

Adorno and Korsch on Marxism and philosophy**Chris Cutrone**

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The publication of Karl Korsch's seminal essay "Marxism and Philosophy" in 1923 coincided with the publication of Georg Lukács's landmark collection of essays, *History and Class Consciousness*. While Lukács's book has the word "history" in its title, it follows Marx's *Capital* in addressing the problem of social being and consciousness in a primarily "philosophical" and categorial manner, as the subjectivity of the commodity form. Korsch's essay on philosophy in Marxism, by contrast, is actually a *historical* treatment of the problem, from Marx and Engels's time, through the 2nd International, to what Korsch called the "crisis of Marxism" and the revolutions of 1917–19. More specifically, Korsch's essay takes up the development and vicissitudes of the relation between theory and practice in the history of Marxism, which Korsch considered *the* "philosophical" problem of Marxism.

Independently of one another, both Korsch's and Lukács's 1923 works shared an interest in recovering the Hegelian or "idealist" dimension of Marx's thought and politics. Both were motivated to establish the coherence of the Marxist revolutionaries Lenin and Luxemburg, and these 2nd International-era radicals' shared grounding in what Korsch called "Marx's own Marxism." Due to a perceived shortcoming in the expounding of revolutionary Marxism, the problem for Korsch and Lukács was

interpreting Marxism as both theory and practice, or how the politics of Lenin and Luxemburg (rightly) considered itself “dialectical.” Both Lukács and Korsch explicitly sought to provide this missing exposition and elaboration.

Lukács and Korsch were later denounced as “professors” in the Communist International, a controversy that erupted after the deaths of Luxemburg and Lenin. In the face of this party criticism, Lukács acquiesced and made his peace with “orthodoxy,” disavowing his work of 1919–24 as comprising a misguided attempt to “out-Hegel Hegel.”

Korsch responded differently to the party’s criticism. Quitting the 3rd International Communist movement entirely, he became associated with the “Left” or “council” communism of Antonie Pannekoek and Paul Mattick. Though making a choice very different from Lukács and distancing himself from official “Marxism-Leninism,” Korsch also came to disavow his earlier argument in “Marxism and Philosophy.” Specifically, he abandoned the attempt to establish the coherence of Lenin’s theory and practice with that of Marx, going so far as to critique Marx. Thus, in the 1930 essay “The Present State of the Problem of ‘Marxism and Philosophy:’ An Anti-Critique,” Korsch argued that, to the degree Marx shared a common basis with Lenin, this was an expression of limitations in Marx’s own critical theory and political practice. Indeed, for Korsch it was a problem of “Marxism” in general, including Kautsky and Luxemburg. Ultimately, Korsch called for “going beyond” Marxism.

The complementary, if divergent, trajectories of Korsch and Lukács are indicative of the historical disintegration of the perspective both shared in their writings of 1923. Both had understood the “subjective” aspect of Marxism to have been clarified by

Lenin's role in the October Revolution. The figure of Lenin was irreducible, and brought out dimensions of the Marxian project that otherwise lay unacknowledged. No less than Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, Korsch's essay on "Marxism and Philosophy" inspired the work of the Marxist critical theorists associated with the Frankfurt School — Horkheimer, Marcuse, Benjamin, and Adorno. But the reputation of Korsch's work has been eclipsed by that of Lukács. What the usual interpretive emphasis on Lukács occludes is that the Frankfurt School writers grappled not only with the problem of Stalinism but "anti-Stalinism" as well. Both Korsch's and Lukács's post-1923 trajectories were critiqued by the Frankfurt School writers.¹ Korsch, in the 1930 "Anti-Critique," distanced himself from the problem Adorno sought to address, of the constitutive non-identity of theory and practice. Writing 40 years later, in *Negative Dialectics* (1966), Adorno thought, like Korsch and Lukács in the early 1920s, that Lenin and Luxemburg's theoretical self-understanding, together with their revolutionary

1. The reverse was also true. Korsch, in distancing himself from his 1923 work that was so seminal for the Frankfurt School writers, also came to critique them:

[Korsch] intended to try and interest Horkheimer and the [Frankfurt] Institute [for Social Research] in Pannekoek's book *Lenin as Philosopher* (1938) [which traced the bureaucratization of the USSR back to the supposedly crude materialism of Lenin's 1909 book *Materialism and Empirio-Criticism*]. . . . [Either] Korsch [or, the Director of the Institute, Horkheimer himself] would write a review for [the Institute's journal] the *Zeitschrift*. . . . Yet no such review appeared. . . . [Korsch suffered] total disillusionment with the Institute and their "impotent philosophy." Korsch [was] particularly bitter about the "metaphysician Horkheimer." [Phil Slater, *Origin and Significance of the Frankfurt School: A Marxist Perspective* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 73–74.]

The record for Korsch's deteriorating relations with the Frankfurt Institute in exile is found in his private letters to Paul Mattick, editor of the journal *Living Marxism: International Council Correspondence*.

political practice, comprised the most advanced attempt yet to work through precisely this non-identity.

In Adorno's terms, both the later Korsch and official "dialectical materialism" (including the later Lukács) assumed "identity thinking," an identity of effective theory and practice, rather than their articulated non-identity, to which Korsch and Lukács had drawn attention earlier. Instead of this recognition of the actuality of the symptom of "philosophical" thinking, of the mutually constitutive separation of theory and practice, Korsch, by embracing "council" communism, and shunning Marxian theory in the years after writing his famously condemned work, succumbed to what Adorno termed "identity thinking" — just as Lukács had done in adapting to Stalinist "orthodoxy." By assuming the identity of theory and practice, or of social being and consciousness in the workers' movement, Korsch sought their "reconciliation," instead of discerning and critically grasping their persistent antagonism, as would necessarily be articulated in any purported politics of emancipation.

Just as Adorno tried to hold fast to the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness* in the face of Lukács's own subsequent disavowals, the first sentence of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* reiterated Korsch's statement in "Marxism and Philosophy" that "Philosophy cannot be abolished without being realized" ("Marxism and Philosophy," in *Marxism and Philosophy*, trans. Fred Halliday [NY: Monthly Review Press, 1970 and 2008], 97). As Adorno put it,

Philosophy, which once seemed outmoded, remains alive because the moment of its realization was missed. The summary judgment that it had

merely interpreted the world is itself crippled by resignation before reality, and becomes a defeatism of reason after the transformation of the world failed.²

In 1923, Korsch had explicitly tied the question of “philosophy” to Lenin’s treatment of the problem of the state in *The State and Revolution* (1917). Just as, with the overcoming of capitalism, the necessity of the state would “wither,” and not be done away with at one stroke, so too the necessity of “philosophical” thinking, specifically the critical reflection on the relation of theory and practice, as it appeared in the epoch of capital, would dissolve. This side of emancipation, “theoretical” self-reflection, thought’s reflecting on its own conditions of possibility, remains necessary, precisely because it expresses an unresolved social-historical problem.

Korsch divided the relation of Marx’s thought to philosophy roughly into three periods: pre-1848, circa 1848, and post-1848. These periods were distinguished by the different ways they related theory and practice: the first period was the critique of philosophy calling for its simultaneous realization and self-abolition; the second, the sublimation of philosophy in revolution; and the third, the recrudescence of the problem of relating theory and practice.

Korsch’s third period in the history of Marxism, post-1848, extended into what he termed the “crisis of Marxism” beginning in the 1890s with the reformist “revisionist” dispute of Eduard Bernstein against the “orthodox Marxism” of the 2nd International — when the “revolutionary Marxism” of Luxemburg and Lenin originated — and

2. Translated by Dennis Redmond (2001).

continuing into the acutely revolutionary period of 1917–19, from the Russian Revolution of 1917 through the German Revolution and civil war of 1918–19, to the Hungarian Soviet Republic (in which Lukács participated) and the workers' uprisings in Italy (in which Antonio Gramsci participated) in 1919.

It was in this revolutionary period of the early 20th century that “Marx’s own Marxism” of 1848, as expressed in the *Communist Manifesto*, regained its saliency, but in ways that Korsch thought remained not entirely resolved as a matter of relating theory to practice. In “Marxism and Philosophy,” Korsch found that while Lenin and Luxemburg had tried to better relate Marxian theory and practice than 2nd International Marxism had done, they had recognized this as an on-going task and aspiration, and not already achieved in some finished sense. In the words of the epigraph from Lenin that introduces Korsch’s 1923 essay, “We must organize a systematic study of the Hegelian dialectic from a materialist standpoint” (“On the Significance of Militant Materialism,” 1922). If Marxism continued to be subject to a “Hegelian dialectic,” thus requiring the “historical materialist” analysis and explanation that Korsch sought to provide of it, this was because it was not itself the reconciled unity of theory and practice but remained, as theory, the critical reflection on the *problem* of relating theory and practice — which in turn prompted further theoretical development as well as practical political advances.

For Korsch in the 1923 “Marxism and Philosophy,” Lenin and Luxemburg’s “revolutionary Marxism” was bound up in the “crisis of Marxism,” while advancing it to a new stage. As Korsch commented,

This transformation and development of Marxist theory has been effected under the peculiar ideological guise of a return to the pure teaching of original or true Marxism. Yet it is easy to understand both the reasons for this guise and the real character of the process which is concealed by it. What theoreticians like Rosa Luxemburg in Germany and Lenin in Russia have done, and are doing, in the field of Marxist theory is to liberate it from the inhibiting traditions of [Social Democracy]. They thereby answer the practical needs of the new revolutionary stage of proletarian class struggle, for these traditions weighed “like a nightmare” on the brain of the working masses whose objectively revolutionary socioeconomic position no longer corresponded to these [earlier] evolutionary doctrines. The apparent revival of original Marxist theory in the Third International is simply a result of the fact that in a new revolutionary period not only the workers’ movement itself, but the theoretical conceptions of communists which express it, must assume an explicitly revolutionary form. This is why large sections of the Marxist system, which seemed virtually forgotten in the final decades of the nineteenth century, have now come to life again. . . . [T]he internal connection of theory and practice within revolutionary Marxism had been consciously re-established. (67–68)

Korsch thus established the importance for what Adorno later called the “historically changing” relation of theory and practice, making sense of their vicissitudes in the history of the politics of Marxism. Furthermore, by establishing the character of the “crisis of

Marxism” as a matter of theoretical reflection, Korsch re-established the role of consciousness in a Marxian conception of social revolution, why the abandonment or distancing of the practical perspective of revolution necessitates a degradation of theory.

Adorno, in one of his last writings, the “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis” (1969), stated that,

If, to make an exception for once, one risks what is called a grand perspective, beyond the historical differences in which the concepts of theory and praxis have their life, one discovers the infinitely progressive aspect of the separation of theory and praxis, which was deplored by the Romantics and denounced by the Socialists in their wake — except for the mature Marx.³

According to Adorno, Marx had a critical theory of the relation of theory and practice — recognizing it as a historically specific and not merely “philosophical” problem, or, a problem that called for the *critical theory of the philosophy of history* — and a political practice of the relation of theory and practice. Adorno noted that the relation of theory

3. Adorno, “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,” in *Critical Models*, trans. by Henry W. Pickford (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 266. This essay, a “dialectical epilegomenon” to his book *Negative Dialectics* that Adorno said intended to bring together “philosophical speculation and drastic experience” (*Critical Models*, 126), reflected his dispute with fellow Frankfurt School critical theorist Hebert Marcuse over the student protests of the Vietnam War (see Adorno and Marcuse, “Correspondence on the German Student Movement,” trans. by Esther Leslie, *New Left Review* 1/233, Jan.–Feb. 1999, 123–136). As Adorno put it in his May 5, 1969 letter to Marcuse,

[T]here are moments in which theory is pushed on further by practice. But such a situation neither exists objectively today, nor does the barren and brutal practiciness that confronts us here have the slightest thing to do with theory anyhow. (“Correspondence,” 127.)

and practice is “not settled once and for all, but fluctuates historically.”⁴ There is not simply a theoretical or practical problem, but also, and more profoundly, a problem of *relating* theory and practice. It is not a matter of finding either a correct theory or correct practice, but of trying to judge and affect their *changing relation* and recognizing this as a problem of *history*. This is a function of the past’s problematic legacy in the present.

The revolutionary politics of Lenin and Luxemburg, following Marx, which inspired the Marxian critical theory of Lukács, Korsch and Adorno, recovered and struggled through the problem of theory and practice for their time, precipitating a crisis in Marxism, and thus potentially advancing it. Overcoming the “vulgar Marxist” ossification of theory and practice in the 2nd International opened the way to their *critical* relation, which Adorno elaborated. This meant the Marxist critique of Marxism, or, a Left critique of the Left. This was not a finished but an on-going task. Adorno’s focus, following Korsch, on the constitutive non-identity of theory and practice, is key to recovering a Marxian approach to the problem of an emancipatory, “dialectical” politics, an unresolved but neglected problem in the history of Marxism. | §

4. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (New York: Continuum Publishing, 1983), 143.