Movement,” trans. E. Leslie, *New Left Review*, No. 233 (January–February 1999), 123–36. Compare also Theodor Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Practice,” in Adorno, *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, with Herbert Marcuse, “The Failure of the New Left?,” in *Herbert Marcuse: The New Left and the 1960s*, ed. D. Kellner (London and New York: Routledge, 2005).

⁴⁸ Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Practice.”

⁴⁹ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 149–50. Adorno objected to Marcuse’s early essay on “Affirmative Culture” that Marcuse underrated the critical import of art in his denunciation of its socially conservative, compensatory function. For the disagreement with Adorno, see Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, trans. M. Robertson (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1994), 220–2. Marcuse’s later views are further developed in Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 31–2. For a discussion of Marcuse’s theory of the avantgarde see Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. M. Shaw (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 50–1.

⁵⁰ Adorno condemned the whole New Left on terms appropriate only for a small fraction of the movement. Unfortunately that fraction did gain disproportionate influence, but this must not blind us (as it did Adorno) to the largely humane and democratic objectives of the mass of participants. I attempt to explain the problem in a more balanced way in Andrew Feenberg, “Paths to Failure: The Dialectics of Organization and Ideology in the New Left,” in A. Reed, ed., *Race, Politics and Culture: Critical Essays on the Politics of the 1960s* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1986), 119–44.

⁵¹ For example, Marcuse criticized those New Leftists who advocated pure spontaneity: “Within the repressive society, and against its ubiquitous apparatus, spontaneity by itself cannot possibly be a radical and revolutionary force. It can become such a force only as the result of enlightenment, education, political practice—in this sense indeed, as a result of organization.” Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 89.

CHAPTER EIGHT

The Last Philosophy of Praxis

MARCUSE'S PHENOMENOLOGY

In this chapter I will bring the story of the Frankfurt School and philosophy of praxis to a conclusion. I first discuss phenomenological themes in Marcuse linked to his startling conception of a liberation of nature. The chapter continues with a discussion of the ontological significance of Marcuse's concept of nature, and concludes with remarks on the relation of science and technology in critical theory.

Despite differences in terminology, sources, and politics, Marcuse's argument is similar in many respects to Adorno's, but he emphasizes alienation rather than commodity fetishism as the underlying problem of advanced industrial society. This ties his argument more closely to Hegel, whose dialectic of master and slave is the original formulation of the concept of alienation. Marcuse's interpretation of Hegel's dialectic of essence resembles Adorno's concept of non-identity but it is also shaped by this theme from the *Phenomenology*. Adorno would surely have rejected the teleological concept of history it implies. The significance of this difference becomes clear in the 1960s.

Chapters 5 and 6 of *One-Dimensional Man* present a remarkable synthesis of phenomenology and Marxism.¹ Marcuse's argument can be clarified by reference to four main sources: Lukács's concept of reification, Heidegger's critique of technology, Husserl's late discussion of science and the lifeworld, and Horkheimer and Adorno's theory of the impoverishment of experience under capitalism. The problem Marcuse poses is how to explain the connection between capitalism as a system of domination and scientific-technical rationality. Chapter 5 contrasts premodern ontology with modern science. Chapter 6 then explores the connection between science and technology and concludes with a discussion of their political role under capitalism.

This problematic is first articulated from within Marxism by Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness*. He signals the congruence of modern scientific modes of thought and the structure of everyday experience under capitalism. He describes the reified form of objectivity of experience through which it loses its human qualities and comes to resemble the “facts” of natural science. As we have seen in [Chapter 4](#) of this book, the “form of objectivity” is a neo-Kantian version of Kant’s a priori preconditions of experience. But in contrast with the neo-Kantians, Lukács argues that reification derives from the commodity form rather than from the structure of consciousness.

Marcuse sketches a history of rationality as a succession of such a priori preconditions. In ancient Greece, reason encountered a world of independent things, each with a meaning and purpose. For the Greeks, exemplified by Aristotle, these things are “substances.” As such they are more than the sum of their mechanically related parts. They have an inner core that holds them together in the face of change. This core combines *logos* and *eros*. Things exhibit both rational structure and orientation toward a “desired” end, their *telos*. Aristotle introduced the word “essence” to talk about this core. It is the dynamic center of the thing’s being that drives it toward perfection. Here “is” and “ought” are harmonized in the notion of potentiality. As potentiality, value belongs to the objective world; it is not reduced to a subjective preference as in the modern projection of being.

The Greek conception is realized practically in *technē*, the knowledge associated with craft production and artistic creation. Like natural objects, artifacts have an objective essence, but unlike natural objects they cannot realize that essence through an inner dynamic. They require the help of a craftsman. *Technē* thus incorporates the ends as well as the means, the final cause as well as the matter, form, and skills of the maker. This is “objective rationality” in Horkheimer’s sense.²

Today we no longer believe in teleological substances; instead, scientific reason offers mechanical explanations of a purposeless nature. The things of experience are broken up into measurable components, functional units awaiting transformation and recombination. The relations between these components are explained causally, as a kind of machinery. This new concept of reason is the a priori of science, the precondition of its mode of experiencing and understanding the world. Marcuse follows Hegel in claiming that the domain of history responds to a different logic in which

potentiality still has a place. He does not envisage a return to the Greek world. That is neither possible nor desirable. But he does attempt to reconstruct the idea of potentiality in modern terms as the relation between value and fact in social life. “Logical truth becomes historical truth. The ontological tension between essence and appearance, between ‘is’ and ‘ought’ becomes historical tension and the ‘inner negativity’ of the object-world is understood as the work of the historical subject.”³ This historical reconstruction of the concept of essence provides a standard for the critique of modern society and especially its science and technology.

In his 1930 book *Hegel’s Ontology*, Marcuse argues that reality has two “dimensions,” empirical existence and the essence of the phenomena, their potentialities striving toward realization. As a historical thesis this implies a progressive vision in which the potentialities are expressed in social struggle. But, in *One-Dimensional Man*, published in 1964, Marcuse argues that advanced capitalist society restricts thought and action more and more to the first dimension. This “one-dimensional society” tends to reduce everything to its empirically given form, suppressing the second dimension of essential potentiality. Thus what Adorno calls “identifying thought” prevails. It blocks recognition of the inadequacy of the available satisfactions and the dangers of unreflective technological advance.

Like Adorno’s distinction between ordinary and “emphatic” universals, Marcuse’s distinction between formal and substantive universals corresponds to the two dimensions.⁴ Formal universals classify objects in accordance with quantity and quality. They refer to the empirical, the factual. Substantive universals such as freedom and equality point beyond the facts toward their potentialities. These potentialities are not unreal but are implied in the manifold connections and the history of the phenomena, their constellations. The objects of everyday experience reveal themselves as incomplete, as still fraught with possibilities. Knowledge of this second dimension depends on the imaginative power of the human mind which transcends the given toward its essential meaning. The validation of the transcending content of the substantive universals today is based on the actual technical potential of the production system, which could provide a better and freer life under a different political and economic dispensation.

By contrast, science works exclusively with formal universals. It projects a world of quantitative determinations, dissolving the object as a substantial reality. In eliminating the dimension of essence, science exposes

the object to mechanical explanation and technical manipulation. It does not recognize potentialities but only the empirically given facts. In practice it serves those with the power to establish the facts and reinforces their power.

Science has two essential features, quantification and instrumentalization. It does not address experience in its immediacy but transforms everything it encounters into quantities. Since quantities are alien to values, this stance eliminates purpose from the world. This is the basis of the value-neutrality of science, its indifference to the good and the beautiful in the interests of the true. But values do exist and require some sort of locus. Hence, correlated with the quantified reality of science there is an inner world of subjective feelings in which everything associated with value takes refuge. This inner world is excluded from the objective world science explains, hence also from the domain of rationality.

The scientific world, now stripped of any valuative features and disaggregated, is exposed to unrestrained instrumental control. Within the context of research this instrumentalism appears innocent enough. Science learns by manipulating its objects in experiments. The prior quantification of the objects makes it possible to draw precise conclusions from these manipulations. But the innocence of science is lost when the possibilities of instrumental control are exploited on a much larger scale by technology.

Like Heidegger, Marcuse concludes that the technical applicability of science is no accident. A technological project lies at its basis. "The science of nature develops under the *technological a priori* which projects nature as potential instrumentality, stuff of control and organization."⁵ The unity of science and technology lies in the fact that the quantifiable reality of science is an instrumentalizable reality for society. What for science is a measurable object of experiment and explanation is raw material for production in society. In both cases the a priori concept of the object precedes and makes possible its appropriation by rational theory and practice.

Marcuse's critique of science and technology reverses the Marxist thesis according to which socialism will free the technical forces of production blocked by outmoded capitalist relations of production. Marcuse insists instead that the existing technology dominates both human beings and nature. The forces of production themselves must be reconstructed on the basis of life-affirming values. Their mere growth is not progressive. A

social revolution must interrupt the “continuity of domination” now installed in the very structure of the machines. This requires

a break with the continuity of the technical apparatus of productivity which, for Marx, would extend (freed from capitalist abuse) to the socialist society. Such “*technological*” continuity would constitute a *fateful link between capitalism and socialism*, because this apparatus has, in its very structure and scope, become an apparatus of control and domination. *Cutting this link* would mean, not to regress in the technical progress, but to reconstruct the technical apparatus in accordance with the needs of free men.⁶

Marcuse’s critical strategy is complex. On the one hand, while he never calls into question the cognitive value of natural science and technology, he argues that they have been incorporated into the capitalist system and are part of its apparatus of exploitation and alienation. But he also believes that science and technology are historically contingent and that they may be transformed in the future. Thus the critique is not entirely negative. On the other hand, Marcuse’s critique extends beyond actual science and technology to the a priori cultural form that determines them. This technological a priori operates throughout social life, determining the experience of objects generally, even those remote from scientific and technological intervention. This aspect of the critique is to some extent independent of the first.

Marcuse cites several passages from Heidegger’s writings in support of his concept of the technological a priori. Heidegger explains that the “essence of technics”—Marcuse’s a priori—is a project of mechanization. “Modern man takes the entirety of Being as raw material for production and subjects the entirety of the object-world to the sweep and order of production ... the use of machinery and the production of machines is not technics itself but merely an adequate instrument for the realization of the essence of technics in its objective raw materials.”⁷

In Heidegger the essence of technics is a dispensation of being, but Marcuse argues that it has a social basis in capitalism. He quotes Horkheimer and Adorno, who trace its source to the capitalist transformation of labor: “By virtue of the rationalization of the modes of labor, the elimination of qualities is transferred from the universe of science to that of daily experience.”⁸ Marcuse draws on phenomenology to analyze this “transfer.”

Modern science is adjusted to the requirements of a “universe of self-propelling, productive control.”⁹ It is not the goals of science or its

particular theories that are so determined but the structure of scientific rationality. “The projection of nature as quantifiable matter ... would be the horizon of a concrete societal practice which would be *preserved* in the development of the scientific project.”¹⁰ How has this come about? Marcuse rejects a causal explanation and turns instead to Husserl’s analysis of the relation of science to the lifeworld.

The concept of “lifeworld” refers to everyday experience. Husserl understands experience not in terms of the famous sense data of empiricism but as a system of meanings immediately available to consciousness and enacted in ordinary practice. In Heidegger a similar concept is called simply “world.” For both these phenomenological thinkers, science derives ultimately from a life-worldly basis. The a priori form of the scientific enterprise, its concepts and methods, are not the autonomous creations of pure reason they appear to be but are based on aspects of everyday experience in this phenomenological sense. But unlike Husserl and Heidegger, Marcuse argues that experience is traversed by social contradictions.

He writes that the lifeworld is a “specific mode of ‘seeing’ ... within a purposive practical context.”¹¹ Under capitalism the context is the project of the domination of nature. “Individual, non-quantifiable qualities stand in the way of an organization of men and things in accordance with the measurable power to be extracted from them. But this is a specific, socio-historic project, and the consciousness that undertakes this project is the hidden subject of Galilean science.”¹² That subject is the capitalist class, or, in another reading of Marx, capital itself.

The concept of “project” Marcuse introduces in this passage derives from Sartre who employed it to emphasize the freedom of the subject to choose its path in life.¹³ A project is not a particular plan of action; it is what Heidegger calls the “projection” of a world, that is, an ordering of experience around a certain way of being in the world. Particular plans become possible only within a project-projection of this sort. In Sartre and Heidegger these terms are ontological categories of individual existence but Marcuse historicizes them as civilizational categories referring to the freedom of whole societies.

On this account capitalism is more than an economic system; it projects a world in the phenomenological sense of the term. The congruence of science, technology, and the form of experience is ultimately rooted in the

logic of capitalism. Existing science and technology cannot transcend the capitalist world. Rather, they are destined to reproduce it by their very structure. They are inherently conservative, not because they are ideological in the usual sense of the term, nor because their understanding of nature is false, but because they are intrinsically adjusted to serving a social order that ignores potentialities and views being as the stuff of domination. Thus “technology has become the great vehicle of *reification*.” ¹⁴

The development of this argument is anticipated in a précis of *One-Dimensional Man* that Marcuse wrote while teaching in France in the late 1950s. This text contains once again a significant reference to Heidegger, but not just to the late Heidegger, famous as a critic of technology. Marcuse also goes back to *Being and Time* for a conception of technology as intrinsically oriented toward human needs. He writes,

A machine, a technical instrument, can be considered as neutral, as pure matter. But the machine, the instrument, does not exist outside an ensemble, a technological totality; it exists only as an element of technicity. This form of technicity is a “state of the world,” a way of existing between man and nature. Heidegger stressed that the “project” of an instrumental world precedes (and should precede) the creation of those technologies which serve as the instrument of this ensemble (technicity) before attempting to act upon it as a technician. In fact, such “transcendental” knowledge possesses a material base in the needs of society and in the incapacity of society to either satisfy or develop them. I would like to insist on the fact that the abolition of anxiety, the pacification of life, and enjoyment are the essential needs. From the beginning, the technical project contains the requirements of these needs ... If one considers the existential character of technicity, one can speak of a *final technological cause* and the repression of this cause through the social development of technology. ¹⁵

This is a peculiar passage, a kind of metacritique posing as an interpretation. It translates Heidegger’s existential analysis of worldhood as a system of instrumentalities based on a generalized concept of “care” into the historically specific concept of technicity. Heidegger’s “care” has become the orientation toward human needs intrinsic to instrumental action as such, including modern technology. But service to human needs has been blocked by capitalism. Thus Heidegger’s ontology of instrumental action unifying human being and world in terms of unspecified possible ends has become a normative account of the failure of capitalist technology to realize quite definite ends! Marcuse sets up the contrast between a truncated technological *a priori* aimed exclusively at domination and an alternative *a priori* that would fulfill the *telos* of technology in the creation of a harmonious society reconciled with nature. Technology is not neutral but ambivalent, available for these two different developmental paths.

Compressed in these few lines is the move Marcuse made in the early 1930s from Heidegger to Marxism via Hegel and Marx's *Manuscripts* of 1844. In the *Manuscripts*, Marx describes the ontological unity of man and nature in terms of labor. Translated into Heideggerian terms, this would be equivalent to being-in-the-world as the ontological condition realized in everyday instrumental action. But Marx's notion has a normative character Heidegger's does not. The fulfillment of rich and complex human needs through the application of human capacities and powers in labor contrasts with the impoverishment and alienation of capitalism.

In Heidegger's case there is, to be sure, what Marcuse calls a "final technological cause" but it is left completely vague, relative to the contingent project of *Dasein*. That vagueness would seem to be the condition for its ontological significance, whereas, from a Heideggerian standpoint, Marcuse's turn toward need appears merely ontic. Why, given these differences, did Marcuse retain this curious reference to Heidegger?

As we will see later in this chapter, Marcuse follows Marx in attributing ontological significance to need. Furthermore, Heidegger's concept of a transcendental project is useful for grounding the opposition of capitalism and socialism in a historicized theory of the a priori preconditions of experience. Marcuse claims that the capitalist project of technological domination of nature is historically contingent. Another world is possible.

But for this other world to enter history it must be reflected in the actions of an agent. Now that the proletariat no longer plays that role, whole swaths of Marxist theory are obsolete, especially the idea of class consciousness central to Lukács's version of the philosophy of praxis. Marcuse substitutes the idea of a radical transformation of experience for that outmoded idea. The form of objectivity of a capitalist society is reflected in a truncated experience, but a richer experience is adumbrated in art and the oppositional movements. "The leap from the rationality of domination to the realm of freedom demands the concrete transcendence beyond this rationality, it demands new ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, touching things, a new mode of experience corresponding to the needs of men and women who can and must fight for a free society."¹⁶ The new mode of experience would mediate between the existing society and a new society based on a harmonious relation to nature.

Walter Benjamin introduced the notion of a “liberation of nature” in his eleventh thesis on the philosophy of history. The contrast he formulates between exploitative and liberating labor is familiar except that Benjamin refers not to the exploitation and liberation of human beings but of nature. He does not hesitate to give this unexpected application of Marxist categories its full utopian force. He writes that the Social Democratic

conception of labor amounts to the exploitation of nature, which with naïve complacency is contrasted with the exploitation of the proletariat. Compared with this positivistic conception, Fourier’s fantasies, which have so often been ridiculed, prove to be surprisingly sound. According to Fourier, as a result of efficient cooperative labor, four moons would illuminate the earthly night, the ice would recede from the poles, sea water would no longer taste salty, and beasts of prey would do man’s bidding. All this illustrates a kind of labor which, far from exploiting nature, is capable of delivering her of the creations which lie dormant in her womb as potentials.¹⁷

Nature is a kind of reverse or negative image of society in the early Frankfurt School. It appears as a necessarily lost utopia. This pessimistic view is not contradicted by the implicit irony of Benjamin’s purified sea water and extra moons. But environmentalism has given a more substantial content to the notions of exploitation and liberation of nature. Adorno and Horkheimer do not relate the utopian promise of nature to concrete environmental issues, which only enter public discussion in the 1970s. However, Marcuse does address ecology explicitly on terms that appear to follow directly from Adorno’s elliptical remarks on nature discussed in the previous chapter. As usual, Marcuse enthusiastically breaches Adorno’s self-imposed limits, and this makes for a more explicit and decisive presentation.

In a 1972 speech, he wrote that nature “has a dimension *beyond* labor, a symbol of beauty, of tranquility, of a non-repressive order.”¹⁸ Yet this nature is being destroyed by capitalism. Marcuse’s essay on “Nature and Revolution” represents the furthest advance of the Frankfurt School toward environmentalism. He argues that

Value-free matter, material [there only] for the sake of domination is a *historical* a priori, pertaining to a specific form of society. A free society may well have a very different a priori and a very different object; the development of the scientific concepts may be grounded in an experience of nature as a totality of life to be protected and “cultivated,” and technology would apply this science to the reconstruction of the environment of life.¹⁹

He goes on to suggest the possibility of a “liberation of nature” that would be “the recovery of the life-enhancing forces in nature, the sensuous

aesthetic qualities which are foreign to a life wasted in unending competitive performance.”²⁰

These potentialities of nature hark back to Aristotelian essentialism but refracted through Hegel’s historicism. Potentiality is a dynamic future-oriented principle rather than an “essence” in the Aristotelian sense, i.e., that which the thing always already was. It is not constructed speculatively as a fact independent of humanity but comes into view in the course of actual struggles and reflects the essential involvement of human beings with lived nature. Those struggles are based on the imaginative capacity to project a better future. A technology transformed by those struggles would be respectful of its objects, both human and natural. In this context, “science and technology would be the great vehicles of liberation.”²¹

Marcuse foresees a reconciliation with nature through a new technical practice based on an aesthetic form of objectivity. But he adds an important proviso to his theory of the liberation of nature. “Marx’s notion of a human appropriation of nature retains something of the *hubris* of domination. ‘Appropriation,’ no matter how human, remains appropriation of a (living) object by a subject. It offends that which is essentially other than the appropriating subject, and which exists precisely as object in its own right—that is as subject!”²² Marcuse here reaffirms the Frankfurt School’s fundamental thesis of the non-identity of man and nature, subject and object. But there is also a sense in which his theory is an affirmation of harmony through participation in a “non-exploitative relation: surrender, ‘letting-be,’ acceptance.”²³ The Frankfurt School’s insistence on non-identity is superseded by a different kind of identity, the identity *of* nature *in* subject and object, which is recognized in reflection and aesthetic appreciation.

Marcuse knows that the utopian conception of nature he shares with Adorno appears unscientific, even regressive. But these are resolutely modern thinkers who resist theoretical backsliding. They are not looking to re-enchant nature or to merge with it in a romantic unity. Yet Marcuse links his argument directly to several surprising comments in Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* that appear decidedly premodern. There Adorno claims that human beings are called “to help nature ‘to open its eyes,’ to help it ‘on the poor earth to become what perhaps it would like to be.’”²⁴ Marcuse seeks a non-

metaphysical interpretation of such notions, a third term beyond premodern essentialism and the idealistic kitsch of a “new age.”

He finds his answer in Kant’s aesthetics, which defines natural beauty as “purposiveness without purpose.” Nature exhibits characteristics of an object constructed for a purpose without actually having been so constructed. Marcuse interpreted purposiveness in this sense as a purely formal property of self-organizing objects. It arises from freedom, the self-production of the object according to its own intrinsic nature, its growth potential. We can distinguish the freely developed living thing from the mutilated product of a constricted growth process. The distinction manifests itself in formal properties we associate with health and beauty. This conception supports a normative understanding of nature and its tendencies.

Exactly how is this supposed to work? Adorno considers this idea and draws utopian conclusions from it but stops short of accepting its literal truth. He writes that natural beauty “recollects a world without domination, one that probably never existed.”²⁵ Natural beauty hints at the idea of freedom that corresponds to such a world. But, Adorno concludes, nature is in reality a realm of unfreedom and so the aesthetic appreciation of nature is deceptive, a suggestive misapprehension.

Marcuse takes a different tack. Natural beauty and its purposeless purposiveness express the flourishing of life. A concrete “libidinal” attachment to the world underlies the aesthetic dimension. This attachment is historically variable, restricted by scarcity in the past, and suffering a peculiar reduction to sexuality in the present.

But Marcuse also argues that advanced technology tends to generalize aesthetic perception albeit in the specific context of the market. Here Marcuse’s comments are prescient. He notes the emergence of a new relation of worker to machine, a more distanced and informed relation due to advancing automation. This is “the emergence of a free subject within the realm of necessity” that Marx had predicted for socialist society. It leads to an aesthetic relation to the products of the new technology.

Already today, the achievements of science and technology permit the play of the productive imagination: experimentation with the possibilities of form and matter hitherto enclosed in the density of unmastered nature; the technical transformation of nature tends to make things lighter, easier, prettier ... loosening up of reification. The material becomes increasingly susceptible and subject to aesthetic forms, which enhance its exchange value (the artistic, modernistic banks, office buildings, kitchens, salesrooms, and salespeople, etc.).²⁶

This aestheticization of the built world primarily serves capitalism, but it is ambivalent, contributing to the emergence of a new form of oppositional consciousness that appears in the New Left as an erotic mode of presence. Its full development awaits a liberated society.²⁷ Pleasure in beauty would then express a life-affirming sensibility. Beauty would relate the given to its potentialities in sensation, rather than selling a product or serving as a temporary escape from competitive strife.

Concepts such as beauty, health, potentialities have an intuitive appeal. It is obvious that strip mining “wounds” nature in Adorno’s sense; by contrast the architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright is far more compatible with the unfolding of the potentialities of its living setting. In one of his last speeches, in 1979, Marcuse developed this contrast in its implications for environmental struggle. He argued that ecological devastation is an effect of capitalist productivity against which the “life instincts” rebel. That rebellion inspires the New Left.

What we have is a politicization of erotic energy. This, I suggest, is the distinguishing mark of the most radical movements today. These movements do not ... constitute a struggle to replace one power structure by another. Rather, these radical movements are existential revolts against an obsolete reality principle. They are a revolt carried by the mind and body of individuals themselves ... A revolt in which the whole organism, the very soul of the human being, becomes political. A revolt of the life instincts against organized and socialized destruction.²⁸

Disgust and rage at the abuse of human beings is an “aesthetic” expression of our sensitivity to suppressed potentialities. It articulates their value at the existential level. At that level the subject does more than observe the given state of affairs; she participates in it vicariously. This is the other side of the coin of mutual participation in which Adorno found the meaning of peace with nature. On Marcuse’s account participation is experienced as solidarity. Disgust and rage at harm to the environment would inspire its less destructive appropriation within the human world.

But, after all, is Marcuse’s *parti pris* for “life” more than a sentimental preference? Apart from killing, what is not life-affirming in some sense? And indeed, even killing in self-defense might qualify. Nature goes on in one form or another regardless of what human beings feel and do. Why single out its flourishing around a renaissance palace neatly tucked into the landscape, or Wright’s *Falling Water*? Nature “flourishes” in a garbage can too, especially one uncollected for a week, but this is not the affirmation of life we recognize as normatively valid. Does this mean our intuitive

understanding of life affirmation is an arbitrary and subjective opinion without normative force? Not necessarily.

There is a difference between our intuitions and the counter-example insofar as the former seem to be rooted in our nature and are generally shared while the latter is a mere intellectual construction set up for the sake of argument. To call the multiplication of bacteria in a garbage can an example of flourishing is to ignore the emphatic meaning we normally give the term. What “flourishes” is not simply a mass of cells but the realization of such values as vitality and grace through the free development of living things in which we recognize a certain family resemblance or affinity. The concept is necessarily anthropocentric if it is to have any force at all. A garden or a child “flourish” bugs merely multiply. Furthermore, the introduction of life as a value in public discourse is not arbitrary. It makes sense in a context of permanent aggressive warfare, racial conflict, mass imprisonment, and extensive poverty. This was the context in which Marcuse wrote and it is still our context.

FROM PSYCHOLOGY TO ONTOLOGY

Marcuse’s late conception of nature is ambiguous. He seems to hover uncomfortably between psychology and ontology. In *Eros and Civilization* he regards the nature of lived experience as the object of the erotic “drive” in the Freudian sense. But too strict an adherence to Freudian psychology would undermine Marcuse’s philosophical argument with empiricism and naturalism. Experience does not have ontological significance from a psychological standpoint. Drives in Freud are subjective objects of study, not “ontological affirmations of being (nature),” as Marx claims.²⁹ As a natural science, psychology implies a transcendent nature, indifferent to the projection of our feelings and fantasies. But Marcuse remarks that “it seems permissible to give [Freud’s] conception a general ontological meaning.”³⁰ This unusual interpretation of Freud implies phenomenological themes Marcuse only alludes to, but which are essential to his argument.

Marcuse’s philosophy of nature is of course rooted in Hegel and Marx as well as phenomenology. As he wrote in one early text, Hegel “is concerned ... with the process of reification and its transcendence as the basic happening of human life, which Marx then represented as the basic law of historical happening.”³¹ Marcuse’s philosophy of praxis continues

the tradition by dereifying nature, uncovering its essential implication in human existence obscured by technological rationality. These themes are developed in Marcuse's early writings, especially in his first book on Hegel, although without the reference to Freud; they provide the bridge between psychology and ontology in his most daring late works.

For eros to acquire ontological value, "life" must be considered as a form of being "revealing" nature in something like Heidegger's sense of the term, rather than as just another natural object. In his Hegel thesis Marcuse interprets Hegel's concept of life in terms that echo Heidegger's concept of being-in-the-world. His argument can be read without reference to Heidegger, but in a thesis dedicated to Heidegger, written by his assistant at the time, it is difficult not to see an attempt to reconstruct Hegel's concept of life in quasi-phenomenological terms. Marcuse implicitly returns here to Heidegger's own early term for what will later be called "*Dasein*," namely, "factual life." Life in this phenomenological sense is not independent of the environment with which it engages but establishes its identity through that engagement. "Being-in-the-world" refers to a structure of meaning that grounds the reified opposition of subject and object in a prior unity.³²

Interpreting Hegel, Marcuse writes, "The world in which Life unfolds exists only as *its* world."³³ "At one and the same time therefore, the world is the ontological 'presupposition' of Life as well as the externality and negativity in which Life has 'lost' *itself*!"³⁴ In Hegel the activity of the living being is a transformation and appropriation of nature. Nature is not an indifferent obstacle in this conception but forms the subject's essential milieu. Through its free activity in this milieu the subject realizes itself. In Hegel's remarkable phrase, it comes to be "at home with itself in its other."³⁵ The opposition of subject and object is thus grounded in "an ontological relation, one that holds among beings themselves ... This bond precedes all knowledge and in fact makes factual knowledge possible."³⁶ In sum, a world is revealed in the unity of subject and object that transcends their division in inauthentic objectivistic accounts of experience. That world is not factually present but underlies cognition. Epistemology is thus subordinated to ontology. Truth is not first produced by a method but inhabits experience itself prior to any cognitive labor.

Shortly after finishing his Hegel thesis, Marcuse had the opportunity to read Marx's newly published *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of

1844. Here Marcuse found his interpretation of Hegel confirmed and radicalized.

Man does not have objects merely as the environment of his immediate life activity and does not treat them merely as objects of his immediate needs. He can “confront” any object and exhaust and realize its inner possibilities in his labour. He can produce “in accordance with the laws of beauty” and not merely in accordance with the standards of his own needs. In this freedom man reproduces “the whole of nature,” and through transformation and appropriation furthers it, along with his own life, even when this production does not satisfy an immediate need. Thus the history of human life is at the same time essentially the history of man’s objective world and of “the whole of nature” ...³⁷

In the later work, these themes are taken up through the reinterpretation of Freud. Freud’s theory of the erotic provides the basis for a radical reinterpretation of aesthetics. The erotic drive is not merely psychological but has an ontological correlate in the beauty of lived nature. This correlation is necessary for experience to play a role in Marcuse’s critique of technological rationality and its “one-dimensional” ontology. Erotic experience in this sense is not merely subjective; it has the scope of a Heideggerian “attunement,” a mode in which reality as a whole is given.³⁸

Marcuse’s concept of lived nature and its beauty must overcome the transcendence of the nature of natural science if it is to have this ontological significance. He must validate experienced nature by incorporating it into the historical process, in opposition to the ahistorical construction of external nature in the scientific worldview. At the same time, he must not invalidate scientific and technological knowledge that he concedes are essential for any modern society, including a socialist society. Although Marcuse’s remarks are all too brief, he has such a theory. In *One-Dimensional Man* he distinguishes the physical structure of matter from the historical form it acquires as object for a subject, but he concludes that “the two layers or aspects of objectivity (physical and historical) are interrelated in such a way that they cannot be insulated from each other; the historical aspect can never be eliminated so radically that only the ‘absolute’ physical layer remains.”³⁹

This passage maintains the distinction between natural science and history within a fundamentally historical ontology. Agreeing with Hegel and the early Marx, Marcuse argues that all forms of knowledge and experience are essentially social, rooted in the “we” of society rather than the “I” of a pure epistemological subject. There is thus no pure thing-in-itself or nature totally unconnected to humanity. This view, widely shared in

one form or another in Marcuse's early milieu, guarantees experiential knowledge against naturalistic reduction to psychology.⁴⁰ The historical standpoint is ontologically fundamental. No "view from nowhere" threatens to reduce it to an accident of biology.

The early Marx anticipates Marcuse's historicist ontology with his concept of the irreducibly meaningful character of experience. But in contrast with phenomenology (and on this point he follows Marx, not Heidegger), Marcuse also recognizes that access to meaning is contingent on the evolution of needs. Technical advance does not merely serve preexisting needs, but produces new needs corresponding to the development of human faculties and capacities. These new needs introduce a higher dimension of fulfillment by relating human beings to the meaning of their experience, to music rather than sound, to a home rather than shelter, to a meal rather than sustenance.

The restriction of human development by capitalism motivates the revolution. At the everyday level of human life, this is about poverty and the damage it causes. But once subject and object are redefined as life and world, the revolution is an affair of reason: the world does not yet but must someday correlate adequately with its living subject. The unity of subject and object is thus not merely a speculative concept but becomes a historical demand. All this is explained in Marx's *Manuscripts*, discussed here in [Chapter 2](#). Marcuse comments, "It is only the Marxian conception which, while preserving the critical, transcendent element of idealism, uncovers the material, historical ground for the reconciliation of human freedom and natural necessity; subjective and objective freedom."⁴¹

That "material, historical ground" is the dereification of reified capitalist society. Reification as Marcuse uses the term—and here he follows Lukács—is not just a mental attitude but is also a cultural pattern affecting institutions and technologies. Marcuse calls it "one-dimensionality" in his later work, but he already distinguishes a second "dimension" in his Hegel thesis to refer to the level of essential potentiality in contrast with the empirical facts.⁴² Dereification is the establishment of that second dimension in consciousness and as an active force in social life.

This is not merely a local event. Reification is the form of a rational culture, a culture that proves its superiority to earlier cultures based on myth by discovering the truth of nature and revealing the human basis of history. This is the progressive conception of Marxism, which sees in capitalism a

universal if limited achievement. As I argue in [Chapter 6](#), dereification follows reification in transcending any particular culture to achieve a certain universality. Just as reification reaches out to encompass the entire globe in rational structures, so dereification follows it and reveals the human potentialities it suppresses. Revolt thus gives insights of general validity no less than science, technology, and economics. This dialectic is implicit in Marcuse's concept of aesthetic "form as one of the necessities of being, universal beyond all subjective varieties of taste, affinity, etc."⁴³

In recognition of its universality, Marcuse proposes that the aesthetic imagination should be included among Kant's transcendental forms of experience. As such it would be coextensive with the objectified world of space, time, and causality on which science and technology are based and not a mere psychological or sociological phenomenon.

The great conception which animates Kant's critical philosophy shatters the philosophical framework in which he kept it. The imagination, unifying sensibility and reason, becomes "productive" as it becomes practical: a guiding force in the reconstruction of reality—reconstruction with the help of a *gaya scienza*, a science and technology released from their service to destruction and exploitation, and thus free for the liberating exigencies of the imagination. The rational transformation of the world could then lead to a reality formed by the aesthetic sensibility of man. Such a world could (in a literal sense!) embody, incorporate, the human faculties and desires to such an extent that they appear as part of the objective determinism of nature.⁴⁴

This is what allows Marcuse to claim in his essay on "Nature and Revolution" that there is an "existential ... truth in things, in nature."⁴⁵ This "truth" is existential in the sense that it is experiential rather than scientific. The fact that experience is always *our* experience and not that of an imaginary pure rationality means its anthropocentric character is unsurpassable. But it is not a mere psychological construct. Rather it is the condition of another kind of knowledge different from scientific knowledge.

That knowledge arises as a "synthesis, reassembling the bits and fragments which can be found in distorted humanity and nature. This recollected material has become the domain of the imagination, it has been sanctioned by the repressive societies in art."⁴⁶ The existential truth so understood is not only propositional but also constitutes the "*horizon* of experience under which the immediately given forms of things appear as 'negative,' as denial of their inherent possibilities, their truth."⁴⁷

Experience thus has a normative character. We do not perceive the world as scientific reason apprehends it, as a meaningless order of primary

qualities in abstract space and time. The “secondary qualities” belong essentially to the sensed world, and these include the objects of lived “judgments” of good and bad, beautiful and ugly, experienced directly in the act of sensation. These qualities reveal the potentialities of nature, “what perhaps it would like to be.”⁴⁸

With these remarks Marcuse echoes Adorno’s concepts of constellation and non-identity. But, unlike Adorno, Marcuse envisages struggle to realize those “inherent possibilities,” the “truth” of things. Experience offers a non-scientific knowledge that is also a force, driving history toward higher levels of freedom. The negative becomes positive in this struggle.

Negative thinking draws whatever force it may have from its empirical basis: the actual human condition in the given society, and the “given” possibilities to transcend this condition, to enlarge the realm of freedom. In this sense, negative thinking is by virtue of its own internal concepts “positive”: oriented toward, and comprehending a future which is “contained” in the present.⁴⁹

In Lukács, dereification is confined to suppressed humanity, but Marcuse’s implicit ontology does not allow for a separation of the human and the natural: the “aesthetic *Lebenswelt*” is a “being-in-the-world.” His existential truths are attributed to an aesthetic faculty that transforms not only human life but nature itself. Human beings can, in Marx’s astonishing phrase, “form things in accordance with the laws of beauty.”⁵⁰

These reflections help us to understand Marcuse’s hyperbolic claims for technological change. Perhaps the most astonishing of these claims is his revival of the surrealist notion of “*hasard objectif*” in *An Essay on Liberation*. This is the notion of a transformed world in which “human faculties and desires ... appear as part of the objective determinism of nature—coincidence of causality through nature and causality through freedom.”⁵¹ This dualistic conception of liberation maintains the unity in difference of nature and society. It once again poses the problem of the relation between reified rationality, in the form of science and technology, and the concrete content of lived experience.

Socialist technology lies at the intersection of two disparate sources, the scientific understanding of nature in terms of causality, and respect for human and natural potentialities, formulated as meanings. This intersection takes the form of what I have called a “technical code.”⁵² Such codes translate between the two worlds of reason and experience. They represent social demands in the form of technical specifications. Meanings

encountered in experience gain technical salience through such translations. Technology is not autonomous but essentially imbricated with society through this process.

The sidewalk ramp is a good example. Until it was introduced, disability was a private problem. The interests of the disabled were not represented in the design of sidewalks that obstructed their movements at every crossing. The “universal” rationality of sidewalks was “particular” in its exclusion of the disabled. But once society accepted responsibility for the free movement of the disabled, the design of sidewalks translated the new right. This recognition takes the form of a design specification representing the disabled. The sidewalk becomes more “universal” in responding to an enlarged range of interests, a range more nearly corresponding to humanity as a whole.⁵³

Something like this concept of technical code is implicit in Marcuse’s discussion of capitalist technology, which he argues is designed for domination. *One-Dimensional Man* makes a similar point explicitly in relation to socialism.

The historical achievement of science and technology has rendered possible the *translation of values into technical tasks*—the materialization of values. Consequently, what is at stake is the redefinition of values in *technical terms*, as elements in the technological process. The new ends, as technical ends, would then operate in the project and in the construction of the machinery, and not only in its utilization.⁵⁴

An Essay on Liberation draws out the ontological implications of this conception: “Technique, assuming the features of art, would translate subjective sensibility into objective form, into reality.”⁵⁵ Thus not only are meanings embodied in technology, but lived nature is itself reshaped in response to its technical mediation. As Augustin Berque has shown, there is no better illustration of this than the production of landscape in the course of history.⁵⁶ The technical work of traditional agriculture not only yields food but also a meaningful organization of space. Socialism must do the same for industry with respect to the whole material base of modern civilization.

Marcuse’s concept of nature lies at the core of his philosophy of praxis. The revolution takes place not only in society but in things as well. The historically charged categories of critical theory operate to resolve the philosophical antinomy of humanity and nature, frozen in place by both

naturalism and idealism. The contraries are reconciled through the transformation of the technology that binds them together in a unity.

SCIENCE OR TECHNOLOGY

Philosophy of praxis has a critical relation to science and technology from the beginning. But at the same time it resists the unqualified rejection of reason characteristic of much romantic thought. Nevertheless, its critique of scientific abstraction and the dehumanizing effects of industrial technology seems anti-modern and technophobic. This leaves philosophy of praxis vulnerable to the charge of “romantic irrationalism.” There are real difficulties involved in constructing a “dialectic of Enlightenment” that does not recapitulate the errors of conservative cultural critique. The vagueness of the Frankfurt School critique of science and technology leaves room for doubt. This issue is part of a larger one that concerns the politics of rationality in modern society.

This conundrum already makes its appearance in Marx whose critique of science and technology under capitalism leads not to a return to traditional sources of authority or to romantic passion but to the demand for a new science and technology. Lukács and the Frankfurt School offer more moderate but still highly speculative discussions of the prospects of rationality under socialism. Can we find a better grounded solution today on the basis of our much more sophisticated sociological understanding of science and technology?

Lukács exemplifies the treatment of science and technology within philosophy of praxis. He criticizes the quantification of being under capitalism. All the phenomena of scientific and technical progress, economic markets, the transformation of the labor process, bureaucratization of the economy and the state, are tied together by a reifying logic stemming ultimately from the fetishism of commodities. He claims that the quantitative methods of natural science applied to society yield reactionary ideology, but he admits that applied to nature they contribute to scientific progress.⁵⁷ Properly understood, society is subject to a qualitative historical account based on a functional hermeneutic in which the economy plays a central role. He never explains how the two contradictory sides of *this* equation might come together in a socialist *technology*, both scientific and social, both quantitative and qualitative. The

lacuna is critical for the Frankfurt School. If technological domination is conceived as the simple realization of the quantifying procedures of science, then the transcendental argument would seem to exclude socialism insofar as it too relies on technology.

Adorno and Horkheimer attempt to solve this problem in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* through distinguishing the instrumental uses of rationality from the faculty of reflection. They argue that universal quantification betrays the real power of thought. “The reduction of thought to a mathematical apparatus condemns the world to be its own measure.”⁵⁸ The expulsion of essences through the reduction of things to their measurable aspects leaves thought helpless to criticize (“measure”) the world. Science is thus complicit with capitalism. This complicity involves more than supplying capital with machines; it also corrupts experience itself. Abstract labor and the fetishism of commodities become touchstones of experience, stripping it bare of normative qualities. The elimination of a proper “measure” deprives the individuals of a basis on which to resist conformity to society’s demands. The true purpose of technology, the preservation and enhancement of life, is lost.

As we saw in the last chapter, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that modern scientific-technical rationality is both committed to domination by its quantifying reduction of the real, and destined to serve humanity as a whole through its objective form as machinery. The mutilated capacity for reflection must be recovered to realize this destiny. Only in reflection can human beings recognize their natural limitations and thereby moderate their struggle to dominate nature and each other. To save Enlightenment from itself they must overcome the damage capitalism has inflicted on experience and reason. A reflective humanity can orient the struggle toward its proper goal.

This argument is merely hinted at in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Horkheimer and Adorno seem to have no idea what a successor technology would be like. What is more, they do not explain what positive motive could move masses of people to reflect, nor what reflection would reveal to them beyond their own limits. Perhaps the implausibility of such a development explains the growing gap between Horkheimer and Adorno’s philosophy and their politics, culminating in their violent rejection of the New Left.

The New Left was received very differently by Marcuse. His transcendental framework led to a far more radical conclusion than the bare emphasis on reflection in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The movement instituted a new a priori of experience that would not only release the critical power of reflection but also lead to the transformation of technology. This would be a “two-dimensional” experience responsive to the potentialities of people and things. In effect, he developed a substitute for the original Marxist theory of class consciousness and on that basis conceived a unity of theory and practice once again.

Marcuse’s appropriation of phenomenology for Marxism is thus central to his argument and enables him to develop a positive concept of revolution incorporating technology for the first time. Here is how he describes that concept in an unpublished late essay:

Only if the vast capabilities of science and technology, of the scientific and artistic imagination direct the construction of a sensuous environment, only if the work world loses its alienating features and becomes a world of human relationships, only if productivity becomes creativity, are the roots of domination dried up in the individuals. No return to precapitalist, pre-industrial artisanship, but on the contrary, perfection of the new mutilated and distorted science and technology in the formation of the object world in accordance with “the laws of beauty.” And “beauty” here defines an ontological condition—not of an *oeuvre d’art* isolated from real existence ... but that harmony between man and his world which would shape the form of society.⁵⁹

The vision is exciting, but is it coherent? Marcuse has no more explanation than do Horkheimer and Adorno for how a quantifying science and technology would be appropriated in the context of the socialist transformation he projects. This is a damaging inconsistency in the Frankfurt School’s critique. It is already visible in Lukács’s theory of reification that is the source of all such critiques.

Marcuse wavers between two strategies for overcoming this difficulty, the *re-enchantment of nature* through the transformation of science, and the institution of *respect for nature* through transformed technology. The latter strategy resolves the antinomies practically, independent of the evolution of science. Either or both of these strategies can succeed in fulfilling the requirements of the philosophy of praxis but they are not equally plausible and Marcuse does not distinguish them clearly.

Marcuse mentions the transformation of science briefly in *One-Dimensional Man*. The emergence of an “aesthetic *Lebenswelt*” holds the promise of a new science that will assimilate the aesthetic qualities that emerge in the full experience of nature. The new science will discover value

in the very structure of its objects. The antinomies will be resolved through a representation of nature in which their opposed poles are reconciled, subject with object, value with fact.

In a confusing passage, Marcuse attributes qualities such as beauty, that today's science does not recognize, to the nature of a future natural science. But he immediately rejects the idea of a return to a "qualitative physics" and so undermines this notion even as he evokes it. In any case he imagines the transformation of science as the long-term consequence of a new mode of experience rather than as a political task of the revolution. Science might gradually evolve in new directions through genuine discoveries stimulated by life in a liberated society. But no one can anticipate, much less dictate, the science of the future.⁶⁰

The alternative to the theory of the new science is the reconstruction of technology on the basis of experiential knowledge. Technology would be reshaped by respect for the potentialities of human beings and things. This evolution would release the aesthetic imagination from its marginal role under capitalism to a central place in the design of technology.⁶¹ Here the antinomies are not resolved by a changed *representation* of the world but by a new practical *relation* to the world. The philosophical significance of the revolution would depend not on a new science but on a technology shaped by the new a priori of experience.

Unfortunately, Marcuse does not distinguish between the emergence of new scientific concepts and methods and new technical codes and designs. He leaves the impression that socialism awaits an unimaginable cognitive advance—a new science of nature—rather than much simpler technical changes well within our reach today. Not surprisingly, this theory has met with a generally skeptical response.⁶²

THE INNOCENCE OF SCIENCE?

Even if the technological option correctly interprets Marcuse's intent and overcomes the usual objections, there are still problems with the critique of quantification. These problems concern what science and technology share, namely, precise rational methods of calculation and control. Like Heidegger, Lukács, and his Frankfurt School colleagues, Marcuse wants to extract grounds for critique from these features. But he admits that they cannot be eliminated from technology even in a socialist society. If that is

so, then the objectionable aspect of capitalist technology must lie elsewhere, but where?

In a Habermasian framework one might argue that the term “domination” is inappropriate as a description of the scientific-technical quantification of being; the neutral term “control” would be a better description with “domination” reserved for specific uses of scientific-technical powers.⁶³ But as I explained in [Chapter 7](#) the solution to the conundrum is not to revert to this outdated notion of the neutrality of science and technology, but to understand their social implications in a more complex framework.

All these theories confuse the shared a priori precondition of science and technology with a unity of purpose and consequence they need not share. The “command of nature” Bacon prophesized is common to both but this is not sufficient grounds for identifying them without distinction. Without going as far as Habermas in restricting the use of the concept of domination, it is still important to note that the link between capitalism and natural science is *fundamentally* methodological, not substantive. The economic system and science share a reliance on quantification, as exemplified by commodity fetishism and measurement, but they do not share the same relation to society or serve the same goals.

The concept of domination does seem inappropriate when applied to natural sciences such as physics, chemistry, and geology rather than to their contingent social uses. Of course social needs often inspire research; some scientific objects and research programs clearly reflect specific power relations or ideologies. But the most profound link between capitalism and natural science is its construction of nature as an object. At this level science is relatively neutral with respect to the ideologies and values circulating in modern society. A technological attitude toward nature will be shared to some extent by any modern society, including a socialist society.

Yet, even here, where its connection to social forces is remote, the very neutrality of science cancels the consideration due to the potentialities of human beings and things.⁶⁴ But it is only conservative in its social implications to the extent that its prevailing technological applications ignore those potentialities as well. The important link between technology and capitalism is not pure method but a particular application of the method. In this context neutrality is an ideological choice.

Crudely put, science treats potassium cyanide and magnesium hydroxide indifferently as natural substances, but administering one or the other to a living human being transforms them into poison or medicine. The choice has nothing to do with scientific-technical rationality, but the technological *a priori* contains an inherent *potential* for domination, insofar as it allows one to conceive the conditions of life and death indifferently as “natural.” That potential need not be actualized. Indeed, society has structured the institution of medicine specifically to exclude neutrality as between life and death. Unfortunately, no similar exclusion protects workers and nature from the harms of industrialism.

Thus even though scientific-technical rationality is not exactly “innocent,” there is a difference between the theoretical representation of nature and the practical response to social forces in the construction of useful artifacts. To get from research to social facts an essential mediation is required; that mediation is the design process, itself based on technical codes that embody social demands in technical specifications.

The scientific-technical conception of nature enters the social world through formally biased technical realizations. These realizations depend not just on rational principles but also reflect the understanding and intentions of social actors. Technology relies on scientific knowledge at the level of causal effectiveness, while also participating in the meaningful contexture of ordinary experience. Technology thus lies “between reason and experience” and cannot be identified completely with the abstract understanding of nature of natural science.⁶⁵ Because it functions in and responds to far more substantive aspects of the lifeworld than science, technology has distinctive characteristics. The theory of formal bias explained in [Chapter 7](#) shows how the apparently contradictory world relations of the scientific-technical disciplines and everyday experience are combined in design.

Counteracting the potential for domination implicit in science and technology requires incorporating values protective of life in design. Designs answering to such values are routinely found in precapitalist societies. This is the work of craft. But craft belongs to societies of scarcity in which class rule is based not on technology but on myth and force.

Under capitalism craft traditions are abandoned and the underlying population excluded from the design process. Capitalism revolutionizes production and subordinates the whole society to technical power that

becomes the new source of legitimacy. Thus capitalist technology fully unfolds its potential for domination not only at the level of its particular objects but generally, socially. This situation can be reversed where design takes into account the potentialities projected by a democratic process informed by a humane imagination.

Marcuse thus argues that technology must again incorporate an objective “final cause.” Teleology returns as an attribute of artifacts responding to human and natural potentialities. He writes, “the technical mastery of final causes *is* the construction, development, and utilization of resources (material and intellectual) *freed* from all *particular* interests which impede the satisfaction of human needs and the evolution of human faculties. In other words, it is the rational enterprise of man as man, of mankind.”⁶⁶ And again:

The critique of technology aims neither at a romantic regression nor at a spiritual restoration of “values.” The oppressive features of technological society are not due to excessive materialism and technicism. On the contrary, it seems that the causes of the trouble are rather in the arrest of materialism and technological rationality, that is to say, in the restraints imposed on the materialization of values.⁶⁷

Here the original *telos* of rationality is restored.

RECONCILIATION WITH NATURE

Technological domination is neither extrinsic to technology, nor inevitable wherever technology is employed. Design is the mediation through which the potential for domination contained in scientific-technical rationality enters the social world as a civilizational project. Capitalism realizes that potential by extending it without limit to every aspect of nature and human beings: “When technics becomes the universal form of material production, it circumscribes an entire culture; it projects a historical totality—a world.”⁶⁸ The break with that world does not immediately transform science, although in the long run it may have consequences for the scientific conception of reality. However, the break does require an immediate engagement with technology.

Although Marcuse treats it as a revolutionary task, that engagement does not await the revolution. It began long ago as excluded actors protested the side effects of the dominant designs. Such protests were commonplace in the labor movement as it grappled with the threats to

health and safety caused by the industrial revolution. The theory of reification illuminates this experience and links it to contemporary protests around such issues as environmental pollution. Resistance from below provides the impetus to revise technical assumptions and designs. These considerations belong to a dialectical critique of technology that is neither irrationalist nor technophobic.⁶⁹

Struggles over technology and other rational systems intrinsic to modernity promise the resolution of the antinomies not through a conceptual innovation but rather through the practical transformation of the relation of human beings to each other and to nature. Note that it is not a question of “attitude” Marcuse would have dismissed a merely subjective reconciliation. The focus on design differentiates his solution from such unconvincing notions as Heidegger’s “free relation” to technology, or the many appeals to voluntary simplicity emanating from a certain wing of the environmental movement. The point is not just to change attitudes toward technology or material goods in general, but to reconstruct the industrial system in accordance with different values. This is the concrete “liberation of nature” in which philosophy of praxis culminates.

Here in summary are the main points of Marcuse’s position. Horkheimer and Adorno would have agreed with most of them.

1. Experience of nature is historically shaped. The nature revealed under the technological a priori is not the last word on the truth of being, but may be transcended in another a priori.

2. The technological a priori of modern societies reveals only an aspect of experienced or lived nature. That aspect has become the basis of science and technology and also of a cultural system that suppresses or derealizes other aspects.

3. A nature understood on restricted instrumental terms stands opposed to human beings who fear and dominate it. This is the origin of the philosophical antinomies of matter and spirit, fact and value, necessity and freedom.

4. Other aspects of lived nature include aesthetic beauty and potentialities. These aspects of nature are “objective” in the sense that they belong to the object of human perception. They are not subjective illusions.

5. These aspects are revealed to sensation informed by the erotic and imaginative faculties. These faculties belong to a fully developed reason, as opposed to the restricted instrumental rationality of modern societies.

6. The differentiation of these faculties from rationality is an effect of scarcity in class society. Technological advance has made this differentiation obsolete, even dangerous, since reason uninformed by *eros* and the imagination is an increasingly destructive and self-destructive force.

7. A free society in which erotic and imaginative faculties flourish would encounter a different nature from the restricted one of today. Human beings would be at home in that nature to a far greater degree than they are today.

8. Such a society would interact with nature through a different technology that was more respectful of nature's potentialities and limits. This technology would still serve human needs, but it would do so less destructively.

9. Human liberation and the liberation of nature go together. These two forms of freedom are not identical. They still presuppose a relationship of differentiated subjects and objects, but in a liberated society they will be able to achieve a harmonious relationship.

10. The failure of restricted instrumental rationality is increasingly obvious and may (but need not) lead to a revolt in favor of new social forms based on cooperation, solidarity, and respect for nature.

¹ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

² For more on the relation of Marcuse's thought to Aristotle, and to Heidegger's interpretation of Aristotle, see Andrew Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History* (London: Routledge, 2005).

³ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 141.

⁴ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury, 1973), 150–1. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 211–15.

⁵ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 153.

⁶ Herbert Marcuse, "Re-Examination of the Concept of Revolution," in A. Lothstein, ed., *All We Are Saying* (New York: Capricorn Books, 1970), 280.

⁷ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, quoted, 153–4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, quoted, 157.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 158.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 160.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 164.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, xvi.

- 14 Ibid., 168.
- 15 Herbert Marcuse, "From Ontology to Technology: Fundamental Tendencies of Industrial Society," in D. Kellner and C. Pierce, ed., *Herbert Marcuse: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis and Emancipation* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 136–7.
- 16 Herbert Marcuse, "Beyond *One-Dimensional Man*" in D. Kellner, ed., *Herbert Marcuse: Towards a Critical Theory of Society* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 117–18.
- 17 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. H. Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1969), 259.
- 18 Herbert Marcuse, "Ecology and Revolution," in D. Kellner, ed., *Herbert Marcuse: The New Left and the 1960s* (London and New York: Routledge 2005), 174.
- 19 Herbert Marcuse, "Nature and Revolution," in *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 61.
- 20 Ibid., 60.
- 21 Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 12.
- 22 Marcuse, "Nature and Revolution," 68–9.
- 23 Ibid., 69.
- 24 Ibid., 66; Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetische Theorie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970), 100, 107.
- 25 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. R. Hullot-Kentor (London and New York: Continuum, 1997), 66.
- 26 Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 50. Note that the success of Steve Jobs in aestheticizing electronic gadgets does not refute Marcuse's thesis but rather confirms it, as can be seen from this passage.
- 27 Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 73. See also Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), [Chapter 8](#).
- 28 Herbert Marcuse, "Ecology and the Critique of Modern Society," *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, Vol. 3. No. 9 (1992).
- 29 Karl Marx, *Early Writings*, trans. and ed. T. B. Bottomore (London: C.A. Watts, 1963), 189.
- 30 Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 125.
- 31 Herbert Marcuse, "Zum Problem der Dialektik I and II," in *Herbert Marcuse Schriften*, vol. I (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978), 440.
- 32 The ontological concept of life in Hegel, Heidegger, and Marcuse is developed more fully in Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse*, [Chapter 3](#).
- 33 Herbert Marcuse, *Hegel's Ontology and the Theory of Historicity*, trans. S. Benhabib (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), 156.
- 34 Ibid., 158.
- 35 G. W. F. Hegel, *The Logic of Hegel*, trans. W. Wallace (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), 175. Hegel's conception of the lifeworld relation is confirmed at the objective level by modern biology. Biological organisms do not relate externally to a generalized nature but internally to the specific niche within which they function and thrive and which is shaped in turn by their activity. Organisms are thus not independent things; the correlation of species powers and needs with features of the natural environment refutes individualistic ontology. The human technical relation to nature completes the integration of organism and environment by modifying both.
- 36 Marcuse, *Hegel's Ontology*, 162.
- 37 Herbert Marcuse, "New Sources on the Foundations of Historical Materialism," in *Heideggerian Marxism*, ed. R. Wolin and J. Abromeit (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 2005), 97.
- 38 "Wer in den Kategorien der Freudschen Triebtheorie, aus denen Marcuse eine marxistische Geschichtskonstruktion entwickelt hat, wer in seiner neuerdings wieder hervorgekehrten Anthropologie die überlagerten Kategorien von *Sein und Zeit* nicht einmal mehr ahnt, ist vor handfesten Mißverständnissen nicht sicher." "Whoever cannot again notice the underlying categories of *Being and Time* in Freud's categories of the drive theory, out of which Marcuse developed a

Marxist historical construct, or in his recently reconstructed anthropology, will run the danger of serious misunderstandings.” Jürgen Habermas, *Antworten auf Herbert Marcuse* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1968), 10–11.

39 Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 218.

40 Marcuse, “Nature and Revolution,” 72–4.

41 Ibid., 73–4.

42 Marcuse, *Hegel’s Ontology*, 75.

43 Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 32.

44 Ibid., 31. The “gaya scienza” mentioned here refers to Nietzsche’s book of that title (*Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft*) but perhaps also to Emerson’s lecture on “The Scholar” from which Nietzsche took his title: “I think the peculiar office of scholars in a careful and gloomy generation is to be (as the poets were called in the Middle Ages) Professors of the Joyous Science, detectors and delineators of occult symmetries & unpublished beauties, heralds of civility, nobility, learning & wisdom; affirmers of the One Law, yet as ones who should affirm it in music or dancing.” *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson: Lectures and Biographical Sketches*, Vol. 10, 262.

45 Marcuse, “Nature and Revolution,” 69.

46 Ibid., 70.

47 Ibid.

48 Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. R. Hullot-Kentor (London and New York: Continuum, 1997), 107. Quoted in Marcuse, “Nature and Revolution,” 66.

49 Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 87.

50 Quoted in Marcuse, “Nature and Revolution,” 67.

51 Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 31.

52 Andrew Feenberg, *Between Reason and Experience: Essays in Technology and Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2010), [Chapter 4](#). I have developed this argument in an “instrumentalization theory” that explains the correlation of causal dimensions of technology with dimensions of meaning and identity.

53 For more on this subject, see Feenberg, *Between Reason and Experience*, [Chapter 8](#).

54 Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 231–2.

55 Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 24. It is interesting to find the concept of translation in something very close to the sense it has in science and technology studies today in these old texts of Marcuse. For the most similar type of translation Latour calls “delegation,” see Bruno Latour, “Where Are the Missing Masses? The Sociology of a Few Mundane Artifacts,” in W. Bijker and J. Law, ed., *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change* (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1992).

56 Augustin Berque, *Médiance: de milieux en paysages* (Paris: Reclus, 1990).

57 HCC, 10.

58 Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. G. S. Noerr, trans. E. Jephcott (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 20.

59 Marcuse, “Beyond *One-Dimensional Man*,’ 117–18. See also “Cultural Revolution,” in *Herbert Marcuse: Towards a Critical Theory of Society*, 138–9.

60 Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 164–6, 229–31. For a rather different discussion than mine of Marcuse’s views on science, see C. Fred Alford, *Science and the Revenge of Nature* (Tampa, FL: University of Florida Press, 1985), 59–64.

61 It may be objected that the distinction between science and technology this implies has been outdated by the new “technoscience.” Like Heidegger, Marcuse seems to have adopted something like that notion even before it was formulated by constructivist science and technology studies. There are certainly domains in which the distinction is difficult to make but these domains are still fairly marginal to the central productive activities of modern societies. It would be a mistake to confound science and technology while we can still make a meaningful distinction between research in fields

such as computer science and engineering and the production that goes on in computer and construction companies. For a variety of contemporary views, see Alfred Nordmann, Hans Radder, and Gregor Schiemann, ed., *Science Transformed? Debating Claims of an Epochal Break* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2011).

62 See for example Alford, *Science and the Revenge of Nature*.

63 Jürgen Habermas, "Technology and Science as Ideology," in *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science and Politics*, trans. J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 88.

64 This neutrality is implicit in the very nature of quantification. Hegel writes, "Magnitude is that characteristic wherein, while no harm appears to be intended, a Determinate Being can be seized, and whereby it can be destroyed." G. W. F. Hegel, *The Science of Logic*, Vol. 1., trans. W. H. Johnston and L. G. Struthers (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1961), 391.

65 See Feenberg, *Between Reason and Experience*, [Chapter 9](#).

66 Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 234.

67 Herbert Marcuse, "The Problem of Social Change in the Technological Society," in *Herbert Marcuse: Towards a Critical Theory of Society*, 57.

68 Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 154.

69 For an introduction to such a philosophy, see Feenberg, *Between Reason and Experience*, [Chapters 1 and 4](#).

CHAPTER NINE

Philosophy of Praxis: Summary and Significance

INTRODUCTION

In this concluding chapter I begin with an analytical summary of the history of philosophy of praxis as a figure of thought. This has been our main concern throughout this book. But the philosophy of praxis raises questions for us today that do not have clear answers in this history. The later sections of this chapter consider two of these questions. Here is a brief preview of these sections.

The failure of proletarian revolution has not ended the struggle against reification but it has fragmented that struggle. How is the metacritique of reification affected by that change? Reified rationality still prevails in society and it is still mediated by tensions between its forms and the content of the life processes it shapes and constrains, but it is no longer plausible to envisage a final end of this condition. Reification in some form is an essential aspect of modernity. Both the successes and the failures of socialist revolution teach us that reified rationality, as embodied in social institutions, will always confront suppressed potentialities motivating transformation from below. This conflictual configuration is now the permanent state of modern society, but it does not at present take the form of general revolutionary struggle.

Can the fragmented struggles of this historical period fulfill the program of philosophy of praxis? The answer to this question depends on the type of practice that is supposed to resolve the antinomies. If that practice is conceived as revolution in the traditional sense, then clearly no resolution is likely in the foreseeable future.¹ On the other hand, a fuller account of practice reveals a hidden dimension overlooked in the exclusive focus on revolutionary activity. That dimension is the *horizontal work* of establishing the framework of meaning within which activity goes on. Reification is such a horizon and so is the dereifying challenge to it. If changes in that

hidden dimension are understood as essentially transformative, then the philosophy of praxis survives the loss of its revolutionary guarantee.

THE STRUCTURE OF THE THEORY

Philosophy of praxis is based on a metacritique of idealist philosophy. Idealism attempted to resolve contradictions between subject and object, value and fact, freedom and necessity, life and thought. The idealist resolution of these “antinomies” took the form of a speculative play with concepts. Philosophy of praxis demands a real resolution through the practical transformation of the social basis of the antinomies. The metacritique that establishes the rationale for this approach has three moments: the social reconstitution of idealist categories; the construction of the relations between the reconstituted categories according to the original idealist pattern; and the projection of a resolution of the contradictions between them through social change.

The philosophers of praxis argue that abstract philosophical categories are sublimated versions of concrete social realities. The philosophical subject is a sublimated version of the real subject, social class. The object is not being or the thing-in-itself but the actual object of social practice. The antinomies reflect fundamental problems of capitalist society. For example, if value and fact stand opposed, this is because the capitalist world is structured by economic laws indifferent to human needs, not because these two domains of being are by nature alien to each other. The antinomies cannot be resolved at the level of pure theory, but only by action to change society. Hence Marx’s famous dictum, “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is, to *change* it.”²

Philosophy of praxis avoids the crude economic reductionism of which Marxism is often accused by reconstructing the relations idealism established between its categories as social relations. For example, in the early Marx labor engages with nature not just technically but ontologically, as the power revealing nature within the social world. Similarly, in Lukács, once the philosophical subject is redefined as the proletariat it is shown to constitute social reality through a process of mediation. In both Marx and Lukács the idealist concepts of synthesis, constitution, and mediation are translated as practical relations to nature and society.

Adorno and Marcuse's claims for social practice are less ambitious but even they consider the subject-object and value-fact relations as unities fractured by capitalism. The vaunted objectivity of science and its restricted empiricism is won at the expense of a richer experience of things and their potentialities. The excluded "second dimension" is reduced to an inner realm of subjective values. This is what gives rise to the philosophical antinomy of value and fact that idealism attempts to overcome speculatively.

In his early metacritique Marx argues that the antinomies arise from conceptualizing subject and object on the model of cognition. The "real" subject and object are the worker and nature, not the knower and the known. The worker is more than a *cogito*, a thinker of thoughts; the subject *qua* worker is a human being with needs, relating to its objects practically rather than theoretically. These practical relations have the form of the idealist "identity" of subject and object. Although common sense considers needs and satisfactions to be accidentally related like any two objects in the world, Marx argues the contrary, that the subject of need and its objects are essentially related. This is an ontological relation in which both subject and object are constituted. The constituting process is played out in the practical humanization of nature through labor and sense experience.

Marx calls this "objectification," but under capitalism it takes an alienated form. Despite the fundamental interdependence of human subject and object, laboring is associated with poverty and loss. The subject-object relation is lived in suffering and conflict. Private property and wage labor are historically contingent causes of this lived version of the antinomy. Overcoming these institutional obstacles through revolution can bring about a rational harmony of subject and object no amount of philosophical speculation can achieve.

Lukács's metacritique relates the subject-object concept of idealism to the economic processes analyzed in Marx's mature works. Those works restrict the early metacritique to a limited social arena and abandon larger philosophical goals, but Lukács recovers Marx's original intent to create a philosophy of praxis. The result differs from Marx's thought in several respects. Lukács lives in a far more advanced society in which vast bureaucracies deploy a scientific-technical production system. The problem of rationality the early Marx addressed with the idea of a socialist reconciliation of man and nature now appears in a different light.

Rationality has split in two, one form corresponding to a strictly instrumental relation to human beings and nature—reification—while another dialectical rationality belongs to the transforming practice in which the social and cultural world are revolutionized by the proletariat. No new concept of reason seems able to reconcile them nor can the rule of the “assembled producers” eliminate the instrumental relation to reality. Reified rationality predominates under capitalism. Its contradictions are reflected philosophically in the antinomies.

Lukács formulates all this through an immanent critique of German idealism. He identifies three “demands of reason” that emerge from idealism’s failed attempt to carry out its program: the principle of practice, history as reality, and dialectical method. They hang together: practice can only transform reality, i.e., being in the strong philosophical sense of the term, where reality is essentially historical. This historical transformation will take place not through a deterministic mechanism or an unbounded creative process, but through realizing the social potentialities revealed in the tension between the rationalized social forms and individual life processes. The philosophical subject of idealism is replaced by the human subject of work, as in Marx, but Lukács emphasizes the role of that subject in constituting and overthrowing reified social institutions rather than its relation to nature. By mediating reification the historical subject reconciles the antinomies of subject and object, value and fact, freedom and necessity, theory and practice.

In both Marx and Lukács, the concept of reason emerges transformed from the metacritique. Its uncritical alienated or reified form is replaced or complemented by a dialectical rationality. That alternative form of rationality is not another scientific or technical discipline but the articulation of social experience, social experience raised to consciousness. Now rationality is associated not only with science and experiment, but also with the practical critique coming from those subordinated to the forms of capitalism. Their situated knowledge reveals aspects of reality to which reified rationality is blind.

That situated knowledge is granted cognitive status by philosophy of praxis. It is not merely a “matter of opinion,” but arises from and refers to a real object Marcuse will later identify with the lifeworld. The metacritically reconstructed subject and object of the lifeworld are ultimately real. Theory

builds on the critical method immanently present in lifeworldly experience, not a pure reason in which philosophy of praxis no longer believes.

This view contrasts with the scientistic ideology that becomes increasingly influential from Lukács's time down to the present. According to this ideology, experience is essentially flawed and subjective in contrast with the objective understanding of a purified *cogito*, freed from all bonds of corporality, emotion, and situation. Philosophy of praxis dismisses this "view from nowhere" as a reflex of reification and imposes a finite horizon on the cognitive subject. It rejects idealism's thesis of the absolute autonomy of reason, and relativizes the claims of naturalism by restricting scientific cognition to a limited aspect of the real. Science too is then interpreted as a social institution, situated in a social context. This "absolute historicism" characterizes all four versions of the philosophy of praxis discussed here.

These are some of the main concepts of philosophy of praxis that the Frankfurt School elaborates in very different historical circumstances from Marx and Lukács. Theory and practice are split apart. Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse conclude that no proletarian movement promises to realize the demands of reason and reconcile humanity and nature. The Soviet Union resembles Weber's iron cage of bureaucracy far more than Marx's Paris Commune. Instrumental reason has triumphed and socialist revolution now appears as a lost cause, at least for the foreseeable future. The third moment in the metacritique is beyond reach. Yet the first two moments retain their credibility as a critique of idealism and naturalism, and a reconstructive alternative. But it is impossible to detach the first two moments entirely from the third. If subject and object have become concrete, active social beings in the world, their antinomies demand resolution in the world as well. The Frankfurt School struggles with this conundrum.

In Adorno the outcome is dystopian despair in history. He argues that the thought and experience of the individuals in capitalist society have been radically distorted by the commodification of every aspect of social life. Abstract concepts replace a deeper understanding of the connections and potentialities of things. Experience is reduced to a mere reflection of the given, without the imaginative force required for self-reflection. Instrumental rationality, unrestrained by any concept of potentialities and limits, threatens human survival with the increase in its technological power to exploit and destroy. In this critique one sees the persistence of the ideal

of harmony between human being and nature. But now that ideal promises no transformation; it simply devalues the present by contrast.

In his late work Marcuse arrives at a more positive position under the influence of the New Left. The New Left practices a cultural politics that, while it lacks the power of a proletarian movement, at least goes beyond mere technical manipulation within the existing system. The movement testifies to the continuing possibility of practical critique, beyond the “one-dimensionality” of reified experience under capitalism. Radical experience, the “new sensibility,” is informed by an imaginative grasp of the blocked potentialities of a society that artificially maintains competition, poverty, and war long after it has become rich and secure enough to dispense with these vestiges of an obsolete reality principle. The cultural movement has political expressions capable of catalyzing a much broader popular movement, as occurred in France in 1968. The unity of theory and practice is not fully restored by this argument, but its promise is renewed.

Marcuse is the first philosopher of praxis to respond positively to the growth of technology. He argues that radical change must involve not only social transformation but also technological transformation. A technology of liberation must be created to replace capitalism’s technology of domination.

The weak points in Marcuse’s formulation are all too obvious today. I identify two principal ones in [Chapter 8](#): the reliance on a normative grounding in the affirmation of life, which, while intuitively appealing, is vague; and the undifferentiated critique of science and technology that leads to the implausible demand for a new science. Nevertheless, despite these problems Marcuse revives the philosophy of praxis. He succeeds, I believe, in opening up new ways of thinking about technology and experience, and the theory–practice relationship that would result from their transformation.

The accompanying table shows the main points of similarity between these philosophers. Several things become clear from the table. Adorno is the odd man out. Because he believes the unity of theory and practice has broken down completely his position is quite different from the others. But he shares enough with them that many of his ideas could serve as inspiration or confirmation of Marcuse’s closely related version of philosophy of praxis. Marcuse believed the results of the breakdown of the unity of theory and praxis were partially compensated by a radical vision shared by critical theory and the movements of the New Left. This vision

falls far short of the unity envisaged by Marx and Lukács, but it suffices to overcome Adorno's excessively pessimistic conclusion.

	Principle of practice (ontologically effective practice)	History as reality (versus nature as reality)	Dialectical method (versus natural scientific method)	Finite horizon (validates experiential knowledge)	Unity of theory and practice
Marx	Labor and sensation objectify human faculties	Lived nature is social, man as nature's spirit	Metacritique of abstract reason	Refutation of cosmological argument	Reality strives toward thought
Lukács	Transforming practice mediates form of objectivity	Scientific nature is social since factuality is socially constructed	Dialectic of subject and object versus contemplative epistemology	No absolute spectator (view from nowhere)	Marxist method corresponds to practical dereification
Adorno	Aesthetics as model but unrealized in practice	Nature is historical and history natural	Negative dialectics versus identity thinking	Secondary qualities real versus scientific abstractions	Theory only unites with informed practice
Marcuse	Cultural revolution transforms the structure of experience	Lived nature as a subject within history	Two-dimensional thought versus one-dimensional operationalism	Existential truth versus mathematical truth	Critique and movement share vision of free society

Table 1: The Philosophers of Praxis Compared

A second point of significance emerges from the table: the variety of solutions to the conundrum of nature and history confronting the philosophy of praxis. Marx's most radical solution devalues the natural sciences as an illusion. He invokes some sort of new science that would transcend current science just as socialism would transcend the capitalist economy, but this is quite implausible. The ambition to overthrow capitalism cannot be extended to the scientific basis of modern society.

The problem is even more obvious in Lukács. He attempts to extend the revolutionary paradigm to the whole field of rational institutions, including the economy and administration, as well as science and technology, and ultimately to rationality as such. But when it comes to proposing a new

concept of reason to replace the reified one, he runs into problems. He balks at the consequences of his own concept of mediation. His dialectic presupposes the very reification the revolution is supposed to overcome. The dialectic serves as a placeholder for a new, reconciled concept of reason, but it cannot be substituted for the reified rationality embodied in the essential institutions of modernity. That Lukács was aware of the difficulty shows up in his philosophy of science. He treats the formal structure of scientific factuality as intrinsically social while sparing the contents of natural science from ideology critique. The distinction between genesis and validity defuses the original Marxian critique of science.

Adorno rejects the absolutization of either nature or history and so does not quite affirm history as reality. Instead of a theory he proposes a chiasmus: nature is historical and history is natural. If nature is identified with the struggle for survival, then indeed it has penetrated history in the form of the violent assault of human beings on nature and each other. History is natural insofar as it is based on that struggle. On the other hand, nature is not an eternal given, but evolves as human understanding and technical practice alter its form.

Marcuse argues that nature is a “subject” and as such deserves respect. Of course the nature in question is not that of natural science but the nature of the lifeworld. He does not anthropomorphize this nature as Habermas charged, but rather attempts to reconstruct the concept of essential potentiality in historical terms.³ Lived nature belongs to history insofar as it contains potentialities that can be realized by social revolution. In this respect it contrasts with the merely manipulable nature of technological rationality.

How lived nature is supposed to relate to the nature of natural science is unclear in Marcuse’s thought. He is misled by a lingering fidelity to a concept of revolution that dictates an epistemological transformation when extended to reason as such. He formulates a highly speculative alternative to the dominant understanding of science and argues for the enlargement of scientific reason’s scope to encompass the fruits of an aesthetic engagement with reality. It is not easy to concretize this suggestion.

Marcuse’s position makes more sense in its application to technology. The application of aesthetic criteria and the imaginative construction of the potentialities implicated in technological design are hardly controversial. Marcuse’s critique is aimed at an exclusive emphasis on profitability and

power. But although plausible in its general lines, the absence of a clear distinction between science and technology leaves his argument vulnerable to all sorts of critical abuse. [Chapter 8](#) attempts to save Marcuse's contribution by clarifying this issue.

THE DIALECTIC OF REASON AND EXPERIENCE

According to Marxism, the proletariat is the subject of socialist revolution. Marx and Lukács share this notion, and even Adorno and Horkheimer, in their 1956 dialogue, can imagine no other revolutionary agent. Why this emphasis on the proletariat? There are several converging reasons. The spread of technology into the factory transforms work, workers, and the control of production, creating a compact social subject motivated to overthrow the system. Meanwhile, the unfolding dynamic of capitalist crisis makes it ever more difficult to sustain the population, and the emergence of a growing and better informed class of workers promises a democratic alternative to capitalist management of the system. The combination of motivation, crisis, and capacity underpins the classical doctrine of socialist revolution.

Unexpectedly, twentieth-century capitalism in the advanced countries adjusted sufficiently to the threat from below to defuse revolutionary motivations. At the same time, the spread of technology and management continues to produce resistant, if non-revolutionary, subjects in many areas of social life. These dispersed subjects have a tension-filled relation to the reified structures that form them. Out of these tensions come struggles that, whether the participants know it or not, are the direct descendants of the proletarian movements that inspired Marxism. The fact that these struggles have not been totalized in a singular confrontation with capital, the fact that no inevitable economic laws promise victory, all this is obvious today. But history has not ended for that matter. A new paradigm of social change is needed based not on the French and Russian revolutions but on a dialectical concept of mediation. I have suggested reasons for this in the discussion of resistance that concludes [Chapter 5](#).

What is left of Marxism under these new conditions? We need to take seriously Lukács's startling assertion at the beginning of *History and Class Consciousness* that the essence of Marxism consists not in factual claims but in dialectical method. By this he means not only the theoretical method of *Capital* but the method of practical critique arising in resistance to reified

markets, bureaucracies, and technologies. That resistance is ongoing in new forms, if still far weaker than its object, but the fact that it exists at all holds open the utopian possibilities that encouraged Marcuse in his last work to keep the philosophy of praxis alive.

If we follow Marcuse in taking these resistances seriously, then we must return to the dialectic for a new approach. It teaches that modern institutions are not substantial “things,” but must be grasped in their contingency on the practices that constitute them. We must also cease thinking about the subject of resistance as a substantial, unified agent with stable characteristics and objective interests. Instead, it too must be seen as a relational aspect of the fractured and contradictory unity of the reified institutions that assemble it.

Those institutions have multiplied enormously since the days of Marx and now cover the whole surface of modern society with various systems of rational control, including state and corporate administrations, educational and medical institutions, and the media. Even leisure activities are structured by the same hierarchical division.⁴ Each such system assembles a latent subject capable of entering into conflict with the institutional base.

Modern society is neither a unity nor an aggregate. Rather, it is inherently divided into reified subjects and objects by the systems that found it. These systems are held together in dialectically divided “totalities” by their rational form. They impose those forms as the basis of social order in every sphere. Their heterogeneous content is never absorbed completely by the forms, nor is it indifferent to the incomplete process of formation imposed on it.

The social rationality of those systems is based on specific cognitive achievements, natural and social scientific insights that determine coherent configurations of human and natural resources. These are real achievements for the most part, not arbitrary or merely ideological. But they are underdetermined by rational considerations and biased formally by social interests, primarily by the interests that flow from the capitalist organization of production and distribution.

The nearly total rationalization of modern society entangles social theory with philosophy in unexpected ways. Concepts of will, interest, ideology, and power no longer suffice to understand the rationalized world. Insofar as it has a rational form it appears to realize universal and necessary laws. And yet its bias is all too clear and gives rise to conflict.⁵ What kind

of society has the form of an argument? One that is split between rational domination and a lived experience that overflows instrumental boundaries and motivates resistances. Those resistances are the mediations that restructure rational domination, modifying its forms and reducing its power in order to accommodate the interests of the dominated. The essence of the Marxist dialectic is the process of mediation, as exemplified originally by Marx's critique of political economy and the struggles of the labor movement.

The socialist movement conceived that process through class struggle because it believed the route to power led through the factory. This obscured the cognitive aspect of mediation and gave rise to unrealistic revolutionary expectations. Marxists believed they could create a socialist society by decommodifying the economy and substituting state planning for private ownership of capital. But the overthrow of capitalism does no more than inaugurate a new phase in the struggle with reification. Lukács is more aware of this fact than most of his contemporaries.⁶ He envisages a long-term struggle rather than a brief and decisive coup. But he equivocates on the role of reification after the revolution.

Lukács knows that no modern society can function without structures. The revolution cannot therefore institute a society in which all institutions are dissolved into temporary political arrangements. At one point he suggests the possibility of a new kind of non-reified stabilization, but this suggestion is not developed beyond a brief note. I wonder if he had any idea what post-revolutionary structures would be like if not some version of the market, bureaucracy, and technology evolved under capitalism. Workers' councils might choose managers instead of boards of directors, and economic planning might replace the banking system, but these modifications of the capitalist inheritance do not abolish reification root and branch. Under socialism at best reified institutions would no longer be as well armored against change from below as under capitalism.

This conception of socialism has political implications. The conflictual interactions in which most mediation consists can only flourish in a democracy. The contestation in which the process of mediation goes on presupposes respect for basic democratic principles, human rights, and the will of the majority. It thus follows that socialism must be democratic, a conclusion that finds support in Marx's enthusiastic description of the Paris Commune. Furthermore, socialism must be a "deep democracy" in which

all forms of rational order, and not just law, are subject to dereification and transformation.

We already have significant examples of democratic interventions that prefigure a different regime of rationality. Struggles over technology most clearly illustrate the challenge to reification. In addition to continuing class conflict over technological innovation in production, many types of protest have emerged in recent years around environmental and medical issues, and the Internet. Demonstrations, lawsuits, hearings, and forums have turned environmentalism into a political issue and transformed public awareness of medical research. Online protests over control of the Internet and hacking have created a new information politics. Most remarkable is occasional lay participation in the work of scientific experimentation and technical design.⁷

Although their scope and effectiveness are still severely limited, interventions such as these enlarge the public sphere and anticipate a more democratic form of modern society. Yet they have been systematically underestimated and ignored by political theorists. Where they are noticed at all, resistances are generally viewed not dialectically but from the one-sided perspective of the dominant. From that perspective rationality stands opposed to ignorance and disorder. But the reality is quite different. Rational domination is biased not only by the usual errors, prejudices, and traditions that threaten everything human beings think and do, but by two problems of principle that stem from the very nature of reification and require democratic correction. These problems have to do with specialization and control.

Everything is connected in the real world, but reification differentiates the totality into fragmented parts. Disciplinary specializations follow the reified pattern in isolating particular cross-sections of the totality for analytical treatment. The cognitive advantages of specialization are undeniable, but it can lead to unanticipated problems in the application. For example, not infrequently engineers design a production process or a device that is hazardous for the workers who use it. Once it is deployed, medical complications ensue and another specialization must be called in to deal with non-engineering aspects of the concrete system formed by the device and the workers' physiology. In the best of cases, the combination of specializations initiates an iterative design process that resolves the problems.

Who is likely to first notice the limitations of the engineers' useful but narrow conception of reality? There is no meta-discipline able to predict the need to integrate multiple forms of disciplinary knowledge. Another source of knowledge must come into play, knowledge "from below" based on real-world experience. Such knowledge is frequently occasioned by overlooked harms of technology, or unexploited technical potentials that have not been identified by the technologists themselves but which users can imagine and even in some cases implement on their own. The chief contemporary examples of these two categories are the medical harms of industrial pollution, and the communicative potentials of the Internet.⁸

There is a second systemic problem with reification: the challenge of control. This is reason's original sin. Technical control of human beings leads to decisions that inspire resistance not just for contingent motives but structurally, necessarily. Consider, for example, the dilemma of capitalist management that must keep up with technological advances while reproducing its control of a more or less antagonistic labor force. These twin requirements have determined the technical code of capitalism, based on authoritarian management, deskilling, and automation. Alternative and more humane paths of progress have been foreclosed and this pattern has been generalized to other social domains. For example, the politics of energy is biased by the imperative requirement of energy companies to enlarge their centrally controlled grids. Alternative sources of energy and conservation have been marginalized. The Internet originated in a decentralized logic but today is in the grip of struggles over control that threaten to bring it into conformity with the general pattern. The point is not to argue for the dissolution of all these rationalized systems, but the extent of centralization and its consequences are very much worth questioning.⁹

Resistance to heavy-handed controls and inhumane policies lead to conflicts and eventually to restructuring domination in less oppressive forms. This is not a conventional political process. Democratic interventions must be translated by technical professionals into new regulations and designs. Struggle gives rise to new technical codes both for particular types of artifacts and even for whole technological domains.

This is an essential form of activism in a rationalized society. It limits the autonomy of experts and capitalist management and forces them to redesign the worlds they create to represent a wider range of interests. The translated demands are assimilated by the institutions and may lead in turn

to future iterations of the struggle, further contestation. This is the logic of reification and mediation and it is unsurpassable. I call it “democratic rationalization” because it reproduces rational institutions in response to pressure from below.¹⁰

TRANSFORMING PRAXIS

The contemporary relevance of the concept of practice developed in these pages should be the subject of another book, but I do want to offer some tentative thoughts here in conclusion. What I have called “transforming practice” is characterized by the following attributes:

1. Transforming practice is aimed at meaning.
2. Meaning is not subjective but is enacted in practice and “raised” to consciousness.
3. Meanings are entangled with each other in a cultural system that forms the horizon of thought and action.
4. Insofar as it is enacted, culture has system effects that are more or (often) less intended consciously by social actors.
5. Culture does not exhaust social reality but stands in tension with the forces it evokes.

In what follows I will summarize the formulations of this concept in Marx, Lukács, and the Frankfurt School, and consider how it might be applied to contemporary social movements.

We have seen how Marx and Lukács attempt to break through the barrier of alienated and reified cultural forms to a reflexive concept of transforming practice. Their attempts establish the foundations of philosophy of praxis but also lead to an exaggerated notion of activity. In Marx’s *Manuscripts* practice takes on the creative power of the divinity: untransformed nature is treated as mere matter awaiting the human touch. In Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* an ambiguity hangs over the concept of subject–object identity. In a metaphysical reading, it signifies the supremacy of the subject over all being. But in what I call a methodological or dialectical reading, his concept of mediation has much in common with the Frankfurt School’s concept of non-identity. This ambiguity is discussed in [Chapter 6](#).

Paradoxically, the Frankfurt School’s emphasis on the liberating implications of reflection and restraint make possible a deeper understanding of transforming practice. The notion of a “non-exploitative relation to nature” is too easily caricatured as hippie nonsense, the flower child’s anthem. But the philosophers of the Frankfurt School do not

advocate abandoning the idea of activity central to the Marxist conception of human being. Rather they attempt to conceptualize a different kind of activity that respects the object as bearer of potentialities, as possessed of a certain “wholeness” or self-relation. The previous chapter discussed this concept of the object in relation to nature, but it obviously applies also to human beings. To achieve such respect requires a break with the dominant instrumentalist conception of practice. Marcuse conceives the alternative as an “aesthetic” or “erotic” world relation. It too is a kind of practice, a self- and world-transforming practice of the sort imagined in earlier philosophy of praxis but left implicit in the emphasis on revolutionary activity.

This implicit practice appears passive since it is not characterized by manipulation and control, but it nevertheless has an effect on the world through a politics of meaning that, as Lukács argues, alters the functional place of objects in the totality. Even reified practice contains such a non-instrumental moment, a moment in which a horizon of meaning is posited under which the active work of change goes on. In his prescient reflections on technology, Francis Bacon famously defined the relation between this special type of passivity and activity, writing, “Nature to be commanded must be obeyed.”¹¹ The technical actor must obey the “commands” of nature, its laws; he can use the laws for his own ends, but to do so he must accept them. This could very well serve as an uncritical definition of reification. In their implicit self-understanding under capitalism the individuals define themselves as individuals rather than as members of a collective. This is the horizon they posit and under which they generally act. As a result they cannot act together; their “command” of society is strictly limited by “obedience” to the individualist capitalist framework that serves as the “law” of their practice.

Pace Bacon, this framework is not natural. Following Ian Angus, we can say it is “instituted.” He suggests “an expanded meaning of ‘institution’ in which it refers to the opening of a space from which a new temporal order comes forth and applies both to a formation of knowledge and an epoch of Being.”¹² This describes reification as an a priori basis of thought and action.

The worst harms of reification arise not from the instituting moment *per se*, but from its systematic misconstruction in class society as an ontological principle beyond all mediation by the subject. Thus practice is narrowed to its overtly active dimension, while the establishment of its horizon is

conceptualized “contemplatively” as an unchangeable objectivity to which human beings must adapt. Since reified practice cannot act on its horizon, the more vigorous its exertions the more effectively it reproduces the very framework of assumptions within which it is condemned to operate. But this is not a fateful necessity. A non-instrumental action transforming the horizon is possible.

Philosophy of praxis recognizes horizontal transformation in this sense, but that creates a certain tension with the Marxist concept of revolution. In what does transforming practice most essentially consist, action on the horizon of action or the action made possible by that action? Which practice fulfills the requirements of the principle of practice and resolves the antinomies, “material-semiotic” change or power-political change? The Frankfurt School resolves the ambiguity in emphasizing the aesthetic, a domain of activity in which the horizon is the essential object of action. With this emphasis it invokes a power more radical and thoroughgoing than anything dreamed up by industry or politics, what Adorno calls a “pacified technique.”¹³

The Frankfurt School’s emphasis on aesthetics is overly narrow but suggestive. The instituting moment of practice is most clearly a conscious and purposeful mediation in the case of aesthetics. This is so for several reasons. Aesthetic practice begins by freely positing a “form” as a horizon of the ordinary instrumental actions through which the work is created. The imaginative freedom characteristic of aesthetic practice enables idealizing strategies that signify unfulfilled potentialities of the social world. This is accomplished through the way in which the form incorporates aspects of the materials, and is thus not simply imposed but is in some sense emergent. As Lukács argues, the aesthetic form–content relation is dialectical; concept and object interact productively. One way of understanding this interaction is in terms of a limit, the independent logic of the object to which the form must adapt in forming its materials.

Marcuse generalizes these aspects of aesthetics beyond the realm of art. He conceives a technical practice that resembles art making in revealing potentialities and respecting its materials. In reaction against an overactive instrumentalism, he even proposes “letting be” as an ideal. Here the notion of limit is carried to the limit. This makes sense in an aesthetic context. I have found it most clearly exemplified by aspects of Japanese culture. It is beautifully anticipated in a Japanese Buddhist tale that has a particular

relevance to this discussion because it concerns a reconciled technology, the swords of the legendary maker Okazaki Masamune. This account is from D. T. Suzuki:

Masamune flourished in the latter part of the Kamakura era, and his works are uniformly prized by all the sword connoisseurs for their excellent qualities. As far as the edge of the blade is concerned, Masamune may not exceed Muramasa, one of his ablest disciplines, but Masamune is said to have something morally inspiring that comes from his personality. The legend goes thus: When someone was trying to test the sharpness of a Muramasa, he placed it in a current of water and watched how it acted against the dead leaves flowing downstream. He saw that every leaf that met the blade was cut in twain. He then placed a Masamune, and he was surprised to find that the leaves avoided the blade. The Masamune was not bent on killing, it was more than a cutting implement, whereas the Muramasa could not go beyond cutting, there was nothing divinely inspiring in it. The Muramasa is terrible, the Masamune is humane. One is despotic and imperialistic, the other is superhuman, if we may use this form of expression.¹⁴

This tale is the mythological expression of transforming practice. The feeling that such a concept is self-contradictory only testifies to the persistent influence of reification. In the parable, the sword that cuts annihilates its object only to find another in the perpetual flow of the stream. Masamune's sword is the more powerful because it acts not on things—on leaves or men—but on the horizon of its own practice, the assumption that killing is an inevitable fate.

The idea of letting be, or reconciliation as a positive mediation and a true positing, appears in Japanese culture in the more familiar form of “borrowed scenery.” The architectural style that leaves trees standing as natural ornaments of the house is as much a mediation of nature as a different style that begins by leveling them. From an aesthetic standpoint, the living trees are as surely chosen and incorporated into the lives of human beings as if they had been clear cut to make way for a real-estate development.¹⁵ Yet their independence as “subjects” facing the human subject is not overthrown by a violent identification. What is more, the letting be of the trees shows respect not only for outer nature, but also for that which in human nature requires trees. It is as much nature in the subject as without that is mediated in this reconciled practice; for, whatever human beings do to an Other, they simultaneously do to themselves in another mode. That is, in effect, the defining trait of a finite being.

This approach to practice may seem remote from Marxism, and certainly the concept of aesthetic practice, even generalized as it is in Marcuse, cannot fully explain radical political movements. But the

emphasis on horizontal change is an implicit aspect of traditional Marxist politics. Marxism addresses not particular wrongs but the generalized wrong of capitalist civilization as a whole. A totalizing critique emerges through the positing of a horizon. That horizon is the life process of the proletariat, damaged by alienation and commodification. Marxism begins with “the categorical imperative to overthrow all conditions in which man is a degraded, enslaved, neglected, contemptible being.”¹⁶ This imperative establishes a limit: action begins in respect for the humanity of the worker. The “law” of that humanity commands the overthrow of all that violates it.¹⁷

A similar correlation of passivity and activity defines class consciousness in Lukács. The prior condition of struggle is the “self-consciousness of the commodity.” In it the worker posits her own needs as a limit violated by the commodification of labor. Unfulfilled needs motivate resistance not just to poverty but to its cause, the reification of the worker’s own self. This self too is a kind of “nature” to be defended against capitalist clear cutting. That defense is the source of the revolutionary act that overthrows the system. It begins with a self-transformation that is itself a social transformation.

Clearly, these Marxist conceptions of practice go beyond Marcuse’s “letting be,” and even Marcuse only mentions this notion to emphasize the contrast between emancipatory technique and the dominant exploitative instrumentalism. The link between meaning and enactment implies active engagement with reality, even if in the extreme case of “letting be” that engagement takes the form of adjustment to the independent potentialities of the materials. More commonly activism involves overt interventions into social and political processes. What characterizes such interventions as transformative is not the degree of violence they exhibit but their relation to the totality, i.e., to the cultural system as a whole.

The Marxist conception of practice depends on a specific historical configuration of the proletariat but its structure survives changes in that configuration. The underlying problem Lukács attempts to solve with his notion of class consciousness is the possibility of totalizing critique. Since critical agency is itself empowered by the system it criticizes, is there not a contradiction in its stance? This was the insuperable obstacle in Horkheimer and Adorno’s futile dialogue. The answer Lukács proposes is the dialectic

of form and content. A modified version of that dialectic applies even after the decline of the revolutionary proletariat.

Societies impose forms on contents they activate and shape, evoke and channel. There is no guarantee that the forms will effectively contain the contents. The culture of rule in every society addresses the gaps with prescriptions and solutions of various sorts, such as religious ideology and administrative initiatives. The conditions of critique are fulfilled where tensions between form and content become conscious as such at the level of content, i.e., the subordinate social actors. Then a resistant subjectivity forms and counter-ideologies and initiatives challenge the system. Lukács identifies this unique situation with capitalism and its proletariat. We now know that it has a wider reach.

Although we do not have many equivalents today of the militant class struggles that inspired Marx and Lukács, a deep transformation of the horizon of contemporary practice is gradually emerging. This transformation takes place in scattered regions of society in response to a critical awareness of the harms of a destructive way of life. Awareness liberates the individuals for political activity most visibly in movements around gender issues, struggles against exclusion, the environmental movement, and the defense of the Internet against commercial domination, surveillance, and censorship. Economic and environmental crises weaken the grip of reification. The horizon of practice shifts with the realization of the contingency of the world created by technocratic neoliberalism.

The movements to which this gives rise are still quite weak and lack an overall strategy of change. They do not fulfill the conditions of revolution as Lukács explains them. But the unfavorable comparison with earlier proletarian movements should not blind us to subtle changes taking place in the conduct of politics and the nature of the public sphere that may yet shape a new era. Of the figures discussed here, Marcuse understood this best.

He proposed two different strategies in the struggle against the one-dimensional society. The “Great Refusal” was an aesthetic principle generalized as a total rejection of the system.¹⁸ This strategy recapitulated old debates that opposed reform to revolution. Uncompromising and absolute critique was an attractive stance in the context of a dystopian society rich enough to co-opt every demand in any case. But ironically the search for the unco-optable demand led to Marcuse himself becoming an

icon in the mass culture of 1968, a fact from which his reputation suffers to this day.

A new configuration emerged in the 1970s that Marcuse called the “preventive counter-revolution.” Co-optation continued but became supplemented by recession and repression. The New Left disintegrated, but left behind a large critical public and a sense of suppressed possibilities. Marcuse now echoed the German slogan, “A Long March through the Institutions.”¹⁹ In a time of political eclipse one must find a place in the institutions of society. But it is still possible to bring contestation to bear on those institutions, accepting the likely ambiguity of the outcome. Demanding the overthrow of the system is not the touchstone of resistance it might be in a time of revolutionary ferment.

These two strategies exemplify two different versions of the dialectic. The Great Refusal is a disappointed response to the failure of the metaphysical version in which a substantialized revolutionary agent such as the proletariat resolves the contradictions and establishes a socialist state. The Long March reflects the dialectic of permanent mediation of rational institutions by their members. I argue for the disruptive thesis—disruptive for traditional Marxism, that is—that only the second version makes sense today as a theory of progressive social change.

The system as a whole is not an object of resistance at this time, and may only become so in the future through the horizontal changes underlying contemporary resistances, challenging fundamental assumptions and institutions. Thus these resistances are neither revolutionary nor reformist in the usual sense of the term; they differ from minor reforms internal to the normal functioning of the institutions since they restructure the context within which the system operates. This too is a kind of transforming practice that affects the totality. For want of a better term, I will call them “radical reforms.” They are not to be conceived as merely deficient by comparison with true revolutionary practice. Even if the system could be abolished, many reified institutions would continue to exist and inspire resistances and radical reforms similar to those we see today.

Traditional Marxism recognized this reality to some extent. It supported the growth of a labor movement demanding economic reforms, and it proposed a gradual transition to socialism. But labor struggle and the transition were conceived as temporary phenomena, the one preparing the revolution and the other following it and ending with the advent of

communism.²⁰ In reality, reform and transition are always already engaged in modern society and will never end. They are inherent in the structure of modernity, not just in a particular economic system. The failure to recognize this has doomed revolutions in the name of socialism. Having overthrown capitalism, they reproduced its reifying consequences in other institutional forms while blocking mediation in the name of the revolution. The contemporary significance of the philosophy of praxis appears clearly in the light of this history.

¹ The operative word here is “foreseeable,” but obviously philosophical conclusions cannot be based on events that might occur despite being unforeseeable.

² Karl Marx, *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, trans. and ed. L. Easton and K. Guddat (New York: Anchor, 1967), 402.

³ For my position on Habermas’s famous critique of Marcuse’s concept of nature, see Andrew Feenberg, *Questioning Technology* (New York: Routledge, 1999), [Chapter 7](#).

⁴ For the example of video games, see Sara M. Grimes and Andrew Feenberg, “Rationalizing Play: A Critical Theory of Digital Gaming,” in A. Feenberg and N. Friesen, ed., *(Re)Inventing the Internet: Critical Case Studies* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2012). The concept of social rationality underlying this discussion is explained in Andrew Feenberg, *Between Reason and Experience: Essays in Technology and Modernity* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2010), [Chapter 8](#).

⁵ Is it still necessary to point out the failure of Habermas’s system theory to deal with the bias of rational systems? See Feenberg, *Questioning Technology*, [Chapter 7](#).

⁶ *HCC*, 208, 313–14.

⁷ Feenberg, *Questioning Technology*, [Chapter 6](#), especially 142–7.

⁸ For a discussion of the Internet on these terms, see Feenberg and Friesen, eds., *(Re) Inventing the Internet: Critical Case Studies* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2012). See also Brian Wynne, *Rationality and Ritual: Participation and Exclusion in Nuclear Decision-Making* (London: Earthscan, 2011).

⁹ Andrew Feenberg, *Transforming Technology* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), [Chapter 3](#).

¹⁰ Feenberg, *Between Reason and Experience*, [Chapter 1](#). The temptation to dismiss this logic as reformist or co-opted must be resisted. A similar attitude would have led to the dismissal of the struggles of the early labor movement. The problem of reform versus revolution only arises in what Lukács called the period of the “actuality of the revolution.” We are not there. Here is how J. M. Bernstein makes a similar point: “I argue that the best we can hope for ... is that rationalizing processes are repeatedly challenged and transformed by social practices that create havens of symbolic renewal ... that nonetheless cannot themselves be fully incorporated into those rationalized systems. Hence, the suggestion is, rather than looking for rational, stable, and systematically reproducible social forms ... we should be operating with a suitably adjusted anti-utopian (albeit thereby utopian) conflict model of ethics and society.” J. M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and*

Ethics (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 19 n33. It is noteworthy that Lukács called his own approach a “post-utopian attitude to history” (*HCC*, 78).

¹¹ Francis Bacon, “Aphorisms Concerning the Interpretation of Nature and the Kingdom of Man,” in E. A. Burt, ed., *The English Philosophers from Bacon to Mill* (New York: Modern Library, 1939), 28.

¹² Ian Angus, *Primal Scenes of Communication* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2000), 5.

¹³ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. R. Hullot-Kentor (London and New York: Continuum, 1997), 47.

¹⁴ D. T. Suzuki, “Zen and Swordsmanship I,” in D. T. Suzuki, *Zen and Japanese Culture* (Princeton, NJ: Bollingen, 1959), 91–2.

¹⁵ Frank Lloyd Wright translated this idea of borrowed scenery into modern architecture. For the influence of this idea on Wright, see Anna Whitsun, “Frank Lloyd Wright: Architect of Landscape (Part II),” *Frank Lloyd Wright Quarterly*, Vol. 11, No. 4, (Fall 2000), 4–25.

¹⁶ Marx, “Towards a Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law: Introduction,” 257–8.

¹⁷ On the concept of limit (*peras*), see Feenberg, *Between Reason and Experience*, 191, 213–15.

¹⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 149–50.

¹⁹ Herbert Marcuse, *Counter-Revolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 55.

²⁰ Feenberg, *Transforming Technology*, [Chapter 2](#).

APPENDIX

The Unity of Theory and Practice

INTRODUCTION

The first essay in *History and Class Consciousness* is a lengthy elucidation of the enigmatic phrase “the unity of theory and practice,” i.e., the relation of Marxism to the proletariat and its movement. Lukács argues that “theory is essentially the intellectual expression of the revolutionary process itself.”¹ The argument is complex and interesting despite Lukács’s erroneous assumptions about the future of the movement. Yet his contribution has been systematically caricatured by critics who insist that it anticipates already in 1923 his later accommodation with Stalinism, rationalizing in advance the confiscation of the historical mission of the proletariat by a party and a police state. This caricature has become the standard interpretation in the English-speaking world.²

In this [Appendix](#), I will attempt to reconstruct Lukács’s position in its real context, that of contemporary Marxist thought and the many dilemmas and unsolved problems implicated in the relation of theory to practice in his time. I will first show how Lukács deals with the contradictions in the program of historical materialism, and then turn to his theory of class consciousness. My approach in this chapter is influenced by French interpreters such as Lucien Goldmann, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Lucien Sebag, who describe a very different image of Lukács from the prevalent one. But it is, I believe, a more accurate image.

These interpreters do not project back onto Lukács’s early Leninism, or Marxism’s later fate under Stalin, as though the meaning of the origin were revealed teleologically in history. This is Whig history in reverse and best avoided by interpreting events in their contemporary context. This is not to say that contemporaries fully understand the ways in which their ideas may be used and abused in the future. Leninism in the early 1920s already had some of the authoritarian features that later characterized the Soviet state,

but those features still responded to real political challenges of an emancipatory movement.³

STRUCTURE AND AGENCY

Lukács situates Marxism at the intersection of the two fundamental discoveries of modern social theory. The first of these, which he attributes to Vico, holds that society is a human product; from this idea derive all those social theories that emphasize human agency. As Marx writes, human beings are “both the authors and the actors of their own drama.”⁴ The second discovery, attributed to Smith and Ricardo, holds that in one of its dimensions—the economy—this product has a rational form described in universal laws resembling the laws of nature. Thus Marx also claims that social life can be “viewed as a process of natural history,” in which men are “governed by laws not only independent of human will, consciousness and intelligence, but rather, on the contrary, determining that will, consciousness and intelligence.”⁵ Every later social determinism stems from this insight.

These two discoveries compass the antinomy of structure and agency. This antinomy still divides social theory, which emphasizes now one, now the other of its poles, the logic of the social order or the action of subjects in history.⁶

The antinomy bedevils Marxism from the beginning. By Marx’s day, capitalism had subordinated all other areas of social life to its exigencies. This state of affairs argued for an emphasis on structure, the determining power of the economic laws over against the will and intentions of human beings. And yet the evidence of Vico—that history is a human product—was increasingly confirmed by revolutionary movements and romantic cultural protest against the deathless mechanism of the market. Hence the contradiction between two of Marx’s most important theories: historical materialism, which was supposed to show the dependency of social and political agency on economic structure; and the projection of a disalienating socialist revolution through which humanity as subject would reassert its claims.

The contradiction finally culminates in the early twentieth century with a series of debates in the social democratic movement. In these debates, a voluntaristic theory of action is dialectically correlated with a mechanistic conception of society. Emphasizing structure leads to passivity, the long

wait for the inevitable revolution that never comes. The action theory cannot in principle go beyond suggesting the desirability of moralizing the social world or of manipulating it technically according to its laws. “Economic fatalism and the reformation of socialism through ethics are intimately connected.”⁷ Thus the great foes in German Social Democracy, the determinists of the orthodox “Center,” and the neo-Kantian liberals of the revisionist right, appear to Lukács to occupy opposite poles of the bourgeois antinomy of fact and value, reified law and individual action in history. Lukács argues,

With the ideology of social democracy the proletariat falls victim to all the antinomies of reification that we have hitherto analyzed in such detail. The important role increasingly played in this ideology by “man” as a value, an ideal, an imperative, accompanied, of course, by a growing “insight” into the necessity and logic of the actual economic process, is only one symptom of this relapse into the reified immediacy of the bourgeoisie.⁸

This dilemma emerges from the ambiguities of Marxist theory. Its program for explaining the role of the subject in history is based on a general ontology that affirms the primacy of matter over thought. This leads by analogy to the notion that the “material” life process of society is the “base,” determining for its “ideal” expressions in the superstructures. That this is an analogy is clear: there is no evident boundary between social “matter” and “spirit” since ideology is, admittedly, “a material force when it seizes the masses,” and since production incorporates the knowledge of the producers. However, the analogy draws its force less from the concrete content of social research than from its polemic opposition to idealistic social theory that first distinguished social “matter” and “spirit” and ordered them as effect and cause. Engels says as much in a famous letter to Bloch in which he admits that Marxism’s historiographic practice differs from its materialist program.

Marx and I are ourselves partly to blame for the fact that the younger people sometimes lay more stress on the economic side than is due to it. We had to emphasize the main principle vis-à-vis our adversaries, who denied it, and we had not always the time, the place or the opportunity to give their due to the other elements involved in the interaction. But when it came to presenting a section of history, that is, to making a practical application, it was a different matter and there no error is permissible.⁹

As it is generally formulated, the materialistic program leads to insoluble dilemmas. Once social matter and spirit are conceived as independent entities, how can they be brought into relation? The mind–

body problem returns to haunt Marxism, which must seek in the theory of ideology a social pineal gland to join what it has conceptually sundered. Like all other solutions of the mind–body problem, that of Marxism is a failure. If social thought is explained as a “reflection” of the economic base, as the image of its original, it is impossible to understand the “reciprocal action” of the former on the latter. Yet without this reciprocal action, Marxism collapses into an economic determinism of which Engels does not hesitate to say that it is “a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase.”¹⁰

These dilemmas show that a given problematic is not transcended by reversing the value signs attached to its terms. Rather, the same antinomies appear within the inverted problematic in inverted form. Thus where idealism ends up in the hazy indetermination of a theory of “values” and “free will,” the materialistic correlate results in a determinism so rigid as to be incompatible with any concept of historical agency at all. The trace of the original idealistic problematic bends Marxist theory toward such conclusions in spite of contrary tendencies in concrete applications.

Adequately relating base to superstructure requires not only more mediations between the terms than materialism provides, but also a definition of the terms that will admit of a mediation in principle. This is precisely what is lacking in the materialist program because it is a prisoner of the traditional ontological distinction of matter and spirit. As such it conceives objectivity as self-subsistent and unreflected, as existence in the mode of thinghood, subject to formal laws. The subjective “factor” appears now as the correlated opposite of existence, as insubstantial, pure reflection, which enters the world only accidentally through a problematic incarnation. The mark of this rigid opposition of thought and things appears clearly in the familiar methodological dilemmas of the materialist program.

The revolution can only be explained in this framework by descending from the clear air in which the laws float to the earthly level of particular historical data. These data often appear to be ideologically determined rather than determined by the mode of production. Revolution in particular implies the possibility of superstructural dominance, which violates the deterministic thesis of historical materialism. The case is not helped much by the structuralist revision of the thesis *à la* Althusser according to which revolution is the structurally possible result of the contingent flow of events. That move goes some way to overcoming determinism but it leaves the occurrence of the revolution to chance. What is required is an

explanation of the sequence leading from capitalism to socialism as a structural rather than a purely contingent process of change, without falling into a determinism that excludes human agency. Lukács's alternative account interprets the revolutionary process not as the simple consequence of the economic laws but as the determinate negation of those laws. As he argues, "A dialectical necessity is far from being the same thing as a mechanical causal necessity."¹¹

The difference stems from the fact that the dialectic involves conscious *Aufhebung*. Hence Lukács's emphasis on the central role of consciousness in the revolution. But consciousness in this context is not an insubstantial spiritual entity as it is for the official Marxist program. In the background of that program, Lukács detects Marx's early metacritical reconstruction of the functions of consciousness in the material life process. On this basis Lukács rejects the causal paradigm of subject–object relations, with its external interactions between separate spheres of reality—being and thinking—and instead shows the dialectical interdependency of the antinomial opposites.

The relativization of thought and social being with respect to each other still shapes Marx's earliest formulations of the distinction between base and superstructure. In *The German Ideology*, for example, passages such as the following abound: "Consciousness can never be anything else than conscious existence, and the existence of men is their actual life-process."¹² Or again:

This mode of production must not be considered simply as being the reproduction of the physical existence of the individuals. Rather, it is a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite *mode of life* on their part. As individuals express their life, so they are ... What they are therefore coincides with their production, both with *what* they produce and with *how* they produce.¹³

While open to a mechanistic interpretation, such passages take on their full significance only in the context of the metacritical revision of consciousness and life that Marx first undertook in the *Manuscripts*. There Marx's critique of the idealistic concept of consciousness is far more radical than his later programmatic position on the superstructure. The reconstruction of philosophical concepts proceeds through an immanent critique of both the abstract ideal and its antinomic correlate, the equally abstract "real." Thus Marx not only revises the concept of reason but also the opposed concept of need. As explained in [Chapter 2](#), the revision of the one *is* the revision of the other, the demonstration that the sphere of need

has the form and function of rationality. This double movement of the metacritique is purged from the later theory of ideology and the superstructures, which treats the opposed correlates as independent real objects and then relates them as cause and effect. The implicit starting point of Lukács's own social theory is a recognition of the failure of this later conception and a recovery of Marx's original metacritical insight.

The contradictions of the traditional Marxist conception have methodological consequences. Lukács argues that reified theory, including its Marxist forms, cannot transcend the antinomy of structure and agency. For it the structural dimension of society appears to be independent of and prior to the level of mere historical events, the "content" of social life produced by conscious action. He rejects the attempt to find mediations between such a separately conceived structure and history. The two aspects must arise simultaneously, as mutually necessary aspects of a third element, a basic substratum. This substratum is social practice. History is a process in which that practice generates not just events, but the structural order through which they take on meaning and coherence. On this basis, Lukács repeatedly argues that history is no mere causal sequence but the production of the social world in a specific *form* that has the socially relative universality of (what we could call) a cultural system.

For a model of this process Lukács draws on classical German philosophy, which confronted a somewhat similar problem at a much higher level of generality. Lukács interprets the philosophical concepts of "synthesis" and "mediation" as the conceptual mythology corresponding to the real practical production of structure as history and in history. Demythologized, these concepts explain the structural dimension of society through the process of its real production. Agency is then conceived not merely as a sequence of actions but as a process of systematization, the construction and deconstruction of a culturally secured social order. The remarkable coordination implied in this process results from the logic of the economic system.

Following Marx's suggestion, Lukács claims that the capitalist economy has a double character. The bourgeoisie constitutes the world of its daily activity through an individualistic economic practice, the reified form of which it then perceives as the essence of society. In the course of its activity, reification is generalized beyond its specifically economic content to become the basis of thought and perception generally. The economic

categories thereby become models of a specific type of objectivity, shaping consciousness and social reality in all domains.¹⁴

The social reproduction of the economy depends on the cultural generalization of its categorial structure. Lukács argues that consciousness is both shaped by its relation to immediate appearances and contributes in its turn to orienting practice toward the activities required to reproduce the system. As Marx put it in another context, “Production thus produces not only an object for the subject, but also a subject for the object.”¹⁵ The form of objectivity and the mode of consciousness based on it are essential mediations in the process of social reproduction.

Society no longer divides into separate spheres of material objectivity and spiritual subjectivity, body and mind metaphorically reconstituted as dimensions of the social world. Social subjectivity and objectivity are no longer seen as causally related independent entities, but rather as functional elements in a system of practice. With this the circle is closed, practice producing a world of objects that, by their form, shape a consciousness that orients practice toward the reproduction of these same objects.

This dialectical circularity of the system of practice is the basis of its systematic misperception as a solid reality constituting for practice. Lukács writes that “history is the history of the unceasing overthrow of the forms of objectivity that shape the life of man.”¹⁶ And yet each form of objectivity presents itself immediately to consciousness as an atemporal system, without roots or history. In fact the very efficacy of forms of objectivity rests on the misperception of them as unhistorical, natural, and necessary. Reification has precisely this character.

Can this circularity be broken? This is the question of the possibility of a “true” or revolutionary consciousness. The purpose of Lukács’s theory of class consciousness is to identify the conditions for a transcendence of immediacy, a demystification of the form of objectivity of society. That demystification takes place in proletarian class consciousness through a metacritical revision of the form of objectivity. Social appearance—reification—and social reality are mediated at the level of lived experience, and not merely in a scientific or philosophical theory. It is the discovery of this practical metacritique that promises not just the truth of social reality, but its transformation. The life experience of the proletariat makes possible a unique revelation of the cultural limits of capitalism while at the same time promising a real transcendence of those limits.

Capitalism is distinguished from all earlier social formations by the fact that the reified form of objectivity of its economy plays the chief role in its reproduction. In precapitalist societies, reproduction is secured through cultural mechanisms that are less directly rooted in the economy, such as tradition and religion. As a result class struggle is not functionally located where it can threaten the overall survival of the mode of production, even if it can still threaten particular institutions, laws, and rulers. Under capitalism, on the contrary, class struggle has devastating implications because it directly affects the most basic foundations of the society. The dereifying class consciousness of the proletariat, arising in the context of economic struggles, has the same sort of general cultural impact as reification itself. This is why Lukács says that “the process of the revolution is—on a historical scale—synonymous with the process of development of proletarian class consciousness.”¹⁷

This interpretation of the Marxist theory of class consciousness unites historical materialism and socialist revolution as two sides of the same coin. It is no longer necessary to make ad hoc claims to defend the theory, for example, explaining that the normal dominance of base over superstructure may be exceptionally reversed in the revolution. The revolution is no longer conceived here as a superstructural reaction on the base, nor is the base conceived in narrow economic terms. The base is a system of practices that establishes reification as the form of objectivity of the whole society. Its transformation depends not on the exceptional efficacy of consciousness, but on the dynamics of the total cultural system. Hence Lukács writes,

The coercive measures taken by society in individual cases are often hard and brutally materialistic, but the strength of every society is in the last resort a spiritual strength. And from this we can only be liberated by knowledge. This knowledge cannot be of the abstract kind that remains in one’s head—many “socialists” have possessed that sort of knowledge. It must be knowledge that has become flesh and blood; to use Marx’s phrase, it must be “practical critical activity.”¹⁸

CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS AS IDEAL-TYPE

It is no accident that *History and Class Consciousness* begins with a discussion of the unsolved problem of the relation of Marxism to the proletariat. Philosophy of praxis depends on historical action, but what sort of action qualifies? In his first attempts to find an agent of revolution, Marx surreptitiously makes philosophy the subject of a historical change the proletariat itself would undergo rather than initiate and control. Lukács

seeks an alternative to this unsatisfactory view with his theory of proletarian class consciousness. He argues that Marxism is not related in a merely accidental manner to the thought and action of proletarians, that it is not a scientific “consciousness from without” that the proletariat would serve as a “passive, material basis,” but that Marxist method is itself a reflection of proletarian class consciousness. Lukács writes, “every method is necessarily implicated in the existence of the relevant class.”¹⁹

I call such a theory–practice relation “reflexive.” Although Lukács’s version of this approach is his own, its roots lie in Marx’s early writings. Marx first develops the concept of reflexivity in considerations on the revolutionary state, discussed in [Chapter 2](#). He is influenced by Hegel’s critique of the Jacobin experience in the French Revolution. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel claimed that the Terror was the result of an attempt to legislate a universal moral law in ignorance of the imbrication of universal and particular in actual social life. In response to Hegel’s analysis, Marx attempts to avoid political moralism, based not on real social tensions but on abstract principles in the Jacobin manner.

In the early 1840s, Marx is writing under the influence not only of Hegel, but also of Feuerbach, whose theory of religious alienation he generalized to include morality and the state. Just as Feuerbach reduced religion to its human basis in the alienated community, so Marx projects the “social” as the implicit unity of the contraries into which life is divided in alienated class society.

Thus in “Critical Notes on ‘The King of Prussia and Social Reform’” he argues that communism cannot be a utopia imposed against private interests, for the very act of imposing it would reproduce the basic ill, the split between moral values and interests. The proletariat should avoid politics, except for purely negative purposes, and instead concentrate on social action toward the end of creating a wholly new type of society in which politics will be unnecessary.²⁰ A revolution that aims to bring morality down to earth, rooted in the needs of the people, could never succeed on the basis of state action. The goal is not merely to change the state by infusing it with correct moral principles, but far more radically to abolish the state.

This early critique of political moralism implies a general revision of the relation of theory to practice. If Marxism is not merely a disguised moral exigency from which the state would necessarily be reborn after the

revolution, it must stand in a new relation to the class it represents. Starting from the critique of morality, Marx arrives at a concept of revolutionary theory as the “reflection” of life in thought. Reflexive subjectivity corresponds to social revolution just as abstract moral subjectivity corresponds to political revolution. The one emerges from the “social instinct” of the proletariat and articulates the inner meaning of its actions, while the other reflects the opposition of “ought” and “is” as they are experienced by the isolated individual in bourgeois society. Hence Marx writes in an early letter that his theory simply explains to the “world” “its own actions,” articulating the historically evolved content of the social movement. “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.”²¹

Marx’s later works are ambiguous, conserving only traces of this original concept of subjectivity, as for example in the preface to *Capital* where he writes, “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.”²² This passage continues to suggest that Marxism is somehow rooted in the life experiences of the working class, although unfortunately Marx never explains exactly how.

What he might have meant is suggested by a brief passage in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*:

Just as little must one imagine that the democratic representatives are indeed all shopkeepers or enthusiastic champions of shopkeepers. According to their education and their individual position they may be as far apart as heaven from earth. 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.²³

Applied to the proletariat, this would mean that the “problems” the proletariat confronts are “solved” theoretically by Marxism in a way that reflects the similar practical solution to which the class is driven by its life circumstances. This could have been the basis for a theory of the essential relation of Marxist theory to proletarian practice had Marx ever developed such a theory. Instead, in his mature writings, he offers programmatic references to the “determination of thought by being” and “historical

necessity.” Although this deterministic language is often seen as a concession to scientism, it serves the same purpose as the earlier reflexive theory of consciousness in blocking the regression to moralistic socialism.

Marx’s metacritique lies in the background of Lukács’s theory of class consciousness. It suggests a radical revision of the usual understanding of the relation of thought to action. Thought is usually conceived as the locus of rationality and meaning, while action is mere physical execution. But according to the metacritique, rationality and meaning can no longer be exclusively identified with individual thought, as they have been by modern philosophy since Descartes. For a reflexive theory of consciousness, they inhere not so much in thought as in acts. And these acts belong to a system of behavior that includes the beliefs of the individuals as a merely subordinate element. The consciousness of the subject relates to practice as a functional element within it, necessary for its performance but not for that matter the producer or truth of that performance. “Marx breaks with every limitation of signifying activity to the understanding alone, the true subject no longer being the subject of knowledge alone ... but the real human being inserted into the concrete life of the society of which he is a member.”²⁴

This is precisely Lukács’s position. He refuses an identification of meaning and mind. Meaning and its formal structures are now detached from their usual locus and reconstructed through the concept of the form of objectivity as real social determinants. Practice is in itself teleological, meaning-bearing, and not simply the execution of a teleology and a meaning-content first disclosed to the subject in thought. Rather, that disclosure takes place later when theory raises practice to consciousness by thematizing its operative significance.

The Marxist tradition addresses these issues in terms of the theory of class consciousness. But this theory was not elaborated by 1923 much beyond the initial hints to be found in Marx and Engels. References to “subjective factors” covered over the yawning gap Lukács attempts to fill by drawing on several sources, including Weberian sociology and Hegel. His theory is best understood as an investigation into what I will call the “specific rationality” of social standpoints. It measures the epistemological credentials of different classes and on that basis their revolutionary potential.

For all classes but the proletariat, class consciousness is “false,” remains “a class-conditioned *unconsciousness* of one’s own socio-historical and

economic condition.”²⁵ In these cases, class consciousness not only defines what the members of the class at their most lucid can know, but also sets the boundary of their understanding beyond which they cannot penetrate without shedding their class identity.

This boundary is, ultimately, the culture of capitalism. Lukács asks whether any standpoint exists *inside* the given culture from which that culture appears not as a transhistorical limit on consciousness but as a merely historical stage. Is there any class position within capitalist society from which its most basic presuppositions can be transcended? He answers that the proletariat can in principle achieve such a transcendence, overleaping its own age from within, in defiance of Hegel’s pessimistic restriction of wisdom to knowledge of the past.²⁶

According to Lukács the specific rationality of class behavior can be represented theoretically in a model corresponding with the rational content of class action independent of the actual thoughts of the individuals. He employs Weber’s concept of the “ideal-type” to define this model. Although not identical with the reality it describes, the ideal-type can be useful in isolating the probable causes and motives of behavior that more or less conform to it. Weber explains: “For purposes of causal *imputation* of empirical events, we need the rational, empirical-technical and logical constructions, which help us to answer the questions as to what a behavior pattern or thought pattern ... would be like if it possessed completely rational, empirical and logical ‘correctness’ and ‘consistency.’”²⁷ Lukács constructs the concept of class consciousness as an ideal-type in this sense.

By relating consciousness to the whole of society it becomes possible to infer the thoughts and feelings which men would have in a particular life situation if they were able perfectly to assess both it and the interests arising from it in their impact on immediate action and on the whole structure of society. That is to say, it would be possible to infer the thoughts and feelings appropriate to their objective situation ... Now class consciousness consists in fact in the appropriate and rational reactions “imputed” [*zugerechnet*] to a particular typical position available in the process of production.²⁸

Lukács explains that class consciousness is not “the sum nor the average of what is thought or felt by the single individuals who make up the class.”²⁹ With respect to this real consciousness, class consciousness would only be the horizon of rationality, the “objectively possible” beliefs that the individuals could hold at their most lucid and rational.³⁰ To the extent that the concept of class consciousness is properly constructed in each case,

“plausibly motivated” in Weber’s words, it would describe the teleology of class behavior on which depends the “historically significant acts” of the class.³¹ The concept of class consciousness is tailored to the basic tendencies of class action from the outset, while the real consciousness of the individuals frequently trails behind, rationalizing the activity of the class *post festum*.

In his discussion of Lukács, Merleau-Ponty attempts to resolve the ambiguity of this account in which class consciousness seems neither wholly real nor merely ideal. He defines class consciousness as “the inner principle of activity, the global project which supports and animates the productions and actions of a class, which designates for it an image of the world and of its tasks in this world and which, external conditions taken into account, assigns it a history.”³² This seems a good explanation of Lukács’s intent.

Lukács constructs the model of class consciousness on the basis of three determinants: the reified form of objectivity of society, the social situation of the various classes of society, and their class interests.

1. *Form of Objectivity*. The reality of every society is to some extent concealed by the form of objectivity in which it appears. An adequate understanding thus cannot be based on uncritical acceptance of immediacy. For a class to attain a true consciousness of its own social world, it must be able to apprehend social appearances as dialectical moments in a comprehension that goes beyond them to their basis in social reality itself.

But not all forms of objectivity allow the transcendence of immediacy. Precapitalist forms confound nature and culture in a single seamless web, attributed to a God or gods and impenetrable to the members of society. Only reification, the form of objectivity of capitalism, can be successfully mediated by members of the society it structures. This is because reification reveals human agency in the construction of the social world, if in a distorted form.

According to Lukács, workers relativize the reified form of objectivity of capitalist society in their daily experience. They are thus potentially capable of seeing reification as a historically limited moment in a larger process that surpasses capitalism. It is this ability to transcend immediacy that exposes the entire structure of reified thought to criticism. A correct theoretical understanding of society is finally possible from this class standpoint, as a critique of the economic and epistemological premises of

capitalism. Lukács argues that workers' practical-critical response to the reification of experience is the foundation of Marxist dialectics. Marxism is thus, as theory, "adjusted" to the implicit methodological approach of proletarian class consciousness.

2. *Class Situation*. Lukács writes that "in capitalist society reality is—immediately—the same for both the bourgeoisie and the proletariat."³³ And again: "The proletariat shares with the bourgeoisie the reification of every aspect of its life."³⁴ However, reification is differently experienced from different class standpoints. 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.³⁵

Class situation determines a perspective on the form of objectivity of the society. It motivates the bourgeoisie to remain in immediacy and the proletariat to transcend it.

Class situation also determines what Lukács calls the "immediate objects" of the class, that is to say, the objects of its daily activity that are paradigmatic for it in interpreting more "distant" social spheres. To avoid confusion, I prefer to call these initial objects of class consciousness "proximate objects" to distinguish them clearly from the immediate form of objectivity of the society as a whole.

Lukács argues that these proximate objects form an inner circle of awareness, starting out from which the class strives to achieve a universal comprehension of all sectors of society. Whether it succeeds or not in transcending the limits of its own proximate objects will depend on its place in the production process. Classes engaged in secondary economic activities are unable to construct a coherent worldview. Only a class such as the bourgeoisie or proletariat, involved in the industrial economy, can encompass the entire society in thought by generalizing from its particular situation.

3. *Class Interest*. Every class consciousness is adjusted to the interests of the class. Where these interests are better served by a consciousness that remains in immediacy, class consciousness will be "false consciousness." This is the case, Lukács claims, for the bourgeoisie. In a true consciousness

of society it would discover the limited and partial character of its domination as a ruling class. It therefore remains in the “necessary illusion” of reification, the better to believe in its universal mission. And where the uprisings of the oppressed challenge its pretensions, the class nevertheless remains in ignorance through the “falsity of consciousness,” i.e., through the development of ideology in the pejorative sense.³⁶ The class interest of the bourgeoisie thus maintains the class in immediacy and represses comprehension of the class struggle.

Only the proletariat, the bourgeoisie’s antagonist in this struggle, has no interest in the maintenance of capitalism and therefore no need for illusions. As an industrial class it can understand the society as a whole. And it experiences reification not as a universal transhistorical horizon, but rather as a barrier to its own self-actualization, a barrier it can attempt to overcome both in practice and in theory.

Lukács claims that workers themselves are the proximate object of this initial dereification because they cannot accept immediately their own form of objectivity under capitalism as commodified labor power. They are constantly aware of the difference between their social form as commodified labor and real content as persons. Unfortunately, he has little to say about the concrete contexts in which workers more or less spontaneously dereify aspects of social reality.³⁷ The capitalist, on the contrary, receives the worker at the factory gate as a commodity and is not obliged to think beyond this immediacy for any reason of principle.

For Lukács the proletariat is always already situated beyond immediacy in the simple act of becoming (socially) self-conscious. This self-consciousness begins to shatter the reified form of its objects and penetrates to their “reality.” It can do so, Lukács argues, because the consciousness of the proletariat is “the *self-consciousness of the commodity*; or in other words it is the self-knowledge, the self-revelation of the capitalist society founded upon the production and exchange of commodities.”³⁸

In the commodity the worker recognizes himself and his own relation to capital. Inasmuch as he is incapable in practice of raising himself above the role of object his consciousness is the self-consciousness of the commodity; or in other words it is the self-knowledge, the self-revelation of the capitalist society founded upon the production and exchange of commodities ... [W]hen the worker knows himself as a commodity his knowledge is practice. *That is to say, this knowledge brings about an objective structural change in the object of knowledge.*³⁹

This is the unity of theory and practice. Workers' recognition of their own social role transforms that role. They are freed from the reified self-understanding that keeps them divided as owners of a commodity, labor power. This in itself constitutes a fundamental social change. From isolated individuals they are transformed into a rebellious collective subject: "the act of consciousness overthrows the form of objectivity of its object."⁴⁰ The patterns of behavior that flow from and reproduce reification are altered by social self-consciousness. Instead of facing apparently solid social facts individually, workers recognize their own collective implication in these so-called facts and in so doing dereify them: the social world no longer appears as a collection of things but as a complex of processes in which the workers are always already engaged.

For example, a "thing" such as a corporation has a form supplied by law and established practice that is stabilized as a reified appearance. In normal times, the isolated individual agents confront the corporation as an overwhelming power, a "reality" to which they must adjust. But during a strike, social form and content are juxtaposed and clash. The corporation is revealed to be a complex of human relations that can be challenged, exposing it to transformation at every level: economic, social, political. The revolution is such a dereifying practice writ large, encompassing the entire society.

Dereification is not of course a pure thought process, still less a quasiphilosophical transcendence of opinion in knowledge. It is a situated knowledge, a transformation according to quite specific determinations, very different from the activity of a scientific *cogito*. Nor does the possibility of such a dereification imply that workers are spontaneously revolutionary. The point is rather to explain how workers can demystify reification sufficiently to act autonomously on their own behalf and in their own interests as a collective social subject. Class consciousness consists in a more or less spontaneous critique of reification to which correspond everyday practices that challenge the most fundamental premises of capitalism and its culture when deepened and systematized in the context of union and party activities. These practices usually stop far short of revolution, but they underlie the very possibility of revolution. In sum, this theory is an attempt to show *in principle* that the class can make a revolution that does not merely replace one set of rulers with another, but that transcends the cultural horizon and alters the foundations of society.

For that possibility to be actualized specific historical conditions must be met. Those conditions include the mass strike and a revolutionary party.⁴¹

THE MEDIATIONS

In contrast with the French scholars whose interpretation of Lukács influences this account, scholars influential in Germany and America argue that his distinction between class consciousness and real consciousness is not only arbitrary but politically dangerous. They rely heavily on Lukács's borrowings from Weber, while ignoring his concept of practice. The effect of this emphasis is to misrepresent his concept of class consciousness to the point where he appears to announce later repressive Soviet practice. This interpretation is neither textually nor historically plausible.

How do the critics justify this extraordinary charge? Since they overlook the link Lukács makes between class consciousness and "the historically decisive acts" of the class, the ideal-typical construct of the former seems to have no basis in reality.⁴² Lukács is supposed to have no way of "getting" from class consciousness to real consciousness, but can only juxtapose the one to the other as "ought" to "is." He is thus confronted with the very question he himself had posed in relation to Marx on the second page of *History and Class Consciousness*, i.e., whether he is foisting his own revolutionary goals on a proletariat with quite other aims. Leszek Kołakowski concludes that since, according to Lukács, proletarian class consciousness is embodied in the party, the party can safely ignore the empirical consciousness of the proletariat and act on its own. For Lukács, "the party is always right."⁴³ But in the era of the Russian Revolution, this question has tragic implications; the party has become imperious and demands of classes that they conform to an essence it imputes to them, rather than reflecting the thoughts and actions of their members. Such an approach, as Lukács elaborates it, constitutes an anticipatory justification of Stalinist voluntarism.

James Miller argues similarly that Lukács's approach "doubles" the proletariat into a real class, not necessarily revolutionary at any given moment, and an ideal one possessed by definition of revolutionary class consciousness. Theoretically, the consciousness of the ideal proletariat is represented by Marxism, while practically it is represented by the vanguard party. Thus the revolutionary subjectivity of the class is surreptitiously

attributed to the party, while the real proletariat is dismissed as stuck in “reified facticity.” The tension between proletariat and party, real and ideal class is left unresolved in fact, while conceptual equivocations prevent its recognition in theory. “The subject’s objective subjectivity is ‘held safe’ in the party, but the subject himself becomes a mere abstract object for the party. The equivocation of Lukács was the equivocation of Lenin—and this equivocation was ‘transcended’ not in utopia, but in concentration camps.”⁴⁴

Does Lukács really leave such a yawning abyss between class consciousness and real consciousness? This interpretation ignores Rosa Luxemburg’s influence on Lukács’s political thought. In her essay “The Mass Strike,” Luxemburg argues that theory prolongs action and articulates its inner meaning. Marxism sums up the class experience in ideas that it disseminates through educational work and propaganda in times of social peace. Ideas are the highest product of theory but they represent the lowest level of class consciousness. Mere opinions are what Luxemburg calls a “theoretical and latent” class consciousness. Class consciousness achieves full development not in this contemplative form, but in the “practical and active” expression of class aspirations and solidarity in revolutionary struggle. Theory must cease to be a mere representation of the meaning of class struggle to become consciousness as a historical force in that struggle.⁴⁵ As Lukács later explains, “Proletarian thought is in the first place merely a *theory of praxis* which only gradually ... transforms itself into a *practical theory* that overturns the real world.”⁴⁶

For Luxemburg, as for Lukács, the party plays a decisive role in the passage from theory to practice, the latent to the active. “Organization,” Lukács writes, “is the form of the mediation between theory and practice.”⁴⁷ What is theoretical at any given moment must be made present organizationally if it is later to become practical in struggle. In relation to the masses, “the party is the objectification of their own will (obscure though this may be to themselves).”⁴⁸ Like theory, the party represents the still latent meaning of struggles that need only achieve sufficient breadth and intensity to express themselves in revolutionary consciousness. Theory and party organization are thus joined to historical necessity by their expressive function. They grant conscious and explicit form to the implicit content of the spontaneous struggle.

From this Luxemburgian standpoint, political leadership no longer has the voluntaristic traits Marx rejected. It does not change the fundamental orientation of the movement, but rather expresses the significance of ongoing actions, thereby aiding the actors to clarify their own goals.

It [the party] must immerse its own truth in the spontaneous mass movement and raise it from the depths of economic necessity, where it was conceived, on to the heights of free, conscious action. In so doing it will transform itself in the moment of the outbreak of revolution from a party that makes demands to one that imposes an effective reality. This change from demand to reality becomes the lever of the truly class-oriented and truly revolutionary organization of the proletariat.⁴⁹

In the concluding essays of *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács expresses reservations about Luxemburg's theory. While he still maintains that Luxemburg "saw the significance of mass actions more clearly than anyone,"⁵⁰ he praises Lenin for having grasped the role of the party in resolving major technical problems of the revolution such as class alliances and the seizure of the state. Far from authorizing the party to ignore the class, these essays also contain a critique of sectarianism. Lukács emphasizes the hermeneutic function of independent party action rather than just its technical aspect. The coincidence of hermeneutic and technical functions is achieved where, by their exemplary form, the party's technically necessary acts also serve to advance consciousness. Thus Lukács writes that the party's

organizational separation from the class does not mean in this case that it wishes to do battle for its interests on its behalf and in its place ... Should it do this, as occasionally happens in the course of revolution, then it is not in the first instance an attempt to fight for the objective goals of the struggle in question (for in the long run these can only be won or retained by the class itself), but only an attempt to advance or accelerate the development of class consciousness."⁵¹

This conception of the relation of party to class is shared by Gramsci, whose *Prison Notebooks* offer a striking complement to Lukács's theory of class consciousness. Gramsci elaborates precisely the least developed sides of that theory within a generally similar framework. He starts out from the same view of practice as Lukács. As he puts it, worldviews are "implicit" in the action of classes and become "explicit" in the corresponding ideologies. Gramsci explains the process in which the difference between the beliefs of the individuals and the theoretical construction of the specific rationality of their action is reduced so far as possible, and the individuals provided with ideas that raise to consciousness or make explicit what is already adumbrated in their practice.

A new class acts in function of its real social situation and interests even if at first its self-understanding is still determined by the established ideologies, the “common sense” of the old society. In this situation, the meanings implicit in the acts of the class contradict its beliefs. But in the long run, the implicit meanings will prevail and real consciousness will be brought into harmony with them. The determinism of class consciousness is therefore felt not through the literally unthinkable relation between real consciousness and a theoretical construct, as Lukács’s critics charge, but through the gradual effects of class practice on thought, through, in short, the need of the class for beliefs that articulate its historically necessary behavior.

To bring belief into harmony with behavior requires, in Gramsci’s words, the “cultural deployment” of the worldview implicit in action (Lukács’s “class consciousness”), and this process consists in “adjusting culture to the practical function.”⁵² Class consciousness is not immediately realized in class thought, but must be spread through real, historically effective mediations. First, a theory must be elaborated that corresponds with the class consciousness of the class by falling under the horizon of the specific rationality of its class behavior. Second, a specialized stratum of intellectuals and organizers must communicate the ideas corresponding with its implicit worldview. In the modern world, Gramsci argues, political parties are primarily responsible for these functions. The party’s role is to socialize the class consciousness of the class, a process that is “objectively possible,” in Lukács’s terms, because the class is predisposed to believe ideas that rationalize its behavior. Class consciousness, the worldview implicit in action, is the goal toward which real consciousness tends.

But parties are relatively autonomous groups of individuals, with their own real consciousness. Who is to say that the views they “impute” to the class in their theory and propaganda actually correspond to the needs of the class? Gramsci argues that the class itself will always be the judge of the adequacy of the ideology offered it by the party. The excessive deviation of the party from the class consciousness of the class will result in the class abandoning the party. Lukács too argues that “the constant misapplication of false theories must lead inevitably to the collapse of the party.”⁵³ The determinate contingency of the relation between party and class insures against arbitrariness.

Class consciousness is achieved to the extent that the class unifies itself behind representatives whose real consciousness makes sense of their action. The adjustment of real consciousness to class consciousness is thus a social process that takes place in a relation between different real consciousnesses, some of which have the leading, others the following role. The supposed gap between “objective possibility” and actuality is closed by showing how the real consciousness of the members of the class approximates to their class consciousness through the development of specific social relations. Where the party is given assent, its propaganda serves the function of progressively bringing real consciousness into line with class consciousness.

In Gramsci as in Lukács the party does not have the proletariat at its disposal, but rather vice versa. When Lukács writes that the party is “the visible embodiment of proletarian class consciousness,” he does not mean that the party is the true subject of the revolution, but on the contrary, that it is the privileged object of the working class as subject, the object through which the class “sees” its own situation and potentialities most clearly.⁵⁴ Even in its acts, the party “appears” to the class that can accept or reject it, follow or abandon it, as the explicit formulation of a class project inarticulately present in the life of the class itself. The party is thus not a mechanism of social control in the service of the revolution—an impossible contradiction: it is there to be “seen,” and the sight of it is a moment in the constitution of a subject of history.

Unfortunately, this is not the end of the story. Once the party comes to power, it is no longer simply an object but becomes a subject in its own right. Given the immense means of repression and propaganda at the disposal of the modern state, this is no small matter. The Soviet state explored all the terrifying possibilities of one-party rule and in the process destroyed the prospects of socialism it was the first to open up. The critics of Lukács’s theory of class consciousness are mistaken, however, in identifying his theory with this outcome. His hope in a fruitful combination of workers’ councils and party was disappointed.⁵⁵ Far cruder and more elemental processes were engaged than anything he imagined. Even as late as 1923 neither Marxism nor liberalism had yet taken the full measure of the new tyranny equipped with the productive and organizational powers unleashed by modern invention. The final accounting was to come later, at

great cost. But the theory of class consciousness hardly weighs in the balance.

¹ HCC, 3.

² See for example the presumed authoritative work of Leszek Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism: 3—The Breakdown* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), Chapter VII.

³ The German constitutional scholar Henry Ehrmann contacted me shortly after the first version of this book was published, excited to find someone interested in Lukács's organizational theories. He explained that he had been a member in exile of a group called *Neues Beginnen* that attempted to implement these theories as a response to Nazi persecution. He recalled that the group was able to evade arrest for a time due to its tight structure and discipline. Clearly, the issue for these revolutionaries, as for Lenin in his early party work, was survival in the face of tyranny, not the imposition of tyranny.

⁴ Karl Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy* (New York: International, 1963), 115.

⁵ Karl Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1., trans. S. Moore and E. Aveling (New York: Modern Library, 1906), 15, 23.

⁶ For a brilliant treatment of the antinomy, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. R. Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977.) Anthony Giddens offers another treatment in *The Constitution of Society* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1984). For an early approach to the antinomy, see Hans Freyer's 1923 *Theory of Objective Mind*, trans. S. Grosby (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1998).

⁷ HCC, 38.

⁸ Ibid., 197. Cf., for an example, Karl Kautsky, *The Dictatorship of the Proletariat*, trans. H. J. Stenning (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan, 1964). For a detailed discussion of the problem of mechanical determinism in this period, see Lucio Colletti, "Bernstein and the Marxism of the Second International," in Lucio Colletti, *From Rousseau to Lenin*, trans. J. Merrington and J. White (New York: Monthly Review, 1972). On Marx and determinism, see Donald MacKenzie, "Marx and the Machine," *Technology and Culture*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (July 1984).

⁹ Frederick Engels, "Engels to J. Bloch," in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works* (New York: International, 1968), 693.

¹⁰ Ibid., 692.

¹¹ HCC, 178.

¹² Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *The German Ideology* (New York: International, 1968), 14.

¹³ Ibid., 7.

¹⁴ HCC, 83.

¹⁵ Karl Marx, "Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy," in *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. N. I. Stone (Chicago: Charles Kerr, 1904), 280 (translation modified).

¹⁶ HCC, 186.

¹⁷ HCC, 326.

¹⁸ Ibid., 262.

¹⁹ Ibid., 164.

20 Karl Marx, "Critical Notes on 'The King of Prussia and Social Reform,'" in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, trans. and ed. L. Easton and K. Guddat (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 350.

21 Letter from Karl Marx to Arnold Ruge (September 1843), quoted in *HCC*, 77.

22 Marx, *Capital*, Vol. 1., 20.

23 Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte," in Marx and Engels, *Selected Works* (New York: International, 1968), 121. Fredric Jameson identifies this passage as the source of Lukács's theory of class consciousness. See, Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno, Or, the Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990), 46.

24 Lucien Sebag, *Marxisme et structuralisme* (Paris: Payot, 1964), 88: "A critical theory of knowledge is possible; revealing a gap between what is said and what is done, it brings to light the non-fulfillment of that which is implied by a given ideology. This presupposes that the domain of Doing [le Faire] can be autonomized, become its own point of reference. Ideologies then simply are added to it to veil it, deform it, or on the contrary unveil it; but this deformation, when it exists, can always be objectively demonstrated." Pierre Bourdieu calls the view according to which practice is merely the execution of a project formulated in conscious thought or unconscious mental structures "subjectivist voluntarism." See Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 216, n28. See also Adolpho Sanchez Vasquez, *The Philosophy of Praxis* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1977), Chapter VIII. Sanchez Vasquez writes that Marx "acknowledged the existence of unintentional praxis, while insisting that it is still rational" (276).

25 *HCC*, 52.

26 G. W. F. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), 11.

27 Max Weber, *On the Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. and ed. E. Shills and H. Finch (Glencoe, IL: The Free Press, 1949), 42.

28 *HCC*, 51 (translation modified).

29 *Ibid.*, 51.

30 *Ibid.*, 92. Bourdieu formulates a similar point in his own terms: "The awakening of 'class consciousness' is not a primal act constituting the class in a blaze of freedom; its sole efficacy, as with all actions of symbolic reduplication, lies in the extent to which it brings to consciousness all that is implicitly assumed in the unconscious mode in the class habitus." Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 216, n28.

31 *HCC*, 51. Weber, *On the Methodology of the Social Sciences*, 92.

32 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Les aventures de la dialectique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1955), 67.

33 *Ibid.*, 164.

34 *Ibid.*, 149.

35 Cited in *Ibid.*, 149.

36 *HCC*, 65.

37 For a more detailed discussion of the dialectics of working-class consciousness in a loosely Lukácsian framework, see Stanley Aronowitz, *False Promises: The Shaping of American Working Class Consciousness* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1973), [Chapter 2](#).

38 *HCC*, 168.

39 *Ibid.*, 168–9.

40 *HCC*, 178.

41 For further discussion of the significance of class consciousness in Lukács's early Marxist writings, see Andrew Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History* (New York: Routledge, 2005), [Chapter 4](#).

42 Axel Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2008), 27. Morris Watnick, "Relativism and Class Consciousness," in L. Labedz, ed., *Revisionism: Essays on the History of Marxist Ideas* (London: Allen and Unwin, 1962), 160.

- ⁴³ Kołakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism*, vol. III, 282.
- ⁴⁴ James Miller, "Marxism and Subjectivity," *Telos*, No. 6 (1970), 180. Cf. Michael Löwy, *Pour une Sociologie des Intellectuels Revolutionnaires* (Paris: PUF, 1976), 227–54.
- ⁴⁵ Rosa Luxemburg, "The Mass Strike," in *Rosa Luxemburg Speaks* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1970), 199.
- ⁴⁶ *HCC*, 205.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 299. For Lukács's critique of Luxemburg, see Andrew Feenberg "Post-Utopian Marxism: Lukács and the Dilemmas of Organization," in J. McCormick, ed., *Confronting Mass Technology and Mass Democracy: Essays in Twentieth-Century German Political and Social Thought* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 45–69.
- ⁴⁸ *HCC*, 42.
- ⁴⁹ *HCC*, 41–2.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 298.
- ⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 326.
- ⁵² Antonio Gramsci, *The Modern Prince* (New York: International Publishers, 1959), 113–14.
- ⁵³ *HCC*, 327.
- ⁵⁴ Georg Lukács, *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of His Thought*, trans. N. Jacobs (London: New Left Books, 1974), 27 (translation modified). See also *HCC*, 42.
- ⁵⁵ Feenberg, "Post-Utopian Marxism," 66–9.

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On the Typeface

This book is set in Minion, a typeface designed by Robert Slimbach for Adobe Systems in 1990, which has become one of the few contemporary book faces to rival the classic types of Caslon, Bembo, and Garamond. Though it has no obvious precursor, it retains a calligraphic sentiment that Robert Bringhurst dubs “neohumanist” in his *Elements of Typographic Style*.

Telltale features of Minion include the subtle cant in the bar of the “e,” the angular bowl of the “a,” and the tapered bulbs that terminate the head of the “a” and the tails of the “y” and “j.”

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