

## **Adorno in 1969**

### **Adorno's Marxism and the problem and legacy of the 1960s Left in theory and practice**

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#### **Introduction — *Précis***

A certain legend of the 1960s New Left has it that the Marxist critical theorist Theodor [Wiesengrund] Adorno had been hostile to student radicalism. This placed Adorno's legacy for progressive politics in doubt for at least two decades after 1969. Adorno had defended his junior colleague Jürgen Habermas's warning of “left fascism” among 1960s student radicals, and challenged Herbert Marcuse's support for student radicalism, questioning its emancipatory character. Adorno's collaborator Max Horkheimer commented about the '60s radicalism, “But is it really so desirable, this revolution?” Infamously, Adorno called the police to clear demonstrators from the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research in 1969. Students protested that “Adorno as an institution is dead.” Some months later, while hiking on vacation, Adorno suffered a heart attack and died.

Eulogizing Adorno in 1969, Habermas raised two issues for the post-1960s reception of Adorno's work: 1.) Adorno's work was both inspiring and frustrating for the critique of modern society; and 2.) Adorno left little to suggest directions to take beyond a “meager reprise of Marxism.”

Fredric Jameson and others began revisiting Adorno's legacy around 1989, the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, to challenge the politics of “postmodernism” and its relation to “neo-liberal” capitalism: ironically, it was the seemingly “out-of-date” character of Adorno's Marxism in the 1960s that now made his critical theory relevant again, after the passing of the administered, “one-dimensional” society of the Fordist/welfare state. The controversy over Adorno since the 1960s has been over the nature and character of Adorno's Marxism, formed in the 1920s-30s, which has not been given a proper account. — For now there are two registers for the problem of recovering Adorno's Marxism: the 1960s “New” Left; and the 1920s-30s “Old” Left, obscured behind the '60s.

### **Habermas, “calling into his master’s open grave”**

Soon after Adorno died in 1969, Habermas wrote a eulogy to him titled “The Primal History of Subjectivity — Self-Affirmation Gone Wild.” — The title itself says quite a bit. Habermas took this opportunity to offer a critique indicative of the problems in the reception of Adorno’s work in the 1960s. It was as if Adorno had represented something of the block with which one was always struggling but failing to overcome.

For Habermas, Adorno was exemplary of “the bourgeois subject, apprehended in the process of disappearance,” “which is still for itself, but no longer in itself.” Habermas introduced Adorno’s character in order to explain the possibility for real insights — but also “enchanted analyses:”

“In psychological terms . . . Adorno never accepted the alternatives of remaining childlike or growing up. . . . In him there remained vivid a stratum of earlier experiences and attitudes. This sounding board reacted hyper-sensitively to a resistant reality, revealing the harsh, cutting, wounding dimensions of reality itself.”

In this characterization, Habermas rehearsed the idea that Adorno, as a last “Mandarin” intellectual, was grounded in an earlier historical epoch, the liberal capitalism of the 19th Century. However, this fails to consider that the formative experiences for Adorno’s thought were those that defined 20th Century history.

Habermas concluded Adorno’s “aid [had been] indispensable” to understanding the “situation” of the present. Habermas was anxious to defend Adorno against the criticisms of some of his more “impatient” students in 1969 — for, as Habermas put it, “they do not realize all

that they are incapable of knowing in the present state of affairs.” This was the basis for Habermas’s defense of the “rational core” of Adorno’s critical theory.

“All that they are incapable of knowing” — for Habermas, Adorno’s critical theory had failed to render the social world of 1969 critically intelligible. At best, Adorno’s work brought to manifest and acute presentation what had yet to be understood; at worst, it contributed to false understanding, that “the theory that apprehended the totality of society as untrue would actually be a theory of the impossibility of theory. The material content of the theory of society would then also be relatively meager, a reprise of the Marxist doctrine.” — For Habermas, Marx’s critical theory of capitalism might have been adequate to its 19th Century moment, but had become outdated.

The “meager reprise of Marxism” — this was Habermas’s way of addressing the theoretical tradition from which Adorno’s thought originated, and which was experiencing a certain (if ambiguous) renaissance during the final years of Adorno’s life: the “New” Left. For the late 1960s saw the beginning of the last important “return to Marx,” which regained the saliency of Adorno’s critical theory, even if this was confronted by the demand from his students not only for social *theory* but, more emphatically, for social *transformation* and *emancipation*. Cautioning against the conclusion that Adorno’s critical theory had resigned from the task of social emancipation, Habermas wrote that “after Adorno’s opening talk to the sixteenth German Congress of Sociology in 1968 on ‘Late Capitalism or Industrial Society’ [translated and published in English that same year in the journal *Diogenes* under the title “Is Marx Obsolete?”], one could not maintain this [criticism of Adorno] in the same fashion.”

But Habermas added that “the point [of this criticism] remains.” Habermas cited contemporary criticism of Adorno, for instance by Adorno’s student Albrecht Wellmer, of

“the danger that arises when the dialectic of enlightenment is misunderstood as a generalization[,] in the field of [the] philosophy of history[,] of the critique of political economy[,] and tacitly substituted for it. Then . . . the critique of the instrumental spirit can serve as the key to a critique of ideology, to a depth hermeneutics[,] that starts from arbitrary objectifications of the damaged life, that is self-sufficient and no longer in need of an empirical development of social theory.”

Such a misunderstanding was one into which, however, Habermas maintained, “Adorno never let himself fall.”

Habermas did object to the fact that it “was [seemingly] sufficient for [Adorno] to bring in a little too precipitously the analyses handed down from Marx,” adding that “Adorno was never bothered by political economy.” Habermas resolved that “the decodifying of the objective spirit by ideology critique, to which Adorno had turned all his energy in such a remarkable way, can be easily confused with a theory of late-capitalist society,” a theory to whose lack Habermas attributed the problems and character of social discontents and rebellion in 1969 — “all that they are incapable of knowing.”

Habermas expressed sympathy with the gesture of Adorno’s student who had “called into his master’s open grave, [that] ‘He practiced an irresistible critique of the bourgeois individual, and yet he was himself caught within its ruins’.” Habermas ventured “that praxis miscarries may not be attributed to the historical moment alone.” Instead, Habermas considered “the imperfection of [Adorno’s Marxist] theory,” and wished to caution against any possible direct appropriation of Adorno’s work, what could only be a “meager reprise” of Marxism.

However, thought-figures seeking to elaborate Marx's critique of social modernity — capitalism — permeate literally every phrase in Adorno's corpus. To grasp this requires more direct attention to the formative moment of Adorno's thought than has been attempted.

### **The Origins of Adorno's Marxism**

The Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 was the formative event of the 20th Century. The emancipatory moment of the Russian Revolution was the lodestar for all subsequent Marxism. From a decade after 1917, in Horkheimer's late Weimar Republic-era writings [from *Dämmerung* (1926-31)], we read that

“The moral character of a person can be infallibly inferred from his response to certain questions. . . . In 1930 the attitude toward Russia casts light on people's thinking. . . . I do not claim to know where the country is going; there is undoubtedly much misery. . . . [But] [a]nyone who has the eyes to see will view events in Russia as the continuing painful attempt to overcome [the] terrible social injustice [of the imperialist world]. At the very least, he will ask with a throbbing heart whether it is still under way. . . .

When Kant received the first news of the French Revolution [of 1789], he is said to have changed the direction of his customary stroll from then on.”

In 1919 Horkheimer had been in Munich during the short-lived Munich Council/Soviet Republic that was inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution, and he had to flee from the violence of its counterrevolutionary suppression. The trajectory of revolution, counterrevolution and reaction, of world war and civil war, formed the substance of the concerns of Marxism in the 20th Century, including that of the Frankfurt School.

At the time of the October Revolution, Adorno (b. 1903) was 14 years old. He did not experience directly the radicalization that the German defeat in the war brought in 1918-19, as, for instance, Horkheimer and Marcuse had. During this time the teenage Adorno was still living in his relatively quiescent hometown of Frankfurt, being tutored in philosophy by his family's friend Siegfried Kracauer, with whom he discussed Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

However, Adorno became the thinker in Frankfurt School Critical Theory whose work most consistently incorporates the concerns and critically reflects upon the legacy of the emancipatory potential expressed by the moment of 1917-19; such concerns and reflections were sustained in Adorno's work through his very last writings of 1968-69.

The writings of Adorno's last year, [1968-69,] the time of the climax and crisis of the 1960s "New" Left, help to define and evaluate the terms of the late reception of Adorno's work, after his death. The politics informing Adorno's work is obscured behind the 1960s, for Adorno's Marxism was formulated in the 1920s-30s, the period of social and political crisis in the wake of the revolutions of 1917-19.

The Bolshevik Revolution and the radicalism of its historical moment had prompted a "return to Marx" in the early 1920s whose most brilliant expositions were made by Georg Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) and Karl Korsch in "Marxism and Philosophy" (1923). Both these sought to recover the critical intent and purchase of Marx's theory and politics in the aftermath of the collapse of international Social Democracy with WWI and the failure of international anticapitalist revolution in 1917-19. Their work, inspired by and picking up from the radical Left of pre-war international Social Democracy that informed the Bolshevik Revolution, the politics of both the Bolsheviks and Rosa Luxemburg's Spartacists, provided the departure for subsequent, "Frankfurt School" critical theory. The ultimate failure of

the anticapitalist revolution that had opened most fully in Russia, but also manifested significantly elsewhere, prompted critical reflection on the social-emancipatory content of Marxist politics, in hope of its further development. However, because of the contrast of such radically searching work with the stifling repression of Stalinist reaction in Russia under the rubric of “orthodoxy”, this critical Marxism came to be known by the misnomer of “Western” Marxism. Beginning in the 1920s-30s, and extending through the 1960s, Adorno’s work sought to sustain this critical “return to Marx” in the period of triumphant counterrevolution that characterized the high 20th Century.

In this period, Marxism itself became an affirmative ideology of reactionary, “advanced” capitalism, for its emancipatory content — and hence its profoundest critique of modern society — was lost. Just as Marx’s thought originated in the attempt at the progressive critique of the Left of the 19th Century, Adorno’s thought, his sustained engagement with the critical theory of 20th Century capitalism, necessarily pursued the immanent critique of Marxism, to register the disparity between theory and practice, not only how Marxism had failed, but how it might yet point beyond itself.

The “return to Marx” that occurred in the two periods of the 1920s-30s and the 1960s-70s can be characterized well by referring to certain seminal statements, such as found in writings by Korsch from the early 1920s, and by C. Wright Mills, Martin Nicolaus, and Leszek Kolakowski from the 1960s. Bringing these into communication with Adorno’s work from the 1960s illuminates the social-political desiderata of Adorno’s Marxism through his very last writings and helps situate Adorno’s Marxism and the state of its legacy today to the extent that we might recognize the history for problems of any possible “Left” for our present in Adorno’s critical prognosis on the 1960s.

**The “New” Left of the 1960s (1): motivations for a return to Marx**

In 1960, [C. Wright] Mills wrote a letter to the newly founded British journal *New Left Review*, delivering a series of suggestions and caveats to the younger generation of self-styled Leftists. Mills accounted for the emergence of a “New” Left in the crisis of liberalism, at the levels both of ideology and practical politics, manifesting in a combination of what he termed the “liberal rhetoric and conservative default” that amounted to political “irresponsibility.” Furthermore, directing his comments specifically to his British readers and their Labor Party, Mills took issue with the attenuated politics of contemporary socialism/social democracy, afflicted by, as he termed it, a “labor metaphysic.” The politics of this “labor metaphysic,” while apparently privileging the working class as “*the* historic agency of change,” in actuality treated the workers merely as “The Necessary Lever,” really the object and not, as was claimed, the subject of socialist politics. — So what *would* be the adequate “subject” of emancipatory politics? For Mills, it was precisely discontented consciousness, in the ideological forms it takes. For this reason, Mills’s greatest ire was reserved for “end of ideology” Cold War liberalism (and social democracy). Mills castigated “end of ideology” writers like apostate Marxist (and Adorno’s former research assistant) Daniel Bell for their “attack on Marxism . . . in the approved style.” Citing Marx repeatedly throughout his “Letter,” Mills encouraged his readers to the return to Marx, if not to “Vulgar Marxism.” Most remarkably, Mills inveighed in favor of the most radical politics of 20th Century Marxism:

“Forget Victorian Marxism [i.e., the late 19th Century Marxism of social democracy], except whenever you need it; and read Lenin again (be careful) — Rosa Luxemburg, too.”

The thrust of Mills's "Letter" is its emphasis on the importance of ideology for Leftist politics. Mills's acute term for this was "utopianism." Mills suggested attention to the forms of discontent that had manifested in the post-WWII period, which he found among "intellectuals." It was in this spirit that Mills encouraged reconsideration of prior generations of radicalized intellectuals, such as the Marxists Luxemburg and Lenin, against the quiescent "labor metaphysic" of the late "Vulgar Marxism" in Western Social Democracy and Soviet-inspired Communism that had become uncritical, and hence implicated in political "irresponsibility."

The recognition of the importance of *critical* consciousness had been formative for the thinkers like Adorno in the 1920s-30s. As pointed out by the historian of the Frankfurt Institute Helmut Dubiel [in *Theory and Politics* (1978)], as regards the role of consciousness, there had been no difference between Luxemburg and Lenin. From early on, the Frankfurt School critical theorists shared this perspective with their more directly political Marxist forebears.

“[The] ascription of a continuum — that is, of a mediated identity — between proletarian class consciousness and socialist theory — united even such [apparently] divergent positions as those of Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin. . . . Georg Lukács formulated this conception in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). Although this idea was traditionally held by the socialist intelligentsia [. . .] [this] speculative identity of class consciousness and social theory formed the self-consciousness of those socialist intellectuals who were not integrated into the SPD [German Social-Democratic Party] and KPD [German Communist Party] in the 1920s.”

By comparison, the Marxist "orthodoxy" of both Stalinized international Communism and rump, post-WWI Social Democracy became ensnared in the antinomy presented by the contradiction

— the important, constitutive non-identity — of social being and consciousness, practice and theory (or, as in debates around historic Bolshevism, spontaneity and organization), whose dialectic had motivated the critical consciousness of practice for Marx, as well as for the radicals in pre-1914 Social Democracy like Luxemburg and Lenin. Marxists had become stuck on the question of why the workers were not making the revolution. But, as Karl Korsch put it in “Marxism and Philosophy” (1923),

“As scientific socialism, the Marxism of Marx and Engels remains the inclusive whole of a theory of social revolution . . . a materialism whose theory comprehended the totality of society and history, and whose practice overthrew it. . . . The difference [now] is that the various components of [what for Marx and Engels was] the unbreakable interconnection of theory and practice are further separated out. . . . The umbilical cord has been broken.”

The Left is tasked with discovering the basis for its own discontents. Usually, this has taken the form of imputing interests to classes, but in the 20th Century this became an evasion and abdication of critical consciousness, and Marxism became an affirmative ideology for society based on and social existence justified through “labor.”

Among the thinkers who tried to break out of this quandary of self-understanding for critical consciousness that beset “orthodox” Marxism in the 20th Century was the dissident Polish Marxist philosopher Leszek Kolakowski. Their critical Marxist dissidence came after the crisis of international Communism in 1956 that had come with the Khrushchev “revelations” of Stalin’s crimes, and with the suppression of the Hungarian revolt (in which Marxist radicals of the preceding generation like Lukács had also participated).

Kolakowski's essay "The Concept of the Left" (1968) emphasizes the productive role of ideology for the Left, stating that

"The concept of the Left remains unclear to this day. . . . Society cannot be divided into a Right and a Left. . . . The Left must define itself on the level of ideas . . . the Left must be defined in intellectual and not class terms. This presupposes that intellectual life is not and cannot be an exact replica of class interests. . . . The Left . . . takes an attitude of permanent revisionism toward reality . . . the Left strives to base its prospects on the experience and evolutionary tendencies of history [rather than] capitulation toward the situation of the moment. For this reason the Left can have a political ideology. . . . The Left is always to the left in certain respects with relation to some political movements . . . the Left is the fermenting factor in even the most hardened mass of the historical present."

Against the naturalization of "class interests" Kolakowski maintained that it was not society that was divided into Right and Left but *ideology*. Kolakowski recognized the Left as the critical element in progressive politics at the level of consciousness, and as such destined to remain always a spirited "minority."

Such recovery of the essentially critical, intellectually provocative role of the Left was motivated precisely by the attempt to see beyond the "present," and conditioned by Kolakowski's recognition that Soviet Communism had long since become implicated and responsible for the status quo. The reconsideration of Marx that could be motivated through the emphasis on ideology, on the critical aspects of his work for provoking consciousness of unfulfilled emancipatory potential, was marked by the writings of dissident French Communist

Louis Althusser and others such as André Gorz and Martin Nicolaus, those who had been termed (for instance by the president of the U.S. Students for a Democratic Society Carl Oglesby) “neo-Marxists.” Modern Marxism, to remain critical, was tasked with pursuing recognition of its constitutive conditions, the conditions of possibility for critical social consciousness.

Nicolaus’s 1968 essay on “The Unknown Marx” (1968) sought to recover neglected aspects of Marx’s thought on the basis of the *Grundrisse*, a collection of unpublished writings from Marx’s notebooks that had garnered little substantial attention. Nicolaus arrayed Marx’s mature writings such as *Capital*, using the *Grundrisse* to inform his approach, against interpretations derived primarily from Marx’s more influential early writings such as the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, and concluded that “the most important Marxist political manifesto remains to be written.”

### **The “New” Left of the 1960s (2): the politics and intellectual pitfalls of post-Marxism**

Examples of the similar kinds of obscuring of the social-emancipatory content of Marxian critical theory, and the blind alleys in which contemporary Marxists had found themselves can be drawn from writings of the late 1960s by Adorno’s colleague Herbert Marcuse. For instance, “The End of Utopia” begins with a broadside against Marx, that

“Marx says . . . that the only thing that can happen . . . is for labor to be organized as rationally as possible and reduced as much as possible. But it remains labor in and of the realm of necessity and thereby unfree. I believe that one of the new possibilities, which gives an indication of the qualitative difference between the free and the unfree society, is that of letting the realm of freedom appear within the realm of necessity — in labor and not only beyond labor.”

(Marcuse was influenced by Schiller's account of the "play drive:" work was to become play.) Thus Marcuse's articulation expresses precisely the kind of "labor metaphysic" about which Mills had warned, the political incoherence that manifested with the attenuation of historical agencies of social change like the socialist working class movement — and the dearth of political imagination that Nicolaus marked, what stood in need of commensuration with Marx's mature insights into the implications of the surplus-value dynamic of capitalism found in the *Grundrisse*. Concomitantly, in "The Question of Revolution," Marcuse stated that "the conception of freedom by which revolutionaries and revolutions were inspired is suppressed in the developed industrialized countries with their rising standard of living," confusing economics and social politics. Marcuse's late writings thus belied the kind of conflation Kolakowski had critiqued, the inadequate conception of the Left that derived principally from the status of empirical social groups ("classes") rather than from the very ideological dynamics of social consciousness. — Hence, Marcuse manifested precisely the failure of social imagination decried by Mills.

For example, Marcuse made much of the brute oppression and stark life-and-death struggle supposedly motivating political movements in Vietnam and other parts of the Third World as a salutary factor for emancipatory politics:

"the revolutionary concept of freedom coincides with the necessity to defend naked existence: in Vietnam as much as in the slums and ghettos of the rich countries."

By characterizing the military campaigns of the North Vietnamese Communist regime and the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam — not to say the Civil Rights Movement! — in terms of a defense of "naked existence," Marcuse evacuated politics, eliminating any potential basis for progressive critique, and crudely instrumentalizing the horror of their realities. Adorno

laconically remarked that “it would be difficult to argue that Vietnam is robbing anyone of sleep, especially since any opponent of colonial wars knows that the Vietcong for their part practice Chinese methods of torture,” questioning Marcuse’s less than critical support for the Vietnamese and other Third World Communists — and the late-’60s student radicalism that saw itself acting in solidarity with them.

Taking Marcuse to task on the issue of support for the student movement/New Left, Adorno sums up their differences as follows:

“You think that praxis — in its emphatic sense — is not blocked today; I think differently. I would have to deny everything that I think and know about the objective tendency if I wanted to believe that the student protest movement in Germany had even the tiniest prospect of effecting a social intervention.”

For Adorno, a critique of the Left was in order, no less in the 1960s than it had been in the 1920s-30s. For — especially for intellectuals — remaining critical is the most effective form of solidarity and participation in struggles against oppression and for emancipatory possibilities.

Adorno, in his last major monograph, *Negative Dialectic* (1966), argued for critical theory in the context of attenuated “objective” conditions for emancipatory social-political transformative practice — as Mills had argued in his 1960 “Letter to the New Left” (e.g., decline of liberal civic associations and decline of the radicalism of the workers’ movement). Adorno’s work needs to be disenchanted and resituated in its specific critique of the crisis of the Left that had begun at least as early as the Stalinist degeneration of the Russian Revolution in the 1920s, but was in a terminal phase by the ’60s. It was in this context that Adorno tried to steer the hard road between the Stalinophobia of Cold War liberalism and social democracy (for instance of the late Horkheimer), and the abdication of the critique of Third World-ist Stalinism (by Marcuse).

While Adorno had indeed supported the earlier configuration of student protest in 1968, in tandem with workers' organizations, against the proposed "emergency laws" [*Notstandgesetze*] in the Federal Republic of Germany, by late 1968 and 1969, as Adorno pointed out, the student movement was in crisis and sought infantile provocations to sustain its existence, as witnessed in the 1969 student takeover of the Frankfurt Institute organized by Adorno's doctoral student Hans-Jürgen Krahl that prompted Adorno to call the police. Among those evincing the regressive social-political consciousness of the '60s radicals was the French student leader Danny "the Red" Cohn-Bendit. In his 1969 book *Obsolete Communism: A Left-Wing Alternative*, Cohn-Bendit called for making the revolution "here and now," reserving his most strident protests against the "deadly love-making on the [cinema] screen." While Marcuse insisted that those like Cohn-Bendit were marginal to the movement, Adorno knew that they were indicative of the greater problem. Even Marcuse acknowledged a fatal mixture, "Rational and irrational, indeed counter-revolutionary demands are inextricably combined."

Such a combination should not have disqualified the student radicalism of the 1960s, but for the lack of their critical self-awareness. The critique and opposition Adorno had to the '60s radicalism was not due to the juxtaposition of the orthodoxy of the 1930s against the movements of the 1960s. As Adorno put it in his "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis" (1969),

"Praxis is a source of power for theory but cannot be prescribed by it. It appears in theory, merely, and indeed necessarily, as a blind spot, as an obsession with what is being criticized . . . this admixture of delusion, however, warns of the excesses in which it incessantly grows."

Hence, critical consciousness is tasked with reflexively recognizing this delusionary aspect of any possible emancipatory social-political practice: an unavoidable but constitutive problem.

**Adorno in 1969: the non-identity of subject and object**

For Adorno, the subject mediates the object, or, in sociological terms, the individual mediates society, and, in philosophical terms, consciousness mediates reality. This mediation takes place in the commodity form, of which the human being is both subject and object. The non-identity of subject and object is a non-identity of social being and consciousness. Adorno's critique of the reconciliation philosophy of Hegel and others is based on the desideratum of subjectivity: as yet there is no subject, only critical consciousness of its possibility, there can be only a negative recognition, a recognition of the present absence of effective social subjectivity.

For Adorno, it is precisely the non-identity of social being and consciousness and of theory and practice that is salutary for their critical relation. Capitalism is the dialectical source of the theory-practice problem, which is symptomatic and hence indicative of the potential for getting beyond it, but not as something that can be overcome in the here and now, as the '60s radicals (and those later) thought. As Adorno put it in the "Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,"

"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."

In his *Negative Dialectic* (1966), in a section titled "Objectivity and Reification," Adorno had written of the emancipatory aspect of the vision for "planning" in a socialist society in preserving the non-identity of subject and object:

"In the realm of things there is an intermingling of both the object's [non]identical side and the submission of men to prevailing conditions of production, to their

own functional context which they cannot know. The mature Marx, in his few remarks on the character of a liberated society, changed his position on the cause of reification [or alienation], [which he had attributed, earlier, to] the division of labor. He now distinguished the state of freedom from original immediacy. In the moment of planning — the result of which, he hoped, would be production for use by the living rather than for profit, and thus, in a sense, a restitution of immediacy — in that planning he preserved the alien thing; in his design for a realization of what philosophy had only thought, at first, he preserved its mediation.”

The “functional context which [we] cannot know” is capitalism, which generates not only (critical) subjectivity, but the theory-practice problem itself, as a non-identity of subject and object of practice. For Marx, “alienation” is not empirical but social-contextual. By comparison, the 1960s radicals had anticipated overcoming the separation of theory and practice immediately through their own efforts at (personal) transformation. Such a mistaken configuration of the problem was to the detriment both of practice and of critical consciousness, including to the present. In this they had been encouraged by thinkers like Marcuse in their abandonment of the emancipatory desiderata of history accumulated in the most radical exponents of Marxist politics that the critical theory of the earlier Frankfurt School thinkers had sought to preserve against the “Vulgar Marxism” of both Social Democracy and Stalinism in the 1920s-30s — in the aftermath of failed and betrayed revolution after 1917-19, the moment in which social-political possibilities for overcoming capitalism opened to their greatest extent to date.

Following Adorno, properly accounting for the actual emancipatory contents of possible social-politics, as Marx and later Marxist radicals tried to do, continues to task the present. ☼

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