



University  
of Glasgow

Marriott, Stephen Charles (2000) *Critical theory : reason and dialectic*.  
PhD thesis.

<http://theses.gla.ac.uk/2823/>

Copyright and moral rights for this thesis are retained by the author

A copy can be downloaded for personal non-commercial research or  
study, without prior permission or charge

This thesis cannot be reproduced or quoted extensively from without first  
obtaining permission in writing from the Author

The content must not be changed in any way or sold commercially in any  
format or medium without the formal permission of the Author

When referring to this work, full bibliographic details including the  
author, title, awarding institution and date of the thesis must be given

**University of Glasgow**

**Critical Theory: Reason and Dialectic**

**Stephen Charles Marriott**

**Thesis Submitted in Fulfilment of the Requirements for the Degree of**

**Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts**

**Department of Philosophy**

**University of Glasgow**

**June 2000**

## Acknowledgements

This study could never have been completed without the patiently scrupulous editorial work of my supervisor Dudley Knowles. I would also like to thank Dudley for a number of stimulating conversations and probing questions. Without his scepticism this thesis would have been a poorer piece of work. Mention should also be made of Pat Shaw's assistance with respect to various administrative matters. His always courteous and sympathetic approach was much appreciated.

Thanks are also due to a number of people for their help, inspiration and encouragement along the way. In the very first place they are due to William Heggs, a sociology lecturer, who long ago awakened me to the importance of thinking not only critically but systematically about society. Thanks also go to Tony Opie, an old friend, who introduced me to the Marxist tradition. The contributions of Alan Horn and Ian Spence also deserve recognition: in discussion with both of them I came to deepen my knowledge of Hegel and Marx. On a more personal level I owe a debt of gratitude to the various friends who over the past five years have prevented me from becoming an obsessive recluse. These include: Nick Haslam, Fiona Ross, Andy Alston, Alison Gourlay, Helen Runciman, Mike Wharton, Karen Greenshields, Jeff McCracken, Jim O'Donovan, to name but a few.

Finally and most importantly, a massive debt of gratitude is owed to my wife, Stephanie Marriott, whose love and encouragement as well as material support throughout the entire period made this thesis possible. Without her assistance I can categorically declare that the work would never have been completed.

## **Abstract**

Whilst Hegel's influence upon the Frankfurt School's reconstruction of Marx has not gone unnoticed, this influence has never really been adequately theorised. In particular, the question of how the Frankfurt School understood the relation between Hegel's method and Marx's materialism has received very little systematic attention. The present study is a response to this situation: it presents the Frankfurt Marxist tradition as a significant although by no means uncritical contribution to the theory of historical materialism. Moreover, that contribution is shown to derive from some of the central concepts of Hegel's philosophy. Thus in opposition to those commentators, Marxists and non-Marxists alike, who have tended to view Frankfurt Marxism as an exercise in eclectic revisionism, I argue that the work of Horkheimer and his colleagues constitutes an attempt to restate and defend, on the basis of an immanent critique of Hegel's idealism, the fundamental principles of Marx's historical materialism. Accordingly, the central chapters of this thesis are devoted to a close examination of the way in which members of the Frankfurt School, building on the work of Lukács and Korsch, sought to appropriate Hegel's subject-object dialectic on behalf of materialism. In the course of this investigation the following themes come to prominence: the relation between Hegel's social philosophy and a critical theory of society; Horkheimer's project of multi-disciplinary materialism; the methodological significance of the category of totality; materialism as the preponderance of the object; the possibility and nature of a Freud-Marx synthesis; the concept of a critical as opposed to a traditional scientific theory of society. Taken together these themes constitute the basic problematic of the Frankfurt Marxist tradition. The intention of this study is to demonstrate the importance of that problematic for the further development of the materialist theory of history and society..

# Contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <b>Chapter One. Origins of Critical Theory</b>                               | 1   |
| <i>Orthodox Marxism and the Frankfurt School</i>                             | 5   |
| <i>Historical and Dialectical Materialism</i>                                | 13  |
| <i>Hegelian Objections to Orthodox Marxism</i>                               | 27  |
| <i>Conclusion and Preview</i>  | 44  |
| <br>   |     |
| <b>Chapter Two. Marxism and Praxis: Karl Korsch and the Frankfurt School</b> | 55  |
| <i>Korsch, Lukács and the Frankfurt School</i>                               | 57  |
| <i>Philosophy, Science and Marxism</i>                                       | 62  |
| <i>Theory and Praxis</i>   | 70  |
| <i>The Constitutivity of Consciousness</i>                                   | 78  |
| <br>   |     |
| <b>Chapter Three. Social Theory and the Supersession of Philosophy</b>       | 92  |
| <i>Sublation and Determinate Negation</i>                                    | 99  |
| <i>Korsch and the Supersession of Idealism</i>                               | 106 |
| <i>From Korsch to Critical Theory</i>  | 114 |

|   |     |
|---|-----|
| <b>Chapter Four. Multi-Disciplinary Materialism : Empiricism or Dialectics?</b> | 135 |
| <i>The Critique of Empiricism</i>   | 140 |
| <i>History and Social Theory</i>  | 159 |
| <br>  |     |
| <b>Chapter Five. Totality, Materialism and Dialectic</b>                        | 171 |
| <i>Social Theory and the Concept of Totality</i>                                | 174 |
| <i>Subject-Object Dialectics</i>  | 193 |
| <i>Adorno on the Preponderance of the Object</i>                                | 204 |
| <br>  |     |
| <b>Chapter Six. Marx and Freud : Towards a Theory of the Subject</b>            | 220 |
| <i>Marxism and the Social Scientific Tradition</i>                              | 222 |
| <i>Subject and Society</i>  | 231 |
| <i>From Marx to Freud</i>   | 246 |
| <br>  |     |
| <b>Chapter Seven. Totality and Critique</b>                                     | 268 |
| <i>Philosophy, Science and Critical Theory</i>                                  | 271 |
| <i>Immanent Critique</i>  | 286 |
| <i>Immanence, Transcendence and Totality</i>                                    | 295 |
| <i>From Theory to Praxis</i>  | 304 |
| <br>  |     |
| <b>Bibliography</b>   | 324 |

## Chapter 1. Origins of Critical Theory

Critical theory, as first elaborated in the work of Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse, has a two-fold intention: it seeks to offer an account of the condition of late capitalist society, whilst simultaneously providing a philosophically self-conscious meditation upon the nature of social theory. Considered substantively, Frankfurt Marxism is concerned with the social formation of *consciousness*, and in particular with the new and increasingly diverse forms of ideological control that in this century have become integral to the stability of administered capitalism.<sup>1</sup> This historically specific investigation is complemented by, and is a consequence of, the early critical theorists' understanding of the nature and purpose of a social theory. Initially influenced by the philosophical emphasis of Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*, as well as Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy*, the first generation of critical theorists attempted not only to advance a particular analysis of contemporary society but also to distinguish their theory as radically different in kind from alternative approaches to the human sciences. Just as Lukács attempts to define Marxism in terms of *method* rather than the truth of any specific thesis in Marx's political economy, so the Frankfurt theorists give a great deal of attention to the question of what it is that separates a critical theory of society from the traditional conception of theory characteristic of the natural sciences.<sup>2</sup> Thus, from the very first articles in the *Zeitschrift* through to the later work of the 1960s we find a significant and enduring concern with the *philosophical basis* of social theory. The early programmatic writings of Marcuse and Horkheimer, for

---

<sup>1</sup> For a classic analysis of the mass media as a mechanism of social control see the essay by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, 'The Culture Industry: Enlightenment As Mass Deception' in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp.120-167.

<sup>2</sup> Lukács' essay 'What is Orthodox Marxism?' in *History and Class Consciousness* provides a useful summary of the argument that Marxism is essentially defined by its method.

by utilising Hegel's concept of a normative, substantive form of Reason (*Vernunft*) as the organising principle for a theory which can both describe as well as evaluate the society it confronts.<sup>3</sup> Later, during the period of American exile, Marcuse returned to this same question and in a major work, entitled appropriately enough *Reason and Revolution*, argued that the method of Hegel's speculative philosophy is central to the Marxian critique of society.<sup>4</sup> In fact this orientation towards questions surrounding the meta-theoretical status of Marxism persisted through to the very end of first generation critical theory. Thus Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*, in effect his philosophical *magnum opus*, contains an extended discussion of the method underlying his earlier socio-cultural studies and its relation to the program of critical theory.<sup>5</sup> As Adorno puts it, "this largely abstract text ... seeks to explain the author's concrete procedure"; an obligation that the author proceeds to discharge by means of an impressively wide ranging philosophico-political discourse.<sup>6</sup> For the student of critical theory *Negative Dialectics* constitutes not only a late closing account of the nature and condition of the Frankfurt project, but through its return to the question of what it is that distinguishes historical materialism from other kinds of social theory, demonstrates the centrality of methodological thinking within this particular Marxist tradition.

---

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Max Horkheimer's 'Traditional and Critical Theory' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, and Herbert Marcuse's 'Philosophy and Critical Theory' in *Negations*.

<sup>4</sup> See also Marcuse's preface to the later American edition (1960) of *Reason and Revolution* in which he again argues for the importance of Hegel's dialectic in the formulation of the critical project.

<sup>5</sup> Adorno's lengthy introduction to *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* provides an accessible introduction to some of the more obscure methodological material contained in *Negative Dialectics*.

<sup>6</sup> Adorno, T.W., *Negative Dialectics*, p.xix.



The purpose behind the above admittedly brief history of Frankfurt Marxism is to suggest that critical theory, like so many other intellectual movements of the twentieth century, is characterised by a significant degree of self-awareness: as it seeks to provide a particular knowledge of the world it simultaneously reflects upon the very possibility of that knowledge. Now, in choosing to focus upon issues of meta-theory the Frankfurt School, like the Hegelian Marxists who preceded them, were responding to a specific weakness in Marx's thought, namely the failure to produce a sustained, and explicit discussion of the method underlying his analysis of capitalist society.<sup>7</sup> As a result of this lacuna, various interpreters of Marx, in particular Engels and his numerous followers, sought to develop an account of his thought which emphasised the immediate, unproblematic unity of Marxism with other branches of scientific knowledge. Against this positivistic reading the Frankfurt theorists returned to Hegel, not with the intention of restoring his system but to recover, by means of an immanent critique of his idealist philosophy, the *philosophical* basis of Marx's theory of historical materialism.

This aspect of their thought is very often overlooked by commentators, many of whom focus upon specific aspects of the Frankfurt School's analysis of late capitalism, whilst tending to ignore the methodological framework underpinning that analysis.<sup>8</sup> To counter

---

<sup>7</sup> Typically Marx tends to discuss the question of method in the form of prefaces and introductions to his work upon political economy. Hence most debate concerning his methodology has tended to centre around the preface to *A Contribution Towards the Critique of Political Economy*, the introduction to the *Grundrisse* and the various prefaces and afterwords to *Capital*. The obvious problem here is that by their very nature these texts fail to provide a comprehensive discussion of this question.

<sup>8</sup> Martin Jay, for instance, in *The Dialectical Imagination*, attributes the following research program to the Institute: the integration of psycho-analysis and materialism, the study of political and social authority, aesthetics and the critique of mass culture, the

this bias I shall develop an argument to the effect that what is most interesting about Frankfurt Marxism, indeed what distinguishes it from other social theories including orthodox Marxism, is its distinctive approach to the question of *method* in social scientific theory. I shall initially support this claim by means of an historical study of the process of theoretical development which brought critical theory into being.<sup>9</sup> Of necessity, this will involve a close examination of the immediate intellectual context of the Frankfurt School, in particular the conflict between the orthodox and Hegelian Marxists. Now in developing their own response to this dispute the critical theorists came to define themselves not only against the intellectual crudity of a great deal of Marxist orthodoxy but also against the failure of Korsch and Lukács, as they perceived it, to satisfactorily express the methodological significance of Marx's historical materialism. The reconstruction of this whole argument should, therefore, be of interest not only to those who might be sympathetic to the Frankfurt critique of contemporary society but also, and more generally, to philosophers of social science. As Raymond Geuss observes:

Marx's theory of society, if properly construed, does clearly give us knowledge of society but does not easily fit into any of the accepted categories of 'knowledge' ...

Rather Marxism is a radically new kind of theory; to give a proper philosophic

---

empirical study of the authoritarian personality and the philosophy of history. In many ways illuminating, Jay's work unfortunately fails to adequately reflect the substantial methodological concerns characteristic of the Frankfurt theorists. In particular it fails to trace, at least in any detail, the impact of Hegel's thought upon their project.

<sup>9</sup> The term 'critical theory' was first coined by Horkheimer who used it to denote what he called Marx's 'dialectical critique of political economy'. See his 'Traditional and Critical Theory' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p.206. Commenting upon this terminology, Adorno writes: "Horkheimer's phrasing, 'critical theory', seeks not to make [historical] materialism acceptable but to make men theoretically conscious of what it is that distinguishes materialism - distinguishes it from amateurish explications of the world as much as from the 'traditional theory' of science." (*Negative Dialectics*, p.197.)

account of its salient features requires drastic revisions in traditional views about the nature of knowledge.<sup>10</sup>

It is to the credit of the Frankfurt School that they were amongst the first to realise just how drastic these revisions might have to be and accordingly set out to provide an account of Marxism which gives due recognition to this problem. For this reason if no other, their work is of considerable philosophical importance, and as I shall argue, deserves greater recognition within the Anglo-American philosophical community than it has so far achieved.<sup>11</sup> The aim, therefore, of this first chapter is to identify, however provisionally, the nature of this revisionary project as well as to indicate some of its philosophical interest.

### *Orthodox Marxism and the Frankfurt School*

One possible approach to the Frankfurt Marxist tradition is to contrast it with various positivist, empirically oriented approaches to the study of society.<sup>12</sup> To do this, however, is to ignore the actual theoretical context from which the Frankfurt theorists emerged, and so to lose sight of many of the specific questions which their work seeks to address. This

---

<sup>10</sup> Geuss, R., *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, p.1. For a review of Geuss' book see Kai Nielsen, 'The Very Idea of a Critical Theory', *Ratio (New Series)*, IV 2, December 1991.

<sup>11</sup> The critical reception of Frankfurt Marxism by the Anglo-American philosophical academy has tended to be almost uniformly hostile. Thus Jon Elster, in his *An Introduction to Marx*, p.15, writes that "the work of the Frankfurt School is marred ... by Hegelian obscurantism and thinly disguised elitism." and refers his readers to a "devastating review" by Kolakowski. See also Alasdair MacIntyre's *Marcuse* for a similarly dismissive approach.

<sup>12</sup> Geuss' *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, takes this line and offers a useful discussion of critical theory in terms of its general opposition to empiricist social science. See especially Chapter 3.

context is defined, as I have already suggested, by the dispute between the orthodox and Hegelian Marxists, between those theorists who wished to cast Marx's theory as a new positive science, and others, such as Lukács and Korsch, who sought to emphasise its essential relation to German Idealist philosophy.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, much of what is specific to critical theory and most interesting can best be understood by positioning the work of the Frankfurt School with reference to the above debate. This interpretative strategy contrasts with the argument of a number of commentators who have tended to regard Marx as merely one influence, albeit a very important influence, amongst many in the development of the Frankfurt project.<sup>14</sup> Whilst not wishing to deny the obvious fact that the critical theorists draw upon a diverse range of theoretical sources (Nietzsche, Freud and Weber are often cited in their work) the simple truth of the matter is that Frankfurt Marxism is *first and foremost* a form of Marxism. More particularly it is a partially critical, partially sympathetic response to the work of the early Hegelian Marxists, and unless this is clearly understood, no adequate account of critical theory is possible. Accordingly this first chapter will seek to outline some of the differences between the Hegelian Marxists and the theoretical tradition of Marxist orthodoxy to which, in the period 1880-1930, the majority

---

<sup>13</sup> George Lichteim has observed that: "The distinction between the historical materialism of Marx and the dialectical materialism of Engels and his successors is crucial for Adorno, as it was crucial for the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness*." (*From Marx to Hegel*, p.25.) Unfortunately, Lichteim's observation, whilst correct, is supported by very little detailed discussion. See also Nicolae Tertulian's article 'Lukacs, Adorno and German Classical Philosophy', *Telos*, 62, Fall 1984, for a useful discussion of the influence of Hegelian Marxism on the work of Adorno.

<sup>14</sup> See Martin Jay's *Adorno* in which it is argued that this representative of the Frankfurt School should be understood not simply as a Marxist but also as an aesthetic modernist, a cultural mandarin, a Jew and a proto-deconstructionist. Apart from the fact that various items in this eclectic list are in obvious conflict with one another, the problem with Jay's approach is that the specific content of Adorno's Marxism is lost. Against Jay, I would argue that Adorno's concern with, for instance, aesthetic modernism is not expressive of an independent interest but is shaped and fashioned by his materialist outlook.

of Social Democratic and Communist theoreticians subscribed. In the course of this discussion, it will become apparent that critical theory stands as much in opposition to orthodox Marxism as it does to the mainstream of social science. As Adorno observes with respect to those sociologists who advocate a strictly scientific empirical approach to their subject matter: "It is in the nature of society itself that the natural scientific model cannot be happily and unreservedly transferred to it".<sup>15</sup> Yet the orthodox tradition, by representing Marx's historical materialism as a science of history standing alongside the various natural sciences, is guilty of precisely this mistake. In short the Frankfurt School's concern with rescuing historical materialism from the scientistic interpretation of the theory is an entirely logical complement to their well-known rejection of positivistically-oriented programs of social research.

In what follows, I shall argue that the above similarity between Marxist orthodoxy and positivism is a consequence of the fact that the orthodox interpretation of Marx relies heavily upon the popularised version of historical materialism found in the late work of Engels. On this account, Marx's theoretical principles are accorded the same epistemological status as the laws of natural science: Marxism is not different *in kind* from other scientific theories, but on the contrary represents the first real application of *scientific method* to the domain of history and society. In fact, within the orthodox tradition as a whole, it was something of a commonplace that Marx did for the study of human history what Darwin had achieved in the sphere of natural history, both thinkers being credited with having uncovered the *fundamental laws of development* governing their respective objects of study. Undoubtedly, part of the motivation for this position was to secure the

---

<sup>15</sup> 'Sociology and Empirical Research' in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, p.73.

prestige of the natural sciences for historical materialism: if Marx's theory could be plausibly represented as a science with its own specific subject matter, fundamental concepts and laws, the theory's epistemological status could be effortlessly guaranteed. Indeed, for Engels as for many other Marxists, the following argument appeared compelling: science is the most secure form of knowledge that we have, that Marxism is a science, therefore that Marxism is a secure knowledge.<sup>16</sup> The Frankfurt School, however, regarded the scientization of Marx's theory as a serious mistake. Not only did this strategy obscure the real nature of materialism, it also led to grave errors of political judgement. Thus Marcuse, commenting upon Bernstein's revisionist program writes that:

... revisionism replaced the critical dialectic conception with the conformist attitudes of *naturalism*. Bowing to the *authority of the facts*, which indeed justified the hopes of a legal parliamentary opposition, revisionism diverted revolutionary action into the channel of a faith in the 'necessary natural evolution' to socialism.<sup>17</sup>

---

<sup>16</sup> This particular formulation of the argument does not appear in Engels but it is certainly consistent with everything he has to say on the matter. See, for instance, his argument that scientific knowledge divides into three departments: knowledge of inorganic nature, of organic nature and of the historical process. In contrast to scientific knowledge, Engels counter-poses the supposed eternal laws of morality and argues that such laws turn out to be no more than expressions of class interest. (*Anti-Duhring*, pp.123-133.)

<sup>17</sup> *Reason and Revolution*, p.399. Similarly Walter Benjamin in discussing the "evolutionary" reading of Marx popular in Social Democratic and Communist circles comments that: "Nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current. It regarded technological development as the fall of the stream with which it thought it was moving." See his "Theses on the Philosophy of History" in *Illuminations*, p.250. According to the "evolutionary reading", which Benjamin is criticising, the development of the forces of production leads necessarily to a change in the relations of production. More specifically, this was understood to mean that socialism is the inevitable consequence of the process of capitalist development.

Marcuse's objection was intended to apply not only to the revisionist wing of the Social Democratic movement but also to that whole spectrum of Marxist opinion, whether reformist or revolutionary, for whom socialism constituted the developmental goal towards which society was *inevitably* moving. In opposition to this historical naturalism, Marcuse and his colleagues argued that Marxism is not a positive science of social life but a theory of society which in the fashion of Hegel's dialectic seeks to criticise as well negate the world as it exists.<sup>18</sup> What this means is that the theory is not restricted to describing what merely happens to exist, but seeks instead to negate it: materialism not only reveals the disparity between the self-understanding of society and social reality but also points to the emancipatory potential for the resolution of this conflict. Thus critical theory is distinguished from any form of positivist social theory, whether it be "scientific Marxism" or mainstream empirical social science, by its commitment to a wholly different kind of thinking. Against a tradition of social theory which seeks to emulate the method of the natural sciences, the theory advocates a dialectical form of enquiry. Against the claims of the abstract understanding (*Verstehen*), the mode of cognition Hegel regarded as characteristic of the sciences, it proposes a discipline of critical reason (*Vernunft*). Against empiricism, with its fetishism of the fact and law-like conjunction, the critical theorist invokes a logic of totality, essence and appearance, real possibility, negation and emphatic truth.<sup>19</sup> In summary the Frankfurt theorists understand materialism as an attempt to re-establish the relevance of Hegel's idealist agenda to the development of social theory. And without this philosophical "return", the positivist distinction between fact and value, a

---

<sup>18</sup> See Marcuse's preface to *Reason and Revolution*.

<sup>19</sup> These Hegelian terms will be discussed in later chapters of this thesis.

distinction which these theorists believe has distorted social theory right up to the present day, cannot be overcome.

This is not an arcane theoretical point, of interest merely to philosophers of social science, but touches upon profound questions concerning the self-knowledge of humanity. In this context the lesson idealism teaches is that understanding a form of life cannot be distinguished from a judgement concerning the rationality of that form; in the language of Hegel, a genuine science (*Wissenschaft*) of society requires that the classificatory schemata and lawlike regularities which define *Verstehen* give way to the regulative, and critical demands of *Vernunft*. But if this is a "return" to Hegel, it must be emphasised that it is mediated by Marx's historical materialism. Despite what some critics have claimed, the Frankfurt School cannot be understood as latter-day Left Hegelians: the influence of Marx is simply too pronounced to make this charge stick.<sup>20</sup> Thus in a clear acknowledgement of this influence Adorno writes that:

It was Marx who drew the line between historical materialism and the popular-metaphysical kind. He thus involved the former in the problematics of philosophy, leaving popular materialism to cut its dogmatic capers this side of philosophy. Since then, materialism is no longer a counter-position one may resolve to take; *it is the critique of Idealism* in its entirety, and of the reality for which Idealism opts by distorting it.<sup>21</sup> [Italics mine]

---

<sup>20</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, for instance, makes the claim that Marcuse is a Left-Hegelian who has failed to learn the lesson of Marx's original critique of Idealism. (*Marcuse*, pp.22-40.)

<sup>21</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, p.197.



This recovery of the Hegelian dimension of Marxism should not, however, be confused with the sterile dogmatic constituent of Soviet Marxism known as "dialectical materialism"; it is rather, as Adorno explains, the attempt to understand materialism as, in the first place, an *immanent critique* of both Hegel's Idealism and the society of which that philosophy is an expression.<sup>22</sup> Such a critique involves the apparently difficult intellectual feat of taking Hegel seriously whilst rejecting the fundamental idealist premise of his system. Essentially critical theory is an attempt to articulate the encounter between idealism and materialism. Recognising the influence of the former, the theory centres upon the concepts of freedom and rationality; under the influence of the latter it is concerned to demonstrate that these concepts cannot be adequately realised within the capitalist order of society. What results is, as Horkheimer put it, a theory that is incapable of neutrality for it is "a theory dominated at every turn by a concern for reasonable conditions of life."<sup>23</sup> Here it should be emphasised that these "reasonable conditions of life" are not defined by an appeal to a transcendent set of normative criteria, but are the result as Marx puts it of "the self-clarification (critical philosophy) of the struggles and wishes of the age."<sup>24</sup> Put another way, critical theory explores the tension between how the world is and how we think the world is, and in so doing produces a critique that is necessarily immanent to the society it considers. In short, the theory is a form of collective self-knowledge, insofar as it brings to our attention the

---

<sup>22</sup> The classical site for this doctrine can be found in the section entitled "Dialectical and Historical Materialism" in Stalin's *History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union*. For an account, as well as a critique of the conception of dialectic expounded by Stalin and his apologists see Herbert Marcuse's *Soviet Marxism*, especially Chapter 7.

<sup>23</sup> 'Traditional and Critical Theory' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p.199.

<sup>24</sup> Marx to Ruge, September, 1843 in *Marx: Early Writings*, p.209.

various conflicts and contradictions inherent in the social life process in which we are all inescapably participants.

The consequence of these reflections is that the sort of theory advocated by the Frankfurt School is going to be radically distinct from conventional social scientific thought; it is not simply that the theory says something different about specific social phenomena from, for instance Weberian sociology, but rather that the former is developed on the basis of a methodology that is radically distinct from the latter. One needs only to recall Weber's sharp separation of fact from value to realise that a critical theory, with its inherent commitment to the goal of a rational society, is going to proceed towards its object of study quite differently from a theory under the spell of scientific objectivity. In this respect critical theory also contrasts with the tradition of orthodox Marxism, a tradition which regards historical materialism as a theory which does not contain, nor depend upon, any form of *normatively* motivated critique.<sup>25</sup> For Marxist orthodoxy, the materialist theory of history and society provides the basis for a practice that is at once political *and* scientific, the practice of scientific socialism. As a political agency, scientific socialism orientates itself to the historical process in just the same way as technology relates itself to the world of nature: both practices are governed by the recognition of a necessity external to the subject. However, this attempt to establish a "scientific" politics is misconceived: one cannot advocate a transformation of society without at the same time appealing to some kind of normative standard. Thus, even if scientific socialism could demonstrate the inevitability of

---

<sup>25</sup> In this context it is worth noting that certain Althusserian critics of the Frankfurt School have argued that the attempt to construct Marxism as a continuation of the German Idealist tradition is to lose sight of the real scientific character of Marx's theory. Thus Goran Therborn argues that the critical theory of the Frankfurt School "involves a double reduction of science and politics to philosophy." See his article 'The Frankfurt School' in *New Left Review*, 63, Sept-Oct 1970.

the transformation of the capitalist mode of production into another, it would remain an open question as to how that transformation should be regarded from the standpoint of existing norms and values. Worse still, it would seem impossible for “scientific” Marxists, situated as they are within a self-imposed ethical vacuum, to even begin to answer this latter question.<sup>26</sup> Critical theory, by contrast, develops its emancipatory project by means of a theoretical practice, namely *immanent critique*, intentionally constructed so as to overcome this disabling positivist duality of science and criticism. If this can be achieved, the way is open to construing materialism as a discipline that is at once critical but also free from the arbitrariness of a world view.

### *Historical and Dialectical Materialism*

To better establish the distinction between orthodox Marxism and the critical theory of the Frankfurt School I shall, in this section, offer an account of the fundamental principles upon which the former doctrine rests. In the course of the discussion it will be established that this particular interpretive tradition is distinguished by the fact that it portrays Marx’s theory of history as one component, albeit a very important component, of a much wider unified scientific world view. Furthermore, by seeking to integrate Marxism into the family of existing sciences the orthodox tradition is drawn, however unconsciously, towards an essentially positivist conception of the task of philosophy. Thus according to positivism

---

<sup>26</sup> The gap cannot be bridged simply by appealing to the concept of interest, for in those circumstances where socialism is not a realistic prospect the compulsion of self-interest would count against this particular political project. Hence some like Norman Geras have been led to argue that any kind of socialist movement has to possess an ethic of “mutual concern and care”, in other words an ethic of solidarity, so as to overcome the disabling logic of egoistic concern. (*The Contract of Mutual Indifference*, pp.75-76.)

science provide us with knowledge concerning the world whilst the responsibility of philosophy is to reflect upon the underlying formal structure of that knowledge. It is my contention that Marxist orthodoxy offers a surprisingly similar account of the relation between these two theoretical enterprises. However, before proceeding any further with this discussion there is a terminological issue surrounding the notion of orthodoxy which needs to be addressed. Conventionally, historians of ideas have tended to use the term "orthodox Marxism" to designate the political and theoretical movement that found organisational expression in the Second International. By contrast, I shall use the term in a more inclusive sense to denote not only the above theoretical tradition but also the later doctrine of Marxism-Leninism associated with the Third International. This may appear as a controversial decision, for it seems to ignore the many real differences between the theoretical basis of early Social Democracy and that of its Communist rival. Without denying that a significant *political* chasm did indeed separate these groups, the reform versus revolution debate being perhaps the most famous aspect of that quarrel, I shall however argue that both political groupings were under the sway of a common *epistemological* paradigm privileging scientific forms of cognition over and against other forms of knowledge. This common paradigm originates with the later work of Engels, particularly his "philosophical" texts *Anti-Duhring*, *The Dialectics of Nature* and *Ludwig Feurbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*. This body of writing was immensely influential, both practically and theoretically, within the early western Social Democratic movements as well as the later Communist Third International. Without exaggeration it may be said that these works effectively defined the research paradigm of that entire generation of Marxist theoreticians, most noticeably Kautsky, Labriola, Mehring

and Plekhanov, who came to prominence after the demise of Marx and Engels.<sup>27</sup> All of these theorists conceived of their work as an extension or development of Engel's original program for a "science" of history. Commenting upon this codification of Marx's thought Lichtheim writes: "What cannot be doubted is that it was Engels who was responsible for the subsequent interpretation of 'Marxism' as a unified system of thought destined to take the place of Hegelianism and classical German philosophy in general."<sup>28</sup> Thus according to Lichtheim, his interpretation influenced the development not only of German Social Democracy but also of Soviet Marxism and for this reason he argues that "Leninism has to be regarded as a 'revision' of the orthodox Marxism of Engels, Plekhanov and Kautsky."<sup>29</sup> This observation although essentially correct needs to be set out in considerably more detail. Now in the course of setting out such detail it will become apparent that there is indeed a common meta-theoretical core to both Second and Third International Marxism, and that in consequence the use of the term "orthodox Marxism" to designate both traditions is less idiosyncratic than it might at first appear.

To support this argument, I shall identify two central principles of Engels' thought which together define the orthodox tradition. The first such principle is that Marx's theory of historical materialism represents a radical theoretical break with the tradition of German Idealism; in effect the theory constitutes a definitive transition from philosophical speculation to a science of society. Thus for Engels, Marxism is a specific scientific discipline within the wider family of sciences; this new theoretical discipline, which he calls

---

<sup>27</sup> Cf. Anderson, P., *Considerations on Western Marxism*, pp. 5-6.

<sup>28</sup> *From Marx to Hegel*, p.67.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

*historical materialism*, takes history as its domain and proceeds on the basis of concepts derived from the study of economic life to establish the fundamental laws of the historical process. These laws which make reference to the forces and relations of production characteristic of a given society, what Marxists sometimes call the economic or material base, are supposed to be able to account for the past as well as future pattern of development of that society. And not merely economic development: the above laws are also credited with the capacity to explain the existence of the diverse forms of consciousness, political and legal as well as philosophical, religious and aesthetic, that spring up alongside the material life process.

This, of course, is the famous *base-superstructure thesis*, the idea that the material substratum of social life, the mode of production, determines the superstructure of ideas by means of which individuals understand and interpret social reality. Presenting this thesis in summary form, Engels writes:

... the *economic structure* of society always furnishes *the real basis* [of historical explanation], starting from which we can alone work out the ultimate explanation of the whole superstructure of juridical and political institutions as well as of the religious, philosophical and other ideas of a given historical period.<sup>30</sup>

Although Engels cautions against interpreting materialism as a form of economic determinism, and accords a limited form of autonomy to the superstructural sphere, he has no objection to the view that the mode of production is "in the last instance" the

---

<sup>30</sup> Engels, F., 'Feurbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy' in *Marx and Engels: Selected Works*, p.616.

determinate *causal* factor in the explanation of superstructural change. Thus Marx's historical materialism is a science precisely because it systematically connects changes in one area of social life with changes in another; *what* we think is determined by *how* we produce our material lives. Hence *contra* idealism, thought does not produce reality but is rather its reflection. In developing this doctrine, the followers of Engels were greatly impressed by the summary of the method of historical materialism found in the preface to Marx's *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Here Marx describes the "guiding principle" of his work in the following terms:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these *relations of production* constitutes the economic structure of society, the *real foundation* on which arises a legal and political *superstructure* and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.<sup>31</sup> (Italics mine)

This much quoted passage was taken by many orthodox Marxists as justification for the view that Marx's achievement consists in identifying the underlying *causal* basis of the historical process; as Hilferding puts it Marxism aims "at the discovery of causal

---

<sup>31</sup> *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, pp.20-21.

connections."<sup>32</sup> According to this account, Marx's theory offers an explanatory model that distinguishes two distinct aspects of the social life process, base and superstructure, and relates them in the fashion of an independent to a dependent variable. The independent variable, which Engels calls the economic structure, refers to Marx's concept of a *mode of production*, a social formation consisting of *the forces and relations of production*. The former consist of the means of production (machinery, tools, raw materials) and human labour power (the capacity for productive activity) whilst the latter are the social relations established in the course of the productive process. For the orthodox Marxist, the thesis that the mode of production constitutes the "base" or "real foundation" on which the ideological superstructure is built is a thesis describing a *structure of causal interaction* between these two fundamental elements of social life. In turn this structure is the basis of the claim that Marxism is a scientific theory, with its own specialised concepts and laws, which deserves to be ranked alongside the established natural sciences.

This initial statement of the orthodox position, however, requires some further refinement; in particular, more needs to be said concerning the nature of the causal hypothesis at the centre of this interpretation. Thus according to orthodox Marxism the development and growth of the productive forces, and technological change in particular, should be regarded as the cause of any subsequent changes in the relations of production. However, alongside this idea there is another causal hypothesis, namely that the material base of society, which Marx calls the mode of production, determines the superstructure of ideas in terms of which individuals apprehend their social being. It should be noted, however, that in developing this position, most orthodox Marxists took pains to distance themselves from

---

<sup>32</sup> *Finance Capital*, (Introduction).



the thesis of technological or economic determinism: the idea that the historical process is to be explained in terms of a *uni-directional* causal chain linking technological-material developments to changes in forms of social life. Against this thesis, Engels and his followers argued, although not always consistently, that the forces and relations of production, as well as the base and the superstructure cannot be related simply as cause and effect but should be understood as distinguishable aspects of social being which *act and react* upon one another. Plekhanov's writings, for instance, demonstrate that although explanatory primacy is accorded to the forces of production, a degree of reciprocal interaction is allowed to exist between the forces and relations of production. Thus he writes that:

... a certain state of the productive forces *is the cause* of the given production relations ... the latter (once they have arisen *as a consequence of the aforementioned cause*) begin themselves to influence that cause. Thus there arises an *interaction* between the productive forces and the social economy.<sup>33</sup>

In arguing in this fashion Plekhanov is, of course, reiterating an interpretation of the materialist thesis advanced by Engels in his later works and correspondence to various followers in the European socialist movement. Thus in a letter to Bloch, Engels argues that there is a complex process of *interaction* governing the relation between the economic element and the superstructure. As he puts it:

According to the materialist conception of history, the ultimate determining

---

<sup>33</sup> 'Fundamental Problems of Marxism' in *Selected Philosophical Works: Vol III*, p.155.

element in history is the production and re-production of material life. More than this neither Marx nor I have ever asserted. Hence if somebody twists this into saying that the economic element is the only determining one, he transforms that proposition into a meaningless, abstract, senseless phrase. The economic situation is the basis, but the various elements of the superstructure ... also exercise their influence upon the course of historical struggles ...<sup>34</sup>

Engels goes on to argue in this letter that there is an *interaction* between all of these elements but then concludes that in this complex process the "economic movement finally asserts itself as necessary". We shall return to this particular caveat a little later; for the moment however I shall assert that the orthodox formulation of historical materialism leads directly to a scientific-mechanistic account of Marx's thought. Thus history, and social life, are represented as subject to "laws of motion" which in turn are formulated in terms of mechanical concepts such as action-reaction, force, direction and so forth. One has only to consider, for instance, Engels argument that specific historical events are the resultant of a "parallelogram of forces", each force corresponding to the will of an individual, to appreciate the pervasive influence of scientific-mechanistic models within the orthodox version of Marx. We may conclude, therefore, that this particular reading, informed as it is by an emphatically causal framework, does not merely utilise the natural sciences as a source of analogy but has a thorough-going commitment to an essentially *mechanical* mode of explanation.

---

<sup>34</sup> Engels to Bloch, Sept 21, 1890 in *Marx-Engels: Selected Works*, p.682. Similarly in a letter to Schmidt, (July 14, 1893), Engels writes that: "If therefore Barth supposes that we deny any and every reaction of the political, etc, reflexes of the economic movement upon the movement itself, he is simply tilting at windmills." (*Marx-Engels: Selected Works*, p.688-89).

It is now time to say something concerning the second principle employed by Engels in his account of Marx's thought, the conception of materialism as a completely general philosophico-scientific perspective, of relevance not only to the study of society but also to that of nature. In essence, this world-view or *Anschauung* is thought of as providing an integrative theoretical framework for the results of the various natural and social sciences. Now according to Engels, Marxism although materialist in its general outlook, is unlike previous forms of materialism because it is grounded in Hegel's dialectic. Thus the result of Marx's encounter with Hegel is a philosophy that conceives of the material world in dialectical terms, or as Plekhanov later wrote: "The philosophy of Marx and Engels is not just a materialist philosophy. It is dialectical materialism."<sup>35</sup> In retrospect we can see that this idea was the result of Engels' desire to resolve, from a "scientific" standpoint, the question of the relation between Marx's thought and the idealist tradition from which it emerged. The particular problem that Engels faced was that in the prevailing intellectual climate of the late nineteenth century, Hegel's Idealism, and in particular his belief that reality is the expression of an underlying rational order, looked like the final gesture of an obsolete tradition of metaphysical thought. For this reason, many of Marx's early followers were reluctant to accord Hegel too much influence with respect to either the genesis or content of historical materialism: to do so would seem to be inconsistent with the scientific nature of Marx's theory. However, Hegel's contribution to the Marxian project could not be simply denied: despite the fact that many of Marx's philosophical writings remained unpublished in his lifetime, it was evident that his work was characterised by a consistent engagement with the principles and categories of Hegelian thought. In the preface to

---

<sup>35</sup> 'Preface to *Ludwig Feuerbach*' in *Selected Philosophical Works: Vol III*, p.73.

*Capital*, for instance, Marx takes the opportunity to deplore the widespread antipathy to Hegel's philosophy, and defiantly declares himself to be a pupil of, as he puts it, "that mighty thinker".<sup>36</sup> This kind of forthright avowal meant that Marx's early followers were confronted with the following problem of interpretation, namely how to allow for the influence of German Idealism upon Marx without at the same time undermining the positive scientific character of historical materialism.

Engels' approach to the problem attempts to reconcile these two apparently conflicting requirements. Marx's theory of history is acknowledged as a science whilst Hegel's philosophy, or at least the version of it constructed by Engels, is made to serve as its meta-scientific underpinning. Thus in *Anti-Duhring* Engels associates historical materialism with a philosophical doctrine (dubbed "dialectical materialism" by Plekhanov) which seeks to fuse a positivist conception of knowledge with an ill-digested form of Hegelianism.<sup>37</sup> The undoubted appeal of Engels' account lay in the fact that although it recognises Hegel's influence it also promises to preserve the positive scientific status of Marxism by presenting dialectic as a *universal theory of change* applicable to both nature and society.<sup>38</sup> According to Engels, materialist dialectic consists of a number of "laws" derived from Hegel's *Logic*; these are usually referred to as the Transformation of Quantity into Quality, the Negation of the Negation and the Unity and Interpenetration of Opposites. Taken together with the

---

<sup>36</sup> *Capital: Vol 1*, Afterword to the Second Edition, p.29.

<sup>37</sup> David McLellan points out that this term was never used by Marx nor indeed Engels. In fact, it originated with Joseph Dietzgen, a German Social-Democrat, in the 1870s, and was later taken up by Plekhanov and Lenin. See McLellan's *The Thought of Karl Marx*, p.152.

<sup>38</sup> Engels, F., 'Feurbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy' in *Marx-Engels: Selected Works*, p.611.

results of the various empirical sciences, the above laws of dialectic are intended to constitute a framework in which a view of reality *in toto* might be constructed. Furthermore, and in a strikingly positivistic fashion, Engels claims that the resulting dialectical synthesis replaces philosophy altogether. As he observes:

... modern materialism is essentially dialectic, and *no longer needs any philosophy standing above the other sciences*. As soon as each special science is bound to make clear its position in the great totality of things and of our knowledge of things, *a special science dealing with that totality is superfluous*. That which still survives, independently of all earlier philosophy is the science of thought and its laws - formal logic and dialectics. Everything else is subsumed in the *positive science of nature and history*.<sup>39</sup> [Italics mine]

In one respect this passage is misleading with respect to Engel's own position: it suggests that dialectics, here described as part of the "science of thought", is an *a priori* discipline on a par with formal logic. This however, is not Engels' view of the matter; on the contrary, he believes that the various dialectical laws serve as the most general expression of the laws of motion and development of any form of reality. These laws are not available *a priori* but result from scientific practice, a practice which Engels conceives of in fairly traditional terms as being governed by a discipline of experimentation, observation and hypothesis formation. In fact his only complaint against traditional scientific theory is that it has so far failed to recognise the dialectical nature of its own results. On this account, dialectics far from being a venture in *a priori* speculation, is a theory which elucidates the

---

<sup>39</sup> *Anti-Duhring*, p.40.

structure of change in the world as revealed to us through the discoveries of the natural and social sciences.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, according to Engels scientific practice provides a decisive solution to many of the traditional problems of philosophy. Commenting upon scepticism he writes

The most telling refutation of this [Humean scepticism concerning cognition] as of all other philosophical crotchets is practice, namely, experiment and industry. If we are able to prove the correctness of our conception of a natural process by making it ourselves, bringing it into being out of its conditions and making it serve our own purposes into the bargain, then there is an end to the Kantian ungraspable "thing-in-itself".<sup>41</sup>

Thus for Engels, the development of the various sciences has a two-fold effect upon philosophy. In the first place scientific advance decisively resolves certain philosophical questions: scepticism is for instance disposed of by reflection upon the results of experiment and industry. Secondly, whatever remains can no longer be considered as the basis of an independent theoretical activity: philosophy is now redundant.<sup>42</sup> In its place

---

<sup>40</sup> Op.cit., pp.33-40.

<sup>41</sup> 'Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy' in *Marx-Engels: Selected Works*, p.595.

<sup>42</sup> To appreciate just how close Engels comes to positivism one has only to compare his argument with that of the logical positivists. Thus Ayer commenting on the relation between philosophy and science writes: "For our part we are concerned to emphasize not so much the unity of the sciences as the unity of philosophy with science. With regard to the relationship of philosophy and the empirical sciences, we have remarked that philosophy does not in any way compete with the sciences." See *Language, Truth and Logic*, p.151. Of course, there are differences between Engels and the later positivists: for the Vienna Circle philosophy relates to science through its *analysis* of scientific statements, whilst Engels saw *dialectical logic* as the link between the two.

there is a task of synthesis; the results of the specialised sciences are to be unified by means of dialectical categories into a single, coherent world-view. According to Engels, to grasp the real significance of these results there is a need for a sense of their "interconnection" and this latter day form of "natural philosophy", is nothing other than dialectics. In this way Marxism is purged of any critical philosophical content; what is left is on the one hand the general "scientific world-view" of dialectical materialism and on the other the particular science of historical materialism. Furthermore in the study of society, ideas that are not part of the materialist world outlook or of Marx's science of history are to be relegated to the realm of ideology, and so dismissed. For the orthodox Marxists this was to be the fate not only of the legal-political superstructure of bourgeois society but also of philosophy itself.

In the context of the present discussion what needs to be stressed is that this version of Marx was an influence not only on the work of Lenin and his followers but *also* amongst most of the major Social Democratic theorists. For example, Mehring, a leading member of the German SPD spoke for many when he declared that "Historical materialism encompasses the materialism of the natural sciences, but not the other way round."<sup>43</sup> This declaration neatly illustrates Kolakowski's view that: "The orthodox majority [of the Second International] ... maintained that Marxist doctrine itself contained the answers to all or most of the problems of philosophy, and that Engels works ... were the natural completion of Marx's economic and social theories."<sup>44</sup> For this majority, Engels provided the essential philosophical framework into which Marx's strictly scientific work, namely his political economy and theory of history, could be placed.

---

<sup>43</sup> *On Historical Materialism*, p.15.

<sup>44</sup> *Main Currents of Marxism: Vo II*, p.3.

Before concluding this section it is worth noting that Soviet Marxism was in large measure a natural extension of this approach. Like Second International Marxism it regarded materialism as a universally encompassing theoretical view-point, applicable to both matter and consciousness, nature as well as society. Thus we find Lenin writing in 1915 that: “The splitting of a single whole and the cognition of its contradictory parts is the essence ... of dialectics ... The correctness of this aspect of dialectics must be tested by the history of science.”<sup>45</sup> Elaborating on this thought, Lenin lists certain supposed examples of “contradiction” which he argues are daily observed by the individual sciences:

In mathematics: + and -

In mechanics: action and reaction

In physics: positive and negative electricity

In chemistry: the combination and dissociation of atoms

In social science: the class struggle<sup>46</sup>

At this point I shall not comment in detail upon this doctrine other than to remark that Lenin, following Engels, bases much of his argument upon a set of extremely tenuous analogies between natural and social phenomena. These comparisons are intended to support the view that nature, like society, is constituted and indeed develops through contradiction. However, as I shall argue in the next section of this chapter the mere presence of conflict, opposition, difference or binary polarity in the sphere of nature does

---

<sup>45</sup> ‘On the Question of Dialectics’ in *Collected Works: Vol 14*, p.360.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.



not in itself constitute a dialectic, at least in the sense that Hegel and Marx use this term. For both of these thinkers the idea of dialectic necessarily involves the notion of the subjects' activity being in some sort of conflict to the world that it has created, and it is this requirement, rather than Engels' metaphysical Laws of Dialectic, which guarantees the importance of the concept of contradiction in the development of social theory. Failure to appreciate this point leads to the mass of confusions characteristic of the doctrine of dialectical materialism, a doctrine which as it turns out is neither dialectical nor indeed materialist.

### *Hegelian Objections to Orthodox Marxism*

In this section I shall discuss some of the objections, first developed in the work of Korsch and Lukács and later taken up by various members of the Frankfurt School, to the orthodox position. Broadly speaking it can be said that this Hegelian Marxist criticism of the orthodox tradition involves two distinct lines of argumentation: first a rejection of the scientific reconstruction of Marx's theory of history, and second a profound scepticism concerning Engels doctrine of dialectical materialism. Thus beginning with the concept of historical materialism we note that orthodox Marxism is a theory which understands itself as having a scientific rather than a philosophical intent, as abandoning the idealist narrative of Spirit in favour of a *science* of the historical process. On this account the scientific quality of Marxism is vouchsafed by the fact that it contains no appeal to normative principles but simply describes the contradictory logic of the process of capitalist accumulation.<sup>47</sup> For instance, according to Engels, Marx's political economy is in the first

---

<sup>47</sup> See, for instance, Mehring: "In this respect historical materialism denies all moral standards - but in this respect alone. It bans them from the *study of history* because they

place a *scientific description* of reality: it represents, as he puts it, the discovery of "the special law of motion governing the ... capitalist mode of production and the bourgeois society that this mode of production has produced."<sup>48</sup> Central to this reading is the idea that Marx's theory of history is a science in the *exact same sense* as any of the natural sciences. From the viewpoint, however, of Korsch and Lukács this formulation is immensely problematic insofar as it leads to the separation of Marxism from any form of political practice. For if historical materialism stands in the same relation to the social world as physics does to the material world, then there would be appear to be no intrinsic connection between accepting the materialist hypothesis and commitment to a *praxis* directed towards the transformation of society. This in fact was the position taken by the Austro-Marxists, most noticeably Rudolf Hilferding, who argued that the "science of Marxism" was logically independent of any kind of critique of capitalist society. Commenting upon this tendency Lukács wrote:

... the essence of the method of historical materialism is inseparable from the 'practical and critical activity' of the proletariat: both are aspects of the same process of social evolution. So, too, the knowledge of reality provided by the dialectical method is likewise inseparable from the standpoint of the proletariat. The question raised by Austrian Marxists of the methodological separation of the 'pure' science of Marxism from socialism is a pseudo-problem. For, the Marxist method, ... can arise only from the point of view of a class, from the point of view

---

make all *scientific* study of history impossible." (*On Historical Materialism*, p.31.) This is reminiscent of Weber's own sharp separation of fact from value in his discussion of the possibility of a science of society.

<sup>48</sup> 'Speech at the Graveside of Karl Marx' in *Marx-Engels Selected Works*, p.429.

of the struggle of the proletariat.<sup>49</sup>

Thus just as Hegel connects Science to the historically concrete development of Spirit, the young Lukács associates Marxism with the emergence of a new social class, the proletariat, and argues that it is a theory which does no more or less than articulate the ‘standpoint’ of that class. What this means is that the materialist hypothesis cannot be detached from the specific socio-historical context in which it emerged, for it is a theory which seeks to give expression to the *interests* of the class whose standpoint it determines. In other words the emancipatory potential of Marxism depends upon the fact that it is a theory intended to enlighten the proletariat about its present condition, a condition which the theory reveals to be one of exploitation and oppression. Hence against the ‘scientisation’ of materialism, Lukács emphasises the unity of cognition with *praxis*, a unity that follows from the idea that we are dealing with a knowledge concerning essential human interests and which in consequence must inevitably impact upon our practical orientation to the world.

This general criticism of the equation of Marxism with the natural sciences was not however the only issue that Korsch and Lukács wanted to raise. Both thinkers went on to develop a number of detailed objections to the account of historical materialism offered by Marxist orthodoxy. Thus Korsch questioned the way in which Marx’s theory of history and society had come to be interpreted as a particular kind of *causal narrative* relating changes in one area of the social life process to changes in another. Against this approach, Korsch, like Lukács, emphasised the organic unity of social life, arguing that it constituted a totality of consciousness and being, no part of which could be understood without reference to the

---

<sup>49</sup> ‘What is Orthodox Marxism?’ in *History and Class Consciousness*, p.21.

relation of that part to the system as a whole. This perspective, inspired as it is by Hegel's category of totality, stands in sharp opposition to the mechanistic, almost Humean, model of social causality characteristic of the orthodox tradition. In fact Korsch believed that adherence to this model was responsible for the kind of confusion epitomised in Engels' often agonised attempts to evade the charge of economic determinism. Thus commenting upon the Engels-Bloch correspondence he writes:

He [Engels] unwisely conceded that to a large extent so called 'reactions' (*Rückwirkungen*) might take place between the superstructure and the basis ... thereby introducing completely unnecessary confusion ... For *without an exact quantitative determination* of 'how much' action and reaction takes place, without an *exact indication of the conditions* under which one or the other occurs, the whole Marxian theory of historical development of society, as interpreted by Engels, becomes useless even as a working hypothesis. As stated, it affords not the slightest clue as to whether one is to seek for the cause of any change in social life in the *action (Wirkung)* of the base upon the superstructure or in the *reaction* of the superstructure upon the base.<sup>50</sup>

This is an important criticism, for it identifies the central incoherence of the orthodox interpretation of the materialist thesis. In particular, if two-way interaction is admitted, then it becomes questionable as to whether there is any clear sense in supposing that the material base of society be thought of as ultimately causally determinate? Orthodox Marxists tend to respond to this problem by talking about "primary" and "secondary" causes but this, as

---

<sup>50</sup> 'Why I am a Marxist' in *Karl Korsch: Three Essays on Marxism*, p.64.

Korsch rightly observes, is simply to evade the problem. For either the base causally determines the superstructure and *all subsequent superstructural influence* or it does not. The former position leads to the view that the mode of production acts as some kind of "prime mover", that absurdly from the primal productive act everything else follows, whilst the latter results in a "variety of factors" or in a "limited autonomy" approach to the historical process. However, as Korsch notes, once *any degree* of autonomous superstructural effectivity is granted it becomes unclear what it is precisely that distinguishes historical materialism from other forms of historical explanation. To take just one aspect of this problem, we might wonder just *how much* independence an explanation can assign to the superstructure whilst still qualifying as materialist. This question, which clearly demands some kind of quantitative response reveals the flaw behind Engels' conception of limited autonomy; in the absence of any system of relative weighting the question cannot be answered, and consequently the Marxian thesis thus interpreted lacks determinate sense.

This, however, is not the only complication that arises from a critical scrutiny of Engels' codification of historical materialism. Just as problematic is the question of the nature of the causal nexus, or mediating link, that is supposed to connect the material life process to the superstructure of ideas and beliefs. The orthodox view of this matter appeals to the notion of *structurally determined interests*, that is to interests determined by the class position of the subject. On this account, individuals in society are regarded as occupying determinate positions within the economic structure and in virtue of occupying these positions acquire a corresponding set of material interests. Furthermore, according to the Marxist tradition, wherever one class rules over another, wherever there is a class society, it is the interests of

this ruling class which in the long run tend to prevail. This state of affairs is not simply the result of crude oppression, the naked exercise of state power, the use of terror and so forth, but depends also upon the ability of a ruling class to establish a position of ideological dominance over the population at large: in other words the familiar idea that the dominant forms of consciousness in a society are forms which serve the interests of the ruling elite. To give just one but very typical example of this kind of explanation we find Lenin arguing with respect to the notion of parliamentary democracy that "the various political forms of the modern European states serve to strengthen the domination of the bourgeoisie over the proletariat" and that in consequence these forms cannot be made to serve the interests of another class.<sup>51</sup>

Now certainly there are echoes of this kind of approach in Marx's own writings. In the *Manifesto*, for instance, he and Engels argue that "the ruling ideas of each age have ever been the ideas of its ruling class"<sup>52</sup> and that "law, morality, religion, are ... so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk ... just as many bourgeois interests."<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, despite this rhetoric of scepticism, it would be a mistake to regard Marx's theory of ideology as a theory which simply reduces all forms of consciousness to the expression of class interest.<sup>54</sup> To do so is to miss out on much of what is most interesting about Marx's view of the relation between thought and the social life process. To consider

---

<sup>51</sup> 'Three Sources and Component Parts of Marxism' in *Marx Engels: Selected Works*, p.24.

<sup>52</sup> *Communist Manifesto*, p.51.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.* p.44.

<sup>54</sup> It is worth noting that this kind of scepticism concerning the unifying ideology of a society has a long tradition in philosophy: it begins with Thrasymachus' claim in the *Republic* that justice simply means what is in the interests of the stronger. (336B-347E).

just one example, Marx praises Hegel for discovering that “religion, wealth, etc., are only the *estranged reality* of human objectification, of human essential powers born into work, and therefore only the way to true human reality.”<sup>55</sup> (Italics mine) Thus for Marx, the religious consciousness is not false *tout court*, but is rather the distorted expression of an underlying reality, namely human labour as a world producing and transforming activity. As we shall see in the next chapter, Korsch took up this point and argued to some effect that materialism cannot consistently denounce the various ideological forms of law, morality, philosophy and religion as nothing more than systems of false belief.<sup>56</sup> In support of this position he cites Marx’s original discussion of reification and commodity fetishism, arguing that this describes a form of consciousness which precisely through its distortion serves to express a certain truth about the world. Hence, under the grip of commodity fetishism social relations between individuals appear as relations between things but as Norman Geras has pointed out this is not an arbitrary illusion, for “where commodity production prevails, relations between persons *really* do take the form of relations between things.”<sup>57</sup> To put it another way the individual who believes that production relations are governed by impersonal *quasi*-natural forces has not so much made a simple cognitive error but rather failed to move from the realm of appearance to that of essence, to go beyond how things seem to a knowledge of how things are. In summary ideology expresses the truth of appearance whilst simultaneously deceiving its victims about the

---

<sup>55</sup> *Marx: Early Writings*, p.385.

<sup>56</sup> Commenting upon this inherent ambiguity in materialism, Adorno writes that dialectical thought “takes seriously the principle that it is not ideology in itself which is untrue but rather its pretension to correspond to reality.” (‘Cultural Criticism and Society’ in *Prisms*, p.32.)

<sup>57</sup> ‘Marx and the Critique of Political Economy’ in *Ideology and Social Science*, ed.R.Blackburn, p.293.

nature of reality.

This, however, is not the only objection, at least from the standpoint of Hegelian thought, to the orthodox account of ideology. There is another line of argument to the effect that orthodox Marxism is unable to explain how a specific mode of consciousness arises in the first place as well as how once it has come into being that mode of consciousness is related to material reality. Thus although, an explanation in terms of *interest* can be made out for certain ideological forms, this kind of explanation appears incapable of telling us much that is specific to the particular case. For example, once it has been demonstrated that a certain political-legal conception, assuming it commands widespread acceptance, is functional for the maintenance of the status quo, then the contribution of materialism to the analysis of that form appears to be over. This suggests that the materialist hypothesis cannot by itself explain why the interest of a ruling elite has manifested itself in a particular mode of consciousness, constituted by the unity of a specific *form and content*, rather than another mode that would be equally functional in disguising the class nature of society. In fact Engels in a letter to Bloch, seems to concede as much, arguing that the *form* that historical struggles take is determined by superstructural factors rather than the economic base.<sup>58</sup> If taken seriously, Engels' observation points to a significant theoretical weakness: it implies that materialism is unable to explain most of what is specific to individual superstructural phenomena. In consequence, the result of a "materialist" analysis is that the diverse forms of consciousness arising in philosophy, religion, aesthetics, politics and law lose their particularity and become no more than exemplars of a generic type, namely false consciousness.

---

<sup>58</sup> Engels to Bloch, September 21, 1890 in *Marx-Engels: Selected Works*, p.682.



By way of contrast to this separation of form and content, Hegelian Marxism emphasised their essential unity. Thus Lukács in his critique of the Kantian system writes that “actuality, content, matter reaches right into the form, the structures of the forms and their interrelations and thus into the structure of the system itself.”<sup>59</sup> Echoing this thought some years later Marcuse celebrates Hegel’s achievement in recognising that: “The categories and modes of thought derive from the process of reality to which they pertain. Their form is determined by the structure of this process.”<sup>60</sup> In other words materialism is committed to the task of providing a comprehensive account of the various elements of the superstructure; that is, an account which is concerned with both form and content. This means that materialists do not reductively represent the individual phenomenon as simply the instantiation of a type, to asserting for instance that Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* is an example of bourgeois idealism; instead they seek to discover the universal, that is society, by an analysis of what is most particular to the phenomenon.<sup>61</sup> Hence it is by reference to the inner logic of form and content, the logic which make the particular element what it is, that the social pre-conditions of super-structural elements are identified. For example, in the case of Kant’s *Critique* Lukács argues that the idealist thesis advanced in that work is grounded in a particular opposition, namely the opposition between the object of experience and the *ding an sich*, and that it is this contrast which represents the

---

<sup>59</sup> ‘Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat’ in *History and Class Consciousness*, p.118.

<sup>60</sup> *Reason and Revolution*, p.121.

<sup>61</sup> As Adorno observes: “It is rather demanded that the force of the general concept be transformed into the self-development of the concrete object and that it resolve the social enigma of this object with the powers of its own individuation.” (*Philosophy of Modern Music*, p.26.)

social content of the work. As he puts it:

What is novel about modern rationalism is its increasingly insistent claim that it has discovered the *principle* which connects up all phenomena which in nature and society confront mankind. Compared with this, every previous type of rationalism is no more than a partial system.<sup>62</sup>

Now according to Lukács, the concept of the *ding an sich* serves as the organising or structural principle of Kant's rationalist project; moreover it is a principle which serves to express the central dilemma of bourgeois thought, namely the inability to comprehend the world that the bourgeois subject has itself created. Whether this particular interpretation of Kant's thought can be sustained is not an issue that I propose to discuss here; rather it has been mentioned so as to illustrate the quite distinct approach of Lukács to the analysis of forms of consciousness. By insisting that phenomena must be grasped in their totality, as the unity of a specific form with a specific content, he seeks to transcend Engels' obviously *ad hoc* distinction between the form and content of superstructural phenomena and thereby to lay the basis for a more adequate theory of consciousness and ideology.

Having said something concerning the Hegelian-Marxist critique of the orthodox account of historical materialism it is now time to consider their criticism of the other fundamental component of Marxist orthodoxy, namely the doctrine of dialectical materialism. In what follows, I shall argue that this disastrous doctrine is due in large measure to the rigid distinction which Engels makes between the method and the content of Hegel's

---

<sup>62</sup> 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' in *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 113.

philosophy. Before coming to that argument, however, let us recall that central to dialectical materialism is the claim that there are certain general laws of development which govern processes of change and development in nature and society. Thus describing one such law, the law of the negation of the negation, Engels writes:

And so what is the negation of the negation? An extremely general - and for this reason far reaching and important - law of development of nature, history and thought; a law which as we have seen, holds good in the animal and plant kingdoms, in geology, in mathematics, in history and philosophy ...<sup>63</sup>

This quotation neatly illustrates Engels' belief that reality is essentially dynamic, that everything is subject to growth, maturation and decay and that furthermore every such process of change or alteration is governed by certain general laws of development which taken together define the theory of dialectical materialism. Now it should be said immediately that these supposed laws have not been favourably received by most philosophically sophisticated readers of Marx and Engels. On the contrary they have been dismissed as either empty of content and/or based upon profound logical errors. Furthermore there is a strong body of scholarly opinion which asserts that in this respect Engels' enthusiasm for the natural sciences led him to propose a theory which has almost no connection with Marx's own thought. Thus in a discussion of Marx's materialist reconstruction of Hegel's doctrine, Avineri writes:

---

<sup>63</sup> *Anti-Duhring*, p.195.

... it becomes evident that [Marx's] view of materialism differs sharply from the mechanistic materialism propounded by Engel's in his *Dialectics of Nature*. By applying dialectics to nature Engels divorces it from the mediation of consciousness. Strictly speaking such a view cannot be termed dialectical at all. Although Hegel included inanimate nature in his dialectical system, for him nature is spirit in self-estrangement. Hence he did not eliminate consciousness but reasserted it panlogistically. This was not the case with Engels, who saw in inanimate nature only opaque matter.<sup>64</sup>

In making this point Avineri is of course reiterating an argument familiar to readers of Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*. Commenting upon Engels' belief that what distinguishes dialectical from mechanistic thought is an emphasis upon interaction rather than a form of uni-directional causality, Lukács declares that he "does not ... mention the most vital interaction, namely the dialectical relation between subject and object in the historical process, let alone give it the prominence it deserves".<sup>65</sup> In other words dialectic is not a general theory of reality but a means of theorising the concrete process through which subject and object define each other. Much the same point is made by Marcuse, who argues that what characterises the Marxian "inversion" of Hegelian thought is its commitment to the real historical process rather than the development of the Notion.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>64</sup> *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, pp.65-66.

<sup>65</sup> 'What is Orthodox Marxism?' in *History and Class Consciousness*, p.3

<sup>66</sup> Amongst members of the Frankfurt School, Marcuse was not alone in rejecting the doctrine of dialectical materialism. Thus Adorno declares that: "Dialectics is the consistent sense of non-identity. It does not begin by taking a standpoint (*standpunkt*)." (*Negative Dialectics*, p.5). Horkheimer makes a similar point when he writes: "The dialectal method is the quintessence of all intellectual tools for making fruitful the abstract elements derived from the analytic Understanding for the

This allowed Marx to discover that society, and more especially bourgeois society, is not merely the site of specific socio-political conflicts but is structured by contradiction, and in particular by the fact that the development of the social life process of capitalist society is a development which “speaks against” that society. By way of example, Marcuse cites the following: the inherent tendency towards crisis in capitalist economies, the bizarre logic of productivity whereby advances in productive technique lead to increasing “scarcity and toil”, the development of poverty from wealth, and the dehumanising nature of socio-historical “progress”. Each of these examples are proposed as illustrations of the dysfunctional nature of capitalist society, of socio-economic developments which are essential for capital accumulation whilst simultaneously destabilising for that same process.

Hence for Marcuse, as for Lukács, the significance of dialectic does not consist in its capacity to underwrite a general inevitably metaphysical theory of reality, rather that dialectic enables thought to discover that capitalist society is characterised by the above destabilising, and potentially explosive contradictions. Indeed, for this member of the Frankfurt School, Engels’ desire to apply dialectic outside of history derives from Hegel’s idealist philosophy of nature. To understand Marcuse’s argument here we need to recall that this particular component of the Hegelian system is directly dependent upon the idealist thesis that the totality of being is the expression of the Notion, and therefore that all of reality is essentially thought. It is because of this spiritualisation of Being that Hegel finds it possible to discover contradiction in the organic as well as the inorganic world, for where there is thought there is purpose, and where there is purpose there is the potential for self-

---

representation of the living object. There are no universal rules for this purpose.” (‘The Rationalism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy’ in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p.235)

defeat and inner conflict. Oddly enough, Engels despite his declared materialism continues this very same project, although far less coherently. For it is one thing to declare that there is a dialectic of nature if all of Being is thought; it is quite another to suppose from a materialist perspective that matter and motion are characterised by contradiction. Thus according to Marcuse this ill-conceived attempt to universalise dialectic, to extend it beyond the socio-historical sphere, results in a theory that is marked by vacuousness as well as a mass of logical errors. As he notes:

It is no accident that in Engels' 'Dialectics of Nature' the dialectical concepts appear as mere analogies, figurative and super-imposed upon the content - strikingly empty or commonplace compared with the exact concreteness of the dialectical concepts in the economic and socio-historical writings [of Marx and Engels].<sup>67</sup>

The following extract taken from Engels' *Anti-Duhring* provides a good example of what Marcuse is talking about. Thus as an illustration of the "dialectical law" of the negation of the negation Engels considers the process by which a grain of barley develops into a mature plant. He writes:

Billions of such grains of barley are milled, boiled and brewed and then consumed. But if such a grain of barley meets with conditions which are normal for it, if it falls on suitable soil, then under the influence of heat and moisture it undergoes a specific change, it germinates; the grain as such ceases to exist, it is negated, and in its place appears the plant which has arisen from it, the negation of the grain. But

what is the normal life process of this plant? It grows, flowers, is fertilised and finally once more produces grains of barley, and as soon as these have ripened the stalk dies, is in its turn negated. As a result of this negation of the negation we have once again the original grain of barley, but not as a single unit, but ten-, twenty- or thirty fold.<sup>68</sup>

What is striking about this passage is the profound lack of connection between the process Engels is describing and dialectic: to describe the transition from grain to mature plant as a “negation” is simply to attach a pretentious label to a familiar process. In short, the above description contributes nothing to our store of knowledge concerning either nature or reality in general. Rather as Marcuse says the terminology is something that has been “superimposed” upon the content of a specific natural science. Even worse, Engels’ particular example sits uneasily with Hegel’s own account of this dialectical principle, for the latter posits the notion of the “negation of the negation” in the context of an account detailing the process of development by which simple *Dasein* comes to realise itself as the highest form of being, namely self-conscious subjectivity. This process takes the form of a series of transitions from self to other, of qualitative differentiations, by means of which an entity undergoes a process of growth, maturation and decay. For Hegel, however, decay is not the simple negation of the thing but rather the basis for the development of something that is qualitatively new.

Now this pattern of argument, it should be said, certainly does occur in Marx’s historical

---

<sup>67</sup> *Soviet Marxism: A Critical Analysis*, p.120.

<sup>68</sup> *Anti-Duhring*, p.188.

analysis, one might think of for example of the way in which he discusses the transition from one mode of production to another. But these transitions, it must be emphasised, are like those described in Hegel's *Phenomenology*; they represent the dynamic qualitative movement from one world historical complex to another. By contrast, Engels' attempt to apply dialectics to nature is distinguished by the cyclical, recurrent character of the phenomena he describes: the grain of barley merely produces more grains of barley. In fact Engels himself is aware of this fact and comments somewhat lamely that species of grain take a long time to evolve; but this qualification is beside the point, for he has already committed himself to an entirely spurious dialectical analysis of the production and reproduction of identity.

Doubtless a great deal more could be said by way of a detailed criticism of Engels' various examples of a "materialist dialectic of nature" but I believe that enough of an argument has been produced to indicate why thinkers schooled in the thought of Hegel, as well as Marx, rejected the philosophical program outlined in *Anti-Duhring* and *Dialectics of Nature*. Before closing this particular discussion, however, I want to say something in more general terms concerning Engels' approach to the theory of dialectic. As we have seen, one reason why Engels goes so badly astray in this area is the fact that he unwittingly bases his discussion on Hegel's Idealism, and in particular on his idealist construction of nature. There is however another reason, namely Engels' separation of *method* and *content*. Thus he begins by supposing that Marx somehow preserves Hegel's dialectical *method* whilst disposing of the idealist *content* of the latter's thought. It is an argument, however, that should be utterly rejected. To appreciate the bizarre nature of the interpretation, it is sufficient to recall that for both Hegel and Marx no easy separation of method and content



is possible. According to Hegel the content of philosophy is thought, or more precisely the structure of thought in its process of self-realisation; but this structure is at the same time the very method which thought must use to become aware of itself. Similarly for Marx, who argues that the way in which we theoretically appropriate the world (method) is not independent of the way the world is: the history of social being (content) is at the same time the history of the theoretical forms through which we become conscious of that process.<sup>69</sup> As Lukács observes:

Hence only by overcoming the - theoretical - duality of philosophy and special discipline, of methodology and factual knowledge can the way be found by which to annul the duality of thought and existence. Every attempt to overcome the duality dialectically in logic, in a system of thought stripped of every concrete relation to existence is doomed to failure. (And we may observe that despite many opposing tendencies in his work, Hegel's philosophy was of this type.) For every pure logic is Platonic: it is thought released from existence and hence ossified.<sup>70</sup>

Lukács' stricture can be reasonably applied to Engels' "Laws of Dialectic", for they have been extracted from Hegel's system as a formal logic of development which is then superimposed upon the natural world. Unlike the dialectical thought of Marx and Engels' socio-historical studies, a dialectic that develops by means of a "concrete relation to existence", Engels' attempt to theorise nature amounts to no more than a series of loose

---

<sup>69</sup> In a footnote (#72) to *Marxism and Philosophy*, Korsch observes that: "The inability to comprehend this relationship of identity between form and content distinguishes the transcendental from the dialectical standpoint (whether idealist or materialist)."

<sup>70</sup> 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' in *History and Class Consciousness*, p.203.

analogies which illuminate neither the subject matter nor the relation of thought to its content. In summary Engels' dialectic of nature is, as Lukács would put it, a Platonic logic released from existence.

### *Conclusion and Preview*

What has been said thus far concerning the positive content of Frankfurt Marxism has been stated in a schematic and summary fashion. However, as Hegel realised long ago, the real meaning of a philosophical thesis cannot be presented simply as a result but must be derived from *the process of enquiry* which produces it.<sup>71</sup> In the case of the Frankfurt School, as I have already indicated, this developmental process has to be seen, at least initially, in terms of the attitude taken by the critical theorists to the dispute between the orthodox and Hegelian Marxists. With respect to the genesis of critical theory, this dispute is especially important because it centres on the nature of the relation between Hegel's philosophy and Marx's theory of society. The early chapters of this study, therefore, are intended to establish that many of the questions which define critical theory, as well as the answers to some of those questions, derive from the work of the Hegelian Marxists. Considered in itself, this is not a particularly original claim; most commentators recognise the importance of Lukács and Korsch in the formation of critical theory.<sup>72</sup> However, as

---

<sup>71</sup> As Hegel writes: "For the real issue is not exhausted by stating it as an aim, but by carrying it out, nor is the result the actual whole, but rather the result together with the process through which it came about." *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §3.

<sup>72</sup> On the relation between Hegelian Marxism and the Frankfurt School see the following: Susan Buck-Morrs, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, pp.24-32; Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, pp.41-42; Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, pp.197-98; Phil Slater, *Origin and Significance of the Frankfurt School*, pp. 36-38.

Andrew Feenberg has observed "this influence is frequently acknowledged, but it has yet to be traced out in any detail."<sup>73</sup> Part of the intention behind this thesis therefore is to provide some of this detail as well as to demonstrate its relevance to the task of bringing the central questions of critical theory into sharper theoretical focus. In so doing my purpose is not simply to produce a historical account of critical theory but also to assess the validity of the critical theorist's project. Indeed, as this study proceeds, it should become clear that there is no possibility of either describing or evaluating that project without a clear understanding of its theoretical genesis.

By way of conclusion to the present chapter I shall outline the general structure of the argument which will be developed in this thesis. The discussion begins in Chapter 2 with a critical account of Korsch's seminal essay *Marxism and Philosophy*. At the time of its publication this short essay caused a considerable stir amongst both Western and Russian Marxists, for it challenged not only the political passivity of the Western orthodox Marxist tradition but also undermined the near universally held scientific interpretation of Marx's thought. My discussion of Korsch will focus on the following two questions. First, I will consider the relation between Marxist theory and the transformative political *praxis* associated with revolutionary socialism, and in particular examine whether there is an essential connection between the two, or whether as the neo-Kantians argued it is the case that Marxism requires some kind of ethical supplement so as to relate Marx's analysis of capitalism to the project of constructing a new social order. Second I will ask how we are to understand Marx's famous claim that consciousness is determined by social being. As we have already seen, the attempt to provide a coherent account of this relation had caused

---

<sup>73</sup> Lukács, *Marx and the Sources of Critical Theory*, p.xii.

the orthodox Marxist tradition some considerable trouble; to recap, the problem was that any attempt to move away from a rigid economic determinism, the material base determines the superstructure of ideas, seemed to lead almost immediately to a fatal dilution of the principles of historical materialism. Commenting directly on this question Korsch argued that consciousness and social being cannot be held rigidly apart, and that indeed consciousness has a *constitutive* function with respect to a range of social phenomena. In the process of explicating this particular thesis, I shall indicate a number of problems which must first be solved before Korsch's approach can be successfully integrated into a materialist theory of society. I shall also point to some of the ways in which his discussion of this matter anticipates the later work of Horkheimer and his colleagues.

Having reviewed as well as criticised Korsch's attempt to recover the philosophical foundations of Marxism I shall turn in Chapter 3 to a consideration of Horkheimer's project of multi-disciplinary materialism, and in particular to his belief that in the wake of Hegel and Marx philosophy can only progress by means of a decisive turn towards the theory of society. Accordingly the focus of this chapter will be on Horkheimer's attempt to shift philosophy away from its concern with the autarchic consciousness and move it instead towards the study of how thought is bound up with forms of social life. The chapter begins with a discussion of Korsch's thesis that Marxism represents the supersession of the classical philosophical tradition. It is then argued that Horkheimer's demand that philosophy must develop by means of a materialist social theory is an instance as well as a development of this strategy of supersession. Having established why Horkheimer makes this particular move, I proceed in the next chapter to examine more precisely the nature of

the theory that he had in mind. More particularly this chapter is concerned to distinguish the Institute's project of multi-disciplinary materialism from the mainstream tradition of empirical social science. Hence whilst providing an account of this project I will seek to refute the charge that Horkheimer, whether consciously or otherwise, is promoting yet another positivist version of Marxism.<sup>74</sup> In pursuance of this question a considerable portion of the chapter will be devoted to reconstructing his critique of the empiricist model of social theory. This critique takes as its premise the claim that social theory whilst respecting the need for empirical evidence should refuse to submit to what Adorno has called "the tyranny of the fact". Thus in place of the abstract and essentially static image of reality constructed by empiricism the Frankfurt theorists seek to construct a historical, dynamic and therefore potentially critical account of social phenomena. The tension between these two approaches to the theory of society constitutes the major topic of Chapter 4.

Chapter 5 looks in some detail at what is surely the principle methodological aspect of Frankfurt Marxism, namely its commitment to the Hegelian concept of totality. Because this concept has become something of a term of art in the literature, the initial section of the chapter is devoted to a detailed examination of its role in Hegel's idealist philosophy. The discussion then moves on to consider whether it is possible for materialism to coherently utilise this concept without falling back, as critics often allege that Lukács did, into a form of Left Idealism. Indeed, in the course of the argument I shall demonstrate that Horkheimer's attempt to formulate a materialist dialectic between subject and object,

---

<sup>74</sup> Hanke Brunkhorst makes this charge in his article 'Dialectical Positivism of Happiness: Max Horkheimer's Materialist Deconstruction of Philosophy' in *On Max Horkheimer: New Perspectives*, p.68.

where it is not unacceptably vague, comes perilously close to an idealist position. The chapter concludes with an examination of Adorno's important but sadly neglected meditation on this question, and in particular his claim that a materialist totality is one in which the subject-object dialectic is governed by what he calls the "preponderance of the object".<sup>75</sup> This thesis is important because, as I shall argue, it offers the possibility of reconstructing historical materialism not as an instance of causal determinism but as a thesis whose starting point is with the fact that consciousness is essentially embodied consciousness, that thinking is the activity of subjects burdened with physical need and desire. The chapter concludes by considering whether this alternative interpretation provides a more plausible basis than the vulgar Marxist inversion metaphor for distinguishing Marx's materialism from the Idealism of his philosophical mentor.

Chapter 6 takes a substantive turn and examines the Frankfurt School's attempt to synthesise Marx's theory of historical materialism with Freud's analytical psychology. Here I advance the argument that this particular synthesis is an attempt to offer a concrete construction of a materialist subject-object dialectic. More especially I shall maintain that the interest in psycho-analytical theory is a reflection of the fact that Marxism lacks a satisfactory theory of the subject, and that therefore it is incapable of relating the particular to the general, the individual to society. Indeed according to the Frankfurt School this failure is highlighted by the fact that orthodox Marxism has never been able to satisfactorily

---

<sup>75</sup> For example, David Held in his otherwise comprehensive *Introduction to Critical Theory* fails to discuss this particular thesis. Similarly Raymond Geuss in his review of *Negative Dialectics* chooses to pass over this question and like Held focuses upon Adorno's critique of identity thinking. (*Journal of Philosophy*, 1975, pp.167-175). Obviously in any study or review of the work of a thinker choices have to be made, but to omit all reference to Adorno's attempt to reformulate the materialist hypothesis is like seeking to discuss Marx's political economy whilst ignoring his concept of value.

explain why it is that large sections of the proletariat have given their adherence to ideologies and social systems which operate against their interest as a class. Certainly in the twentieth century the most spectacular example of this kind of false consciousness is that provided by the emergence of the irrationalist mass movement in Germany which gave birth to National Socialism. Faced with this radical degeneration in the consciousness of the class singled out by Marx as the new universal class, Marxist orthodoxy had very little to say that was at all convincing. By contrast the Frankfurt School, in focusing upon the interplay between societal phenomena and instinctual drive structures, developed a range of hypotheses, the most famous being that of the authoritarian personality, which appeared to promise at least a degree of insight into this particular phase of late capitalism. Here it should be said that the detail of their arguments concerning the specific nature of Fascism raises a substantial number of socio-historical issues which clearly go well beyond the scope of this particular thesis.<sup>76</sup> In order to avoid superficiality I shall therefore ignore these and concentrate instead on providing answers to the following more general but methodologically focused questions concerning the relation between historical materialism and depth psychology. First I discuss whether Marxism does in fact stand in need of a theory of the subject so as to complement the system of political economy outlined in *Capital*. Second I consider whether it is reasonable to suppose that classical psycho-analytical theory could convincingly play this role. These questions, it seems to me, provide the essential theoretical preliminary for any adequate assessment of the various analyses of particular historical-social formations offered by members of the Frankfurt School.

---

<sup>76</sup> The classic statement of this thesis is to be found in the published results of a collaborative study between members of the Institute and the Psychology Department at Berkeley University. These results were published in 1950 under the title *The Authoritarian Personality*.

In the final chapter I return to a consideration of what it is that distinguishes Frankfurt Marxism from mainstream orthodox Marxism as well as traditional scientific theories. The conclusion that I shall seek to establish is that unlike their orthodox rivals the Frankfurt School understood Marxism as a theory whose primary orientation is towards the critique of existing reality. Thus Marxism is not a new positive science of society, akin say to Darwin's evolutionary biology, but a dialectic directed towards the negation of a particular social form. This form of critique, it will be argued, acquires force because it is grounded in the subject-object dialectic which produces society itself. In other words the critique is not external to the historical process but is shown to be internal or immanent to its object; it is a critique that in the classic Hegelian fashion constitutes itself as a movement of consciousness coming to an awareness of its own purposes and intentions. This approach overcomes the classic positivist duality of fact and value: the critical theory of Frankfurt Marxism is simultaneously an analysis as well as an evaluation of bourgeois society. Indeed an understanding of the logic of immanence will reveal that these two apparently distinguishable moments of thought are necessarily combined in the development of any kind of adequate social theory.

Having outlined the basic structure of the thesis I shall make a number of brief observations concerning my general approach to the Frankfurt School. The first such is that contrary to the emphasis of the many commentators who dwell upon the differences between the various members of the Frankfurt School my principal concern is to identify the substantial common core of ideas that characterise the work of these theorists. This core includes amongst other things a wide-ranging critique of the mainstream empirical social sciences,



the reconstruction of materialism around Hegel's subject-object dialectic and an attempted synthesis of Marxism with psycho-analytical theory. In making this claim, however, I am not for a moment seeking to argue that the work of Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse constitutes a single, unified and consistent body of theory. Clearly this is very far from the case: to cite just one example, Marcuse's revisionary study of Freudian theory, *Eros and Civilisation*, found very little favour with either Adorno or Horkheimer, both of whom held to a more orthodox conception of the psycho-analytical enterprise. Nevertheless, there are good reasons for focusing upon what is more or less common to these theorists. Most importantly it will enable us to subject various of the central elements of the Frankfurt Marxist tradition to a close critical scrutiny. Indeed it is my contention that despite a significant and still growing literature upon the work of these thinkers much of the discussion takes place upon a poorly defined theoretical basis. To take just one example the concept of totality is frequently referenced in the literature, yet very few commentators take the trouble to discuss its origins in the Hegelian system nor to elucidate the problems associated with utilising this concept within the materialist tradition.<sup>77</sup> This is unsatisfactory, for as I shall demonstrate the Frankfurt Marxist project is from a methodological point of view grounded in this aspect of Hegel's thought.

My second observation concerning the structure of this thesis is that it is largely, although not exclusively, centred around the work of Max Horkheimer. This choice does not reflect a belief that Horkheimer's work is markedly superior to that of his colleagues; on the contrary it is my opinion that amongst the critical theorists Adorno is by far the most

---

<sup>77</sup> Martin Jay's ground breaking study of the Frankfurt School, *The Dialectical Imagination*, is a case in point. Despite offering a useful account of the genesis of critical theory Jay has almost nothing to say concerning the role of this concept in the work of Horkheimer and his colleagues.

profound thinker. Nevertheless for the purposes of this thesis Horkheimer's writings have been emphasised because of their *programmatic* quality and because of the fact that he was responsible, especially in the period 1931-1940, for first charting the various courses of research which were to characterise the intellectual life of the Institute over the next thirty years. Having said that I shall by no means ignore the contribution of his fellow theorists, in particular Adorno and Marcuse, to the development of critical theory.

Finally I would like to emphasise yet again that my approach to the Frankfurt School is governed by the belief that their work must be firmly situated within the Marxist tradition. More specifically, and certainly more controversially I shall argue that the Institute's variety of Marxism is, far from being an exercise in revisionism, an attempt to return to some of the fundamental elements of Marx's thought. Certainly this thesis would be fiercely disputed by many, and for a great variety of reasons. Unfortunately, not all of these arguments can be considered in the present work. For instance, to maintain my position with respect to Adorno and Horkheimer's idiosyncratic and deeply obscure *Dialectic of Enlightenment* would represent a substantial task of exegesis and interpretation all on its own.<sup>78</sup> Indeed commentators such as Helmut Dubiel have argued that Horkheimer's program of critical theory is succeeded in the period after 1940 by a radically new theoretical discourse, the primary concern of which is with the destructive effect of instrumental reason on human existence. For Dubiel, the text which defines this project, namely *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, represents a radical departure from the Marxist theoretical tradition because, as he observes, the theory it articulates

---

<sup>78</sup> For some interesting comments on this text see Stefan Breuer's article 'Adorno's Anthropology', *Telos*, 64, Summer 1985, pp.15-31.

... no longer takes as its object the forms - particularly the capitalist forms - of social intercourse by which the human species reproduces itself in appropriating nature. Instead, their concern is the world-historical drama of the active confrontation of the human species with nature.<sup>79</sup>

Dubiel is not alone in this assessment of the work of the Frankfurt School during this period.<sup>80</sup> For instance, Slater from an orthodox Marxist position argues that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is a stage in the transformation of critical theory into a form of Left Hegelianism. In Slater's view the theory's criticism of Enlightenment has become divorced from any form of critical *praxis*: it is the criticism of one idea by another, and in consequence degenerates into Idealism.<sup>81</sup> Unfortunately, whilst the arguments of both of these writers deserve consideration this thesis will be unable to provide that service. However although the present work has no pretension to completeness, I believe that enough will have been said to indicate the way in which a discussion of the relation between Marxism and the Frankfurt School's critique of Enlightenment may be most usefully advanced. This task it seems to me is important because Marx, despite all attempts to bury his work, remains a thinker whose work is seminal for an understanding of the social and political dramas of the contemporary world. In consequence, and insofar as the

---

<sup>79</sup> *Theory and Politics*, pp.92-93.

<sup>80</sup> The key texts of this period are *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, written jointly by Adorno and Horkheimer in 1944, Adorno's *Minima Moralia*(1951) and Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason*(1946).

<sup>81</sup> *Origin and Significance of the Frankfurt School*, pp.87-88.

Frankfurt School help us to read and understand Marx in new and often productive ways, their work constitutes an important indispensable element in that tradition of thought launched by Hegel's most brilliant pupil.

## Chapter 2. Marxism and Praxis: Korsch and the Frankfurt School

In opposition to the orthodox conception of Marxism as a “science of history”, distinguished from the existing natural sciences by subject matter rather than method, the Frankfurt School held to the view that Marx's theory is essentially *critical* and *negative* and therefore qualitatively different from any form of traditional scientific practice. This characterisation of Marxism, I shall argue, depends to a significant degree upon Korsch and Lukács' prior rediscovery of the centrality of Hegel's dialectic to all aspects of Marx's thought.<sup>1</sup> On their account, Marx is, first and foremost, a dialectical thinker concerned to elaborate the dynamically reciprocal relation between subject and object, as opposed to being either a political economist, sociologist or historian working within the conventional boundaries of those disciplines. Furthermore, because the Korsch-Lukács appropriation of Marx emphasises the *constitutive role of subjectivity* in the production of social phenomena, it promises a form of materialism free from the passivity and determinism characteristic of Marxist orthodoxy. By focusing upon the previously under-theorised domains of consciousness and *praxis*, these two theorists re-opened, or perhaps more accurately opened up for the first time the question of the precise relation between idealist philosophy and Marx's theory of historical materialism. This same question, I shall argue, is central to the work of the Frankfurt School and in consequence the original project of critical theory, if it is to be understood at all, must be seen as a continuation, although

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Preface to *History and Class Consciousness*, p.xliv., where Lukács argues that many of Marx's commentators “have failed to notice that a whole series of *categories of central importance and in constant use* [in Marx's works] stem *directly* from Hegel's *Logic*.” Similarly, Korsch remarks that: “The sense of their [Marx and Engels] materialism is distorted in a disastrous and irreparable manner if one forgets that Marxist materialism was *dialectical* from the very beginning”. (*Marxism and Philosophy*, p.68.)

certainly not an uncritical continuation, of the earlier Hegelian Marxist tradition.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, this chapter will be largely devoted to a discussion of the influence of Hegelian-Marxism, and more particularly that of Korsch, on the Frankfurt School's attempt to liberate Marx from the clutches of scientific orthodoxy. I have chosen to concentrate upon this theorist, rather than Lukács, because by and large there has been very little substantive discussion of the role played by Korsch's early work in the genesis of critical theory. Of course, this is not to say that Lukács' contribution to this area will be altogether ignored. However, as I will demonstrate, Korsch deserves as much credit as his better known contemporary for recovering the critical, revolutionary potential of Marx's thought.

I shall begin by considering Korsch's belief that what is distinctive about Marxism is its *practical-critical* orientation, or as he puts it the unity of theory with *praxis*.<sup>3</sup> This account is followed by a discussion of the Korschian thesis that consciousness, far from being a reflex phenomenon, a mental image of a pre-existing social world, is in fact partially constitutive of that world. In Chapter 3 the argument continues with a consideration of Korsch's view that Marxism represents the dialectical supersession of the classical idealist tradition rather than its scientific *nemesis*. All of this material is intended to serve as a prelude to an examination of Horkheimer's attempt to use Hegelian thought, especially as

---

<sup>2</sup> The positive influence of the Hegelian Marxist program upon members of the Frankfurt School, and in particular their reading of Marx, is not difficult to discover. By way of example we may consider the following statement from Marcuse: "The historical heritage of Hegel's philosophy ... did not pass to the 'Hegelians'(neither of the right nor of the left) - they were not the ones who kept alive the true content of this philosophy. The critical tendencies of the Hegelian philosophy, rather, were taken over by, and continued in, the Marxian social theory". (*Reason and Revolution*, p.252.)

<sup>3</sup> The term *practical-critical* is used by Marx in the *Theses on Feurbach* to differentiate his concept of materialism from a purely contemplative scientific materialism.

it is reflected through the work of Korsch and Lukács, as a means of reconstructing the methodological basis of Marx's historical and social theory. Taken together these chapters serve a twofold purpose. First, they are intended to identify as well as to subject to critical scrutiny, the cluster of ideas common to both the Hegelian-Marxists and the Frankfurt theorists. Second they provide a basis for investigating the contrast between the Hegelian-Marxist conception of a positive dialectical reconciliation of subject and object, and the Frankfurt School's considerably more negativistic conception of the nature of a materialist dialectic. In short, this chapter and the next are concerned to introduce a set of questions that will assist in specifying the differences as well as the similarities between the thought of the first generation of critical theorists and that of the Hegelian Marxists.

### *Korsch, Lukács and the Frankfurt School*

At a certain level of generality it is not difficult to demonstrate the influence of Lukács on most of the leading members of the Frankfurt School. Horkheimer's programmatic articles, for instance, contain numerous formulations of the dialectical method which come straight out of the pages of *History and Class Consciousness*.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, there are many passages in Marcuse's work bearing witness to the direct influence of the young Lukács in the formation of critical theory.<sup>5</sup> Even Adorno, who was in many respects, highly critical of

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Horkheimer's 'Traditional and Critical Theory' and 'Materialism and Metaphysics' both in *Critical Theory: Selected Works*. See also the earlier 'Materialism and Morality', in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*.

<sup>5</sup> Compare, for instance, the following extracts from Lukács and Marcuse. Lukács writes that: "Nature is a societal category. That is to say, whatever is held to be natural at any given stage of social development, ..., its content, its range and its objectivity are all socially conditioned." (*History and Class Consciousness*, p.234.) Marcuse makes a similar observation when he observes that: "The dialectical totality again includes nature, but only insofar as the latter enters and conditions the historical process of social reproduction."

Lukács' Hegelian formulation of the materialist thesis, announced his own philosophical program by utilising Lukács' argument that philosophical problems can be resolved by reflection upon the historical conditions in which they arise.<sup>6</sup> But if, as these examples suggest, the influence of Lukács is reasonably transparent, the question of Korsch's contribution to the Frankfurt program is more problematic. Here, the various commentaries display a degree of confusion as well as conflict. Thus Susan Buck-Morris claims that whilst Adorno was attracted to Hegelian Marxism, neither Adorno nor Benjamin, the latter being singled out by Buck-Morris as an important influence upon Adorno, were particularly impressed by Korsch's work.<sup>7</sup> Similarly Martin Jay in *The Dialectical Imagination* cites Korsch, alongside Lukács, as an important influence upon critical theory; yet in a later work he argues that Korsch was an essentially marginal figure in the intellectual life of the Institute.<sup>8</sup> To support this claim Jay cites a passage from *Negative Dialectics*, in which Adorno specifically criticises Korsch's tendency to surrender the autonomy of theory to the pragmatic requirements of *praxis*.<sup>9</sup> Against this largely

---

(*Reason and Revolution*, p.314).

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Adorno's inaugural lecture 'The Actuality of Philosophy' in *Telos*, 31, Spring 1977.

<sup>7</sup> *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p.207. Certainly as Buck-Morris suggests Benjamin had rather mixed feelings about Korsch. Thus he writes in a letter (10.11.1930) to Adorno: "I have read Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy*. Rather faltering steps - so it seems to me - in the right direction". *Theodor Adorno - Walter Benjamin: The Complete Correspondence 1928-1940*.

<sup>8</sup> *The Dialectical Imagination*, pp. 41-44.

<sup>9</sup> *Marxism and Totality*, p.149. Adorno's reference to Korsch is perhaps more ambiguous than Jay realises. Adorno rarely engaged in explicit polemic with other Marxists, thus his mention of Korsch might suggest that he believed that Korsch's work, although mistaken, should be taken seriously. In a letter to Krenek (20.10.38), Adorno describes Korsch as "this intelligent and eccentric man ... who is really so far left, that he practically comes out again on the right." Quoted in Buck-Morr's *Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p.207.



negative assessment, Philip Slater argues that Marcuse and Horkheimer, both of whom positively cite Korsch's work, were in broad agreement with his critique of Marxist orthodoxy.<sup>10</sup> This position is supported by Douglas Kellner, a former student of Marcuse, who states without reservation that "the Korsch-Lukács interpretation of Hegelian Marxism represented the most advanced and revolutionary current of Marxism which most strongly influenced [Marcuse's] own appropriation of Marx."<sup>11</sup> In summary, depending upon the commentator selected, Korsch is either a marginal figure making "weak steps" towards a Marxism free from the chains of orthodoxy or he is a substantial theorist, equal only to Lukács, in respect of his influence amongst members of the Frankfurt School.

This dispute, I believe, does not arise simply from exegetical errors but reflects a certain ambiguity on the part of the Frankfurt School towards the coupling of theory and *praxis*. With Korsch there is no such ambiguity; he consistently argues that Marxism is to be distinguished from traditional science in virtue of the fact that it is premised upon the immediate unproblematic unity of theory and practice. In other words materialism, unlike the natural sciences, makes the claim that the project of comprehending the world is essentially bound up with the attempt to transform it. By contrast, it might be said of critical theory that this is a form of Marxism without any pretension to a transformative capacity. The opening sentence of Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* puts the matter thus: "Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realise it was missed." This remark might be taken to imply not only that the social revolution envisaged

---

<sup>10</sup> *Origin and Significance of the Frankfurt School*, pp.35-38, p.51.

<sup>11</sup> *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism*, p.40. See also T.B.Bottomore's *The Frankfurt School*, p.72, for a positive assessment of the impact of Korsch's thought upon the evolution of critical theory.

by Marx has so far not come about, and that philosophy therefore lives on, but also that the possibility of such a utopian moment has passed forever. Marcuse appears to make a similar point when he observes that: "The critical theory of society possesses no concepts which could bridge the gap between the present and its future; holding no promise and showing no success, it remains negative."<sup>12</sup> Both of these quotations suggest the woeful paradox of Marxist philosophers compelled by historical development to admit that their theory can no longer change the world but only interpret it. If this is true then the relation between the Frankfurt School and Korsch appears to be entirely negative: the critical theorists reject Korsch's *praxis* oriented version of Marxism precisely because they believe that history has effectively foreclosed on any possibility of revolutionary *praxis*. However, I shall argue that this view of the matter is a misleading simplification. Despite the critical theorist's pessimistic assessment of the possibility of immediately relating theory to *praxis*, they did not abandon the regulative idea that an adequate theory of society is also, if only potentially, a socially transformative force. Nor despite numerous claims to the contrary did they ever unequivocally renounce the possibility of humanity emancipating itself from the tyranny of administered capitalism. Thus Adorno, widely regarded as the most pessimistic member of the Frankfurt School could write as late as 1968 concerning the veil of mystification generated by capitalist relations of production:

However unbreakable the spell, it is only a spell. If sociology, instead of merely providing agencies and interested parties with welcome information, is to fulfil something of the task for which it was once conceived, then it must make its contribution, however modest, using means that do not themselves fall victim to

---

<sup>12</sup> *One Dimensional Man*, p.200.

the universal fetishism; thus may the spell be broken.<sup>13</sup>

This remark illustrates the persistent internal tension within the Frankfurt Marxist tradition between theory and *praxis*; for the theory simultaneously reveals the difficulties in the way of an effective revolutionary struggle whilst never renouncing the importance or possibility of that struggle. Put another way it might be said that Frankfurt social theory is intended to point to a range of material, social and cultural forces which act to obstruct or hinder the coming-into-being of a class conscious proletariat but that in making this argument the theory by no means denies that this process is also an important potential of capitalist society. Thus although Adorno and his colleagues held to the view that in most of Western Europe and America the proletariat had become atomised and to a large measure incorporated into the bourgeois social order, they never declared that this condition was either permanent or irreversible. On the contrary they continued to advance a critical theory of society in the hope that this activity might in some measure contribute to breaking the spell of commodity fetishism, to changing the “happy consciousness” of the contemporary world. If this is true it follows that the attempt to sharply counterpose the thought of Korsch (as well as Lukács) to that of the critical theorists is a mistake. Indeed, as I shall argue, a careful reading of his essay *Marxism and Philosophy* leads to the view that Frankfurt Marxism derives, in some significant degree, from a critical but sympathetic response to many of the ideas contained in this work. In summary these ideas, together with those of Lukács, constitute as will be demonstrated the single most important and immediate theoretical source for the Frankfurt program.

---

<sup>13</sup> ‘Is Marx Obsolete?’, *Diogenes*, 64, Winter 1968.

*Philosophy, Science and Marxism*

Central to Korsch's essay *Marxism and Philosophy* is the idea that historical materialism far from representing a "scientific" break with German Idealism is in reality the heir of that earlier philosophical movement.<sup>14</sup> Using the language of speculative thought, we might say that for Korsch the relation between these two theoretical traditions is one of sublation (*Aufhebung*) rather than simple negation: materialism transcends Idealism but at the same time preserves at least some of the content of that earlier philosophical project. Engels, of course, had already advanced an apparently similar thesis, arguing that Marx does not simply put Hegel aside but starts out from the revolutionary aspect of his thought, namely the "dialectical method". For this reason, Engels argues, the German proletarian movement, insofar as it is the practical expression of Marx's critique of society, is "the inheritor of classical German philosophy".<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, as we have seen, Engels' discussion of this matter, apart from being somewhat philosophically naïve, is flawed not only by an untenable distinction between method and content but also by a form of positivism that reduces philosophy to science. By comparison, Korsch's work is philosophically more literate, displaying a keen appreciation of the difficulties involved in seeking to determine the relation between Marxism and idealist philosophy. Thus commenting upon the claim that the materialism of Marx and Engels constitutes the

---

<sup>14</sup> The essay was originally published by Carl Grunberg in the *Archiv für die Geschichte des Socialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung*. In the early years of the Institute, the *Archiv* served as its official publication. Despite its appearance in an academic journal Korsch's essay rapidly gained political notoriety: his work was criticised at the 1924 Congress of the German Social Democratic Party as well as being the subject of a vitriolic attack by Zinoviev at the Fifth World Congress of the Communist International held in the same year.

<sup>15</sup> Engels, F., 'Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy' in *Marx and Engels: Selected Works*, p.622.

“abolition of philosophy”, Korsch poses the following relevantly concrete questions:

How should this process [of abolition] be accomplished, or has it already been accomplished? By what actions? At what speed? And for whom? Should this abolition of philosophy be regarded as accomplished so to speak once and for all by a single intellectual deed of Marx and Engels? Should it be regarded as accomplished only for Marxists, or for the whole proletariat, or for the whole of humanity? Or should we see it (like the abolition of the State) as a very long and arduous revolutionary process which unfolds through the most diverse phases? If so, what is the relationship of Marxism to philosophy so long as this arduous process has not yet attained its final goal, the abolition of philosophy?<sup>16</sup>

As this passage suggests, Korsch, unlike Engels, did not regard the abolition (or sublation) thesis as an immediate or self-evident truth. On the contrary, he believed that the notion of abolition required careful elaboration so as to distinguish it from the idea, positivist in origin, that the “science of Marxism” simply replaces philosophy. In trying to clarify this point, Korsch saw himself as providing a much-needed defence of Marxism against those thinkers, Marxists as well as non-Marxists, who believed that historical materialism had little or no intrinsic philosophical significance. Describing the nineteenth century reception of Marx's theory Korsch observes that:

Bourgeois professors of philosophy reassured each other that Marxism had no philosophical content of its own - and thought they were saying something *against*

---

<sup>16</sup> *Marxism and Philosophy*, p.47.

it. Orthodox Marxists also reassured each other that their Marxism by its very nature had nothing do with philosophy - and thought they were saying something important *in favour* of it.<sup>17</sup>

Although these "professors of philosophy" are not explicitly identified it is almost certain that the intention behind this passage is to refer to the various adherents of the nineteenth century philosophical movement known as neo-Kantianism. To appreciate that this is a reasonable hermeneutic step, we need only recall that in Korsch's time neo-Kantianism was the dominant philosophical force in the German speaking world, and that amongst German academic philosophers it held a near-monopoly position.<sup>18</sup> These latter-day followers of Kant sought to distinguish themselves from the Hegelian tradition by re-instating epistemology, now interpreted as the theory of the natural and historical sciences, as *the* fundamental philosophical discipline. Thus according to Paul Natorp, a prominent member of the Marburg School, philosophy is "the theory of the principles of science and therewith of all culture." Furthermore philosophy, on Natorp's account, is to be construed as a quite specific epistemological project, namely the critique, in the Kantian sense of that term, of our scientific world-picture. This project was conceived of as a largely transcendental investigation into the experiential structures that are the necessary underpinning of all scientific knowledge. Hence, for Natorp and his disciples, where science says something

---

<sup>17</sup> *Marxism and Philosophy*, p.32.

<sup>18</sup> As Korsch notes, this movement even exerted an influence amongst Marxists, some of whom argued that as a science Marx's theory had to be complemented by an external philosophical system. This lacuna was usually conceived of in terms of an absent epistemology or ethics, the former being required to justify materialism's claim that it is a science whilst the latter was required to underpin the practical interest of Marx's theory, namely the goal of a socialist society. (*Marxism and Philosophy*, footnote #7, p.32-33.)

true about the world, philosophy by reflecting upon science says something about the very possibility of this knowledge.<sup>19</sup> Consequently whilst neo-Kantians took the view that philosophy must inevitably concern itself with science, they nevertheless sought to maintain a sharp distinction between these two branches of theoretical labour. In summary: philosophy, in contrast to the first order scientific disciplines, was regarded as a second-order activity dealing with questions which although dependent upon the existence and results of the individual sciences are not themselves scientific questions. On the other hand, first order disciplines, whether natural or social sciences, were regarded as providing an empirically grounded knowledge of the world rather than being concerned with the theorisation of the possibility of that knowledge.

This sharp separation, on the part of the neo-Kantians, of the *content* of knowledge from its *form* helps to explain why so many German philosophers found it difficult to relate Marxism to philosophy. On their view Marxism, because it understands itself to be a scientific theory, is prohibited from claiming a distinctive philosophical content; for insofar as it is a genuine science of history and society it is unable to constitute itself as a meditation upon the very possibility of that science. The most that could be said is that if Marx's theory turned out to be a genuine science its cognitive structure would be a matter for legitimate philosophical concern. But this aversion towards the substantive was not the only difficulty hindering the German academy from recognising Marx as a serious philosophical voice; the other obstacle was that Marx himself conceived of his thought as a

---

<sup>19</sup> Neo-Kantianism was, in fact, divided into two schools. The Marburg School, lead by Cohen and Natorp, argued that the mathematical sciences consitute a paradigm for all systematic knowledge. By contrast the South-West School, principally Rickert and Windelband, argued that the natural and cultural sciences were not in competition with one another but were equally valid, although distinctive methods of research. This argument, as we shall see, finds a strong echo in the work of the young Lukács.

form of *praxis*, as an intervention into rather than an interpretation of world history.<sup>20</sup> However, in moving beyond the comprehension of historical forms and becoming an active adversary of existing society, Marx's historical materialism seemed to these academic thinkers to lose the essential scientific quality of contemplative detachment. Thus Marxism, because it claimed to be both a substantive scientific discipline, and a theory of social revolution, could be excluded twice over from the domain of philosophy: neither of these interests having any legitimate place in a program whose principal concern it was to specify the conditions for, and logical foundations of, the various sciences. As Adorno observed:

The Neo-Kantianism of the Marburg School, which laboured most strenuously to gain the content of reality from logical categories, has indeed preserved its self-contained form as a system, but has thereby renounced every right over reality and has withdrawn into a *formal* region in which every *determination of content* is condemned to virtually the farthest point of an unending process.<sup>21</sup> [Italics mine]

If this description is correct, then it is little wonder that the neo-Kantians looked askance at historical materialism, for this is a theory which proclaims that its philosophical importance derives precisely from the fact that it begins not with the formal conditions of experience but with the content of social reality.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, and as Korsch argues, the purpose of

---

<sup>20</sup> Hegelian-Marxism uses the term *praxis* to denote any form of self-actualising activity on the part of an individual or collective subject. See also Colletti's definition of the term in the Glossary he provides for *Marx: Early Writings*, p.431.

<sup>21</sup> 'The Actuality of Philosophy', *Telos*, 31, Spring 1977, p.121.

<sup>22</sup> Adorno's description of neo-Kantianism accords with Horkheimer's critique of this tendency. See the latter's 'History and Psychology' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, pp.111-12.



Marx's work is not to passively comprehend that reality but to demonstrate that philosophy must rediscover itself in the world-historical struggle of a specific social class, namely the proletariat, to transform that reality and thus secure its own emancipation. Indeed, for Korsch, Marx's analysis of society is nothing other than the *theoretical expression* of this very struggle. Thus, in opposition to the philosophical academy, Korsch identifies philosophy with a *specific* science, Marx's critical science of society: a form of theoretical consciousness which does not stand apart from real material conflict between the social classes, but exists as an essential moment of that self-same conflict. I shall call this idea the *Supersession Thesis*, for it suggests that Marxism is not so much a direct response to the questions which characterise German Idealism but is rather the means of liberating thought from the belief that these questions might be resolved by means of purely theoretical activity.

However, before proceeding further with the discussion of these ideas, some mention should be made of a difficulty that appears to surround Korsch's formulation of the above thesis. The difficulty arises from the fact that Korsch consistently describes Marxism as a *science*, whilst simultaneously denouncing the orthodox tradition for its scientific interpretation of the theory. At first sight this looks plainly inconsistent: on the one hand Marx's theory is said to be a science but on the other those who describe it as a science are criticised. In this case, however, the inconsistency is more apparent than real. Korsch's use of the term "science" should not be taken as an indication of a belief in some fundamental cognitive structure common to both Marxism and the natural sciences, but rather derives from the use of the word "science" (*Wissenschaft*) in German philosophical circles. In this theoretical milieu, *Wissenschaft* although often used to designate the natural sciences

(*Naturwissenschaften*) can also refer to any body of *systematic knowledge*. Thus a *Wissenschaft* will consist of a system of propositions which taken together provide a truthful account of the world. The requirement for system excludes the enumeration of unrelated facts whilst the demand for truth ensures that a *Wissenschaft* provides genuine knowledge. In the first instance, therefore, Korsch's claim that Marxism is a "science of history" says no more than that the theory offers a systematic account of the socio-historical process; there is no requirement that it should be either structurally identical to, or have the same logical form as any kind of natural scientific theory. By itself, however, this observation will not suffice to distinguish historical materialism from other forms of social and historical theory, for instance phenomenology, which similarly reject the notion of a single unified model of scientific cognition. We need therefore to inquire more precisely into the nature of the systematic that characterises Marx's theory. With respect to this question, the following passage provides a useful clue to Korsch's thinking.

The major weakness of vulgar socialism is that, in Marxist terms, it clings quite "unscientifically" to a naive realism - in which both so-called common sense, which is the "worst metaphysician" and the normal positivist science of bourgeois society, draw a sharp line of division between consciousness and its object.<sup>23</sup>

This suggests that the most important distinction between Marxism and the positive sciences consists in its refusal to separate the cognitive subject from the object of cognition. From this viewpoint consciousness, including scientific consciousness, is not something standing over and against its object, but a moment of a single process in which subject and

---

<sup>23</sup> *Marxism and Philosophy*, p.76.

object interact so as to co-determine each other.<sup>24</sup> This principle, which I shall dub the *Constitutivity Thesis*, tells us that society, considered as the object of theory, cannot be understood as a reality existing independently of the subject, for this reality is the product of the subject's own activity. In summary, what distinguishes Marxism from the positive sciences and constitutes its own unique principle of systematicity is the concept of a *totality* of thought and social being.<sup>25</sup> Part of what this principle entails is that Marxism refuses to study phenomena in isolation but instead seeks out their principle of constitution by reference to their participation in the whole life of society. Thus the complex of social relations, practices and institutions which define a historically determinate form of life cannot be comprehended externally, in the way in which for instance we might approach a mechanical system, but have also to be related to the self-consciousness of the subjects engaged in these relations, practices and institutions. This is not to say that the self-understanding of a society is to be regarded in an uncritical fashion, as an unquestioned and unquestionable given; on the contrary, social consciousness must in turn be explained as well as criticised, by reference to the external realm of material being. As we shall see, it is this critical dialectic of subject and object, the confrontation between thought and historical being, that for Korsch constitutes the real meaning of the theoretical program announced by Marx in the Preface to his *Critique of Political Economy*.

---

<sup>24</sup> Compare this thesis with Hegel's remark that "everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as Substance, but equally as Subject." (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, §17.)

<sup>25</sup> In Chapter 5 of this study we shall see how the notion of Science (*Wissenschaft*), considered as a systematic knowledge of reality, can be developed by reference to Hegel's concept of totality.

*Theory and Praxis*

What has been said thus far is no more than a preliminary account of Korsch's attempt to re-discover the philosophical foundations of Marx's social theory. To gain further insight, and thus to be in a position to make a realistic assessment of his work as well as its relation to critical theory, the argument of *Marxism and Philosophy* needs to be considered in greater detail. Accordingly, the rest of this chapter is devoted to a discussion of two principles fundamental to Korsch's thought. The first such principle I shall consider is Korsch's assertion that historical materialism is a theory with an inherent commitment and special relation to an emancipatory *praxis* directed towards the transformation of the relations of production. In making this claim Korsch believes that he is doing no more than simply reflecting Marx's own view that historical materialism is a theory that is simultaneously a form of "practical-critical" activity.<sup>26</sup> This strong coupling of theory with *praxis* is often regarded as a significant point of difference between Korsch's "activist" brand of Marxism and the supposedly "contemplative" theoretical stance of the Frankfurt School.<sup>27</sup> This contrast however is more apparent than real, for as I will shortly demonstrate, the critical theorists, despite their sustained defence of the autonomy of theory with respect to immediate or pragmatic political requirements, always sought, although not in the fashion of Korsch, to relate theory to the attempt to change the world.

---

<sup>26</sup> *Theses on Feurbach*. See also Marx's discussion of Feuerbach's contemplative materialism in *The German Ideology*, pp.44-47.

<sup>27</sup> For example, Susan Buck-Morrs argues that: "No matter how hard one tries to defend Adorno as the true inheritor of Marx's theoretical legacy ... throughout his life he differed fundamentally from Marx in that his philosophy never included a theory of political action." (*Origin of Negative Dialectics* p.24.) This comment betrays a confusion between a pragmatic theory of political action such as Lenin's *What Is To Be Done?* and a theory with a general commitment to *praxis*. Despite what Buck-Morrs suggests these are not necessarily identical.

Whether they were wholly successful in this enterprise is a somewhat complex question and one which will have to await a later chapter.

For the moment, however, the discussion must return to *Marxism and Philosophy*. In this essay Korsch argues that the theory of historical materialism is distinguished from the positive sciences by what he refers to as the "unity of theory and *praxis*." However, without further refinement, this formula tells us very little.<sup>28</sup> After all, most natural scientific theories, in one way or another, are capable of application to the world and so might be thought of as unifying theory with practice. But this kind of technocratic-instrumental unity, the unity characteristic of any form of practical knowledge, is not the object of Korsch's concern. A clue to what he does mean can be found in his observation that Marx's theory has a *dual aspect*. According to Korsch, the theory

... includes from the point of view of the *object* an empirical investigation 'conducted with the precision of natural science', of all its relations and development, and from the point of view of the *subject* an account of how the impotent wishes and demands of individual subjects develop into an historically effective class leading to 'revolutionary practice'.<sup>29</sup>

Thus Marxism, unlike the natural sciences, does not comprehend its object by eliminating the perspective of the subject. On the contrary the theory, understood as the systematic expression of proletarian consciousness, bears an essential relation to the viewpoint of this

---

<sup>28</sup> For a useful discussion of what the unity of theory and *praxis* might actually involve see Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, pp.338-341.

<sup>29</sup> 'Why I am a Marxist' in *Three Essays on Marxism*, p.65.

specific historical agent.<sup>30</sup> In this respect at least, Marxism fails to comply with traditional norms of scientific impartiality and detachment. Furthermore, the theory operates from the point of view of the subject in a two-fold sense: it purports to explain not only how the "wishes and demands" of the subject are as a matter of fact frustrated by social relations, but also how those relations might be changed so as to eliminate such frustration. Marxism therefore is a theory which aims to *emancipate* as well as *enlighten*: by imparting knowledge to the subject of its present condition it becomes a moment in the process through which that condition is transformed by the subject's own activity.

Unfortunately Korsch's discussion, with its reference to the "wishes and demands of individual subjects", is misleading for it suggests that an emancipatory *praxis* informed by Marxist theory is defined by reference to an empirically determined aggregate of *individual* preferences. On this interpretation, the theory is the articulation of a collective or social consciousness, whatever that might happen to be. But to understand Korsch in this way would be a serious mistake; not least because the doubtful existence of such a coherent collectivity would make it impossible to connect theory with a specific form of *praxis*. However, as I have already indicated, Korsch has a historically precise notion of the subject or addressee of Marx's theory; it is the proletariat, a class brought into being as a world-historical force by the emergent bourgeois society of the nineteenth century. This observation suggests that one important difference between Marxism and Idealism is that the former, unlike the latter, does not seek to address the subject *qua* abstract rational agent but rather speaks to a *determinate social class*. Indeed, for Korsch, Marxism is nothing other than "the theoretical expression of the revolutionary movement of the

---

<sup>30</sup> For a discussion of the nature of this viewpoint see Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*, pp.149-172.

proletariat".<sup>31</sup> This formula usefully highlights the fact that materialism is a theory marked from the outset by an orientation towards the activity (*praxis*) of a historically specific collective subject. Furthermore, by coupling Marxism to the socio-political movement defined by the struggle for proletarian emancipation, Korsch draws attention to the way in which social theories have a potential to interact with and transform the reality they describe. Thus the Marxist theory of society seeks to establish that the capitalist mode of production is inimical to the real interests of the mass of producers: it reveals that the relation of capital to labour is founded upon exploitation and that in consequence class relations in bourgeois society have a necessarily antagonistic character. By disclosing this conflict of interest, as well as demonstrating that it is an inherent rather than an accidental or transitory feature of capitalist production, Marxism constitutes the expression *in thought* of the pre-existing, although theoretically inchoate, struggle between labour and capital. In summary, for Korsch, the relation between Marxist theory and society depends crucially upon the fact that it is produced from the perspective of the proletariat, indeed that it understands itself as a systematic statement of the interest of that class and in consequence becomes an essential moment in the process of realising that interest. In giving voice to this concern Marxism provides a theoretical basis for identifying the *goals* of a proletarian movement as well as the *means* by which these goals might be realised. To give just one example, the practical consequence of Marx's theory of surplus value is to identify the abolition of wage labour as the principal aim of a working class movement rather than any improvement, however substantial, in the real level of wages. Here the connection between theory, interests and *praxis* is perfectly evident: according to Marx, the theory of surplus value demonstrates that wage labour is an essentially exploitative relation and therefore

---

<sup>31</sup> *Marxism and Philosophy*, p.42.

operates against the interests of the working class. In consequence, any movement which purports to realise the interests of that class must, if it is truly conscious of those interests, seek the abolition of that particular social relation.<sup>32</sup>

Two things follow from this discussion. First, Korsch's reference to the "wishes and demands" of the subject needs to be interpreted not in an individualistic or empirical-psychologicistic sense, but rather in terms of the real interests of the proletariat considered as a whole. Second, that because Marxism is a form of knowledge organised around that interest it bears an inherent relation to the struggle on the part of the proletariat to liberate itself from the exploitative and therefore socially antagonistic relation of wage labour. These ideas are the essential background to Korsch's view that the Marxist theory of society is radically different in kind from traditional, "objective" scientific theories. For if we accept that Marx's theory does indeed discover and give expression to the interests of the proletariat then we have also to accept that the theory has an essential involvement in a *praxis* directed towards the realisation of the interests of that class. This is why Korsch always sought to distance himself from the attempt by orthodox Marxists, for example Hilferding, to separate Marxist theory from any kind of practical consequence.<sup>33</sup> In this context Hilferding's formulation of the argument is paradigmatic: he claims that the theory of historical materialism is solely concerned with uncovering "causal connections" and

---

<sup>32</sup> For a discussion of the relation between Marxist theory and the worker's movement see Korsch's 'Introduction to the Critique of the Gotha Program' in *Marxism and Philosophy*, especially pp.143-146.

<sup>33</sup> Rudolf Hilferding (1877-1941) was a prominent member of the Second International and an interpreter of Marx's political economy. His classic study *Finanzkapital* published in 1910 offers an analysis of the capitalist accumulation process in the era of imperialism. During the Nazi era he was arrested and according to Kolakowski (*Main Currents of Marxism: Vol 2*, pp.257-58) either died at Buchenwald or committed suicide whilst in prison in Paris.



therefore, like the natural sciences, is objective and free of any value judgements.<sup>34</sup> In the introduction to *Finance Capital*, Hilferding provides an especially clear statement of this position when he observes that

... insight into the correctness of Marxism, which includes insight into the necessity of socialism, is in no way a result of value judgements and has *no implications for practical behaviour*. It is one thing to acknowledge a necessity and quite another to place oneself at the service of this necessity.<sup>35</sup> (Italics mine)

This sharp separation of the science of Marxism from the socialist project is, for Korsch, not so much an aberration on the part of Hilferding but an entirely logical consequence of the orthodox position which presents historical materialism as "an advance registered by socialism in developing from a philosophy to a science."<sup>36</sup> The problem with this view, however, is not with the idea that Marxism points to the existence of certain laws of historical development but rather that these can be understood in *abstraction* from their practical revolutionary consequences.<sup>37</sup> Thus although it is correct to assert that the historical process has an objective character, that it results from the developing material basis of social life, it is also true to say, as Korsch does, that this process is *experienced* by subjects who potentially have the ability to *shape* its developmental course in accordance

---

<sup>34</sup> *Finance Capital*, p.23.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> *Marxism and Philosophy*, p.54.

<sup>37</sup> Op.cit., p.58.

with their real interests.<sup>38</sup> Consequently Marx's theory, because it claims to specify those interests, will *contra* Hilferding have obvious implications for "practical behaviour".

Now in arguing that Marxism is a science with a practical concern, Korsch is issuing a necessary corrective to the numerous interpreters of Marx who have sought to equate his theory with those of the natural sciences. However, although *Marxism and Philosophy* goes some way towards establishing that critical and positive scientific thought should not be conflated, Korsch's discussion of this matter leaves a number of important questions unanswered. This quickly becomes apparent if we turn to Horkheimer's influential discussion of this self-same question. Like Korsch, Horkheimer begins by arguing that a critical theory of society is to be distinguished from a traditional scientific theory by virtue of the fact that the former is essentially oriented towards expressing the interests of the subject to whom it is addressed whilst the latter represents itself as objective or interest free. As Horkheimer puts it, a critical theory of society is "a theory dominated at every turn by a concern for reasonable conditions of life".<sup>39</sup> In other words the principle concern of such a theory is with a society consciously organised in the interests of its members. Now in contrast to Korsch, Horkheimer displays greater determination in making the methodological consequences of this position as explicit as possible by arguing that the difference between a critical and a traditional scientific theory consists in the fact that the former has an *internal* rather than *external* connection to social praxis. To see what this might involve, consider the following observation concerning the natural sciences:

---

<sup>38</sup> 'Introduction to Capital' in *Three Essays on Marxism*, p.42.

<sup>39</sup> 'Traditional and Critical Theory' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p.199.

In traditional theoretical thinking, the genesis of particular objective facts, the practical application of the conceptual systems by which it grasps the facts and *the role of such systems in action*, are all taken to be *external* to theoretical thinking itself.<sup>40</sup>[Italics mine]

The distinction Horkheimer is seeking to make here between theories with an external relation and those with an internal relation to human action can be brought out more clearly by reflecting upon the way in which natural scientific theories find application to the world. In this context it is worth considering Geuss' suggestion that this relation is "never more than one of conditional rationality": knowledge of a natural scientific theory enables the subject to bring about a particular state of affairs but whether this possibility is realised or not depends upon the subject having a *prior interest* in that state.<sup>41</sup> Put another way, acceptance of a conventional scientific theory, together with its associated technological practices, does not automatically entail a commitment to any specific course of action.<sup>42</sup> By contrast Marxism has an immediate and inescapable relation to human *praxis*: it does not provide knowledge about what it *would* be rational for the subject to do *if* he or she had certain interests but instead informs the subject as to the nature of those interests. Thus for the addressee of Marx's theory this form of knowledge brings with it the practical imperative to act so as to realise the interest which the theory discloses. Of course whether individuals choose to act on the basis of this knowledge is a contingent matter: the socialist

---

<sup>40</sup> Op.cit., p.208.

<sup>41</sup> *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, pp.57-58.

<sup>42</sup> As Horkheimer observes, "science accepts as a principle that its every step has a critical basis, yet the most important step of all, *the setting of tasks*, lacks a theoretical grounding and seems to be taken arbitrarily." ('Notes on Science and the Crisis' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p.8.)

project, like any other human project, is not immune from the attractions of *akrasia*.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless it can be said that Marx's theory is essentially related to activity, or as Korsch would put it there is a unity of theory and *praxis*, in a way that is not true of the natural sciences. This much, at least, is common ground between Korsch and the critical theorists. However, I shall argue that there is a real difference here, in that the latter have a much more profound account of the notion of interest than Korsch. As Marcuse notes "the need for radical change must be rooted in the subjectivity of individuals themselves, in their intelligence and their passions, their drives and their goals."<sup>44</sup> Now for the Frankfurt School this did not involve a regression to some kind of utilitarian calculus, rather it was the recognition that interest had to be related to the whole complex of needs, biological, psychological, social and cultural, characteristic of the human situation. This discussion, however, will have to await a later chapter of this study.<sup>45</sup>

### *The Constitutivity of Consciousness*

Korsch's view of the *practico-critical* nature of Marxism is closely related to the account he offers of the relationship between the subject and object of theory, or in classically Marxist terminology, the relationship between consciousness and social being. This question, as we have already seen, had caused some considerable difficulty for the

---

<sup>43</sup> Indeed, it might be said that Adorno's discussion of the relation between the culture industry and those who consume its products is in fact a description of a classic form of *akrasia*: the consumer knows the worthlessness of what is being consumed whilst simultaneously seeking ever more of the same.

<sup>44</sup> *The Aesthetic Dimension*, p.3.

<sup>45</sup> See Chapter 6, which contains a general account of the Frankfurt School's psychoanalytically oriented approach to the concept of need.

orthodox tradition. Thus some Marxists, in order to avoid the charge of economic determinism, had been led into making a series of rather unwise concessions to their critics. These concessions originate with Engels who argued that the superstructure of ideas and beliefs is characterised by a "limited autonomy" with respect to the material base, and should be regarded, at least to some extent, as an independent causal agent in the process of historical development.<sup>46</sup> Unfortunately, this concession, as Korsch recognises, leads to a serious methodological confusion which ultimately deprives the materialist thesis of any real content. The reason for this confusion is plain enough: the idea that a partially autonomous superstructure causally interacts with an underlying economic base makes it all but impossible to distinguish between historical materialism and the kind of multi-factorial explanatory model favoured by mainstream Weberian social science.<sup>47</sup> Against this objection, Engel's assertion that the economic base is *determinate in the last instance* is less than helpful: it merely adds to the confusion by appearing to reinstate what the notion of superstructural autonomy denies, namely the primacy of the economic with respect to historical explanation.

For Korsch this whole problem was the result of a mistaken attempt, on the part of Marxist orthodoxy, to interpret the theory of base and superstructure in terms of a mechanistic-causal model of interaction derived from the natural sciences. On this account the ideational superstructure is seen as the *reflection* in thought of an *ontologically independent* material base, as the causally-induced mental reflex, or image, of an external

---

<sup>46</sup> Engels to Bloch, September 21st, 1890, *Marx-Engels: Selected Works*, pp.682-683.

<sup>47</sup> Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* provides the classic statement of this approach. See also p.75, pp.90-92, and p.183 where Weber attempts to represent historical materialism as a crudely economic, one-sided account of the emergence of capitalist society.

world of social being. This leads to the absurd conclusion that superstructural elements are contingent causal effects resulting from the material life process of society; in other words, that the way in which we apprehend that process is logically although not causally independent of the activity by means of which we produce and reproduce our social existence. Against this interpretation, *Marxism and Philosophy* offers the outline of a dialectical account of the relation between thought and being, an account which emphasises the *internal and mutually reflexive* character of the relation existing between these terms. In putting forward this idea, Korsch refers to what he calls the "coincidence of consciousness and reality", a phrase which is intended to remind us that forms of consciousness "exist *within this world* as a real and objective component of it".<sup>48</sup> (Italics mine) Thus according to Korsch, Marx's declaration that social being determines consciousness ought not to be interpreted as a statement of efficient cause and effect but rather as a reminder that the two are "related ... in the way that a specific particularly defined part of a whole is related to other parts of this whole".<sup>49</sup> What this means is that both consciousness and social being should be regarded as interdependent moments of a totality that is centred upon the process of social reproduction. In consequence, Korsch's materialism is not so much a theory of a particular efficient causality but rather the denial of the possibility of either a pre-social consciousness or an unconscious social existence. As he observes in *Marxism and Philosophy*,

... the coincidence of consciousness and reality characterises every dialectic, including Marx's dialectical materialism. Its consequence is that the material

---

<sup>48</sup> *Marxism and Philosophy*, pp.78-81.

<sup>49</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.84.

relations of production of the capitalist epoch only are what they are in combination with the forms in which they are reflected in the pre-scientific and bourgeois-scientific consciousness of the period; and *they could not subsist in reality without these forms of consciousness.*<sup>50</sup>(Italics mine)

Now although Korsch uses the term "reflection" in this passage it should be clear that his account of the materialist thesis does not rely upon any kind of image-object model. Instead he argues that if we consider the material basis of social life and the forms of consciousness in which that basis is represented, then the notion that either can exist independently of the other cannot be sustained. Consciousness and social reality are not discrete, independent phenomena, but exist in a relation of interdependence, or as Hegel would say inter-penetration.<sup>51</sup> Thus the relations of production, which according to Marx are part of the material base of society, cannot be regarded as either temporally, logically or causally prior to consciousness, but need to be understood as *social forms*, involving subjects with specific modes of self-understanding. As Korsch points out these relations are in fact dependent upon what he calls "pre-scientific" and "bourgeois-scientific" forms of consciousness: they are relations whose existence pre-supposes the widespread acceptance of certain ways of thinking about social production. In short, if we recognise that social being determines consciousness, as Marx claims, then consideration of this realm of being

---

<sup>50</sup> *Marxism and Philosophy*, pp. 79-80.

<sup>51</sup> Horkheimer, criticising the "economism" of orthodox Marxism makes much the same point. He argues that it is a mistake to believe "that the psyche of human beings, personality as well as law, art and philosophy are ... mere reflections of the economy." Like Korsch he explains this economic reading as the consequence of a "highly problematic divorce between Spirit and reality which fails to synthesise them dialectically." ('The Present Situation of Social Philosophy' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p.12.)

forces us to acknowledge that the material basis of social life, production and exchange, is itself infused with consciousness.

This is undoubtedly an important insight but one that needs to be developed with the utmost care, if materialism is not to degenerate into the kind of vacuous theorising whereby the mere invocation of the notion of totality is regarded as a sufficient answer to every possible question concerning the relation between thought and being. Regrettably Korsch's discussion of this matter remains throughout at a high level of abstraction: no examples, for instance, of the way in which specific forms of consciousness are coincident with reality are provided. This is particularly unfortunate because Marx's original account of the act of exchange, the act which it should be recalled is the basis of all production relations under capitalism, serves as a particularly compelling illustration of Korsch's thesis. Thus in *Capital* it is argued that every such act presupposes the mutual recognition of *property rights* on the part of commodity owners engaged in the relation of exchange. In other words, the physical transfer of an item from one individual to another only qualifies as an *act of exchange* if as Marx puts it a specific "juridical relation" between independent wills exists, namely that each party to the exchange gives due recognition to the property claim of the other.<sup>52</sup> This is not a contingent social-psychological fact but an acknowledgement of the necessary *constitutive role of consciousness* with respect to the practice of exchange.<sup>53</sup> The above mutual recognition of right, it should be emphasised, does not entail that property rights are a matter of subjective *fiat*; like any other right the validity of a

---

<sup>52</sup> *Capital: Volume I*, p.178.

<sup>53</sup> All of this is wholly consistent with Hegel's view of property as outlined in Part One of his *Element of the Philosophy of Right*, and later integrated into his description of the economy in *Civil Society*. This fact was drawn to my attention by Dudley Knowles.



property claim depends upon an appeal to objective criteria of legal ownership. It does, however, entail that what Marx calls "legal forms of consciousness", far from being a contingent effect of the material base, are in fact essential to any description of capitalist relations of production.<sup>54</sup> The significance of all of this for Korsch's critique of orthodox Marxism can be summarised as follows. According to Marx's theory, the relation of exchange is a constituent part of the material base of capitalist society, whilst the legal concept of property rights is equally clearly a part of what Marx regards as its superstructure. However, as we have seen, the exchange relation is not logically independent of the concept of property rights; to suppose that there could be exchange without the concept of property is to suppose something which is simply not possible. Hence Marx's theory of the base-superstructure relation cannot be understood as a theory of efficient causation, for according to the conventional Humean account of the causal relation, the terms of that relation are logically independent of one another: no description of a cause entails its effect and conversely no description of an effect entails its cause. But from what has been said above it is not open to us to describe the activity of exchange in a way that is independent of the legal notion of property rights. We may therefore conclude, as Korsch does, that orthodox Marxism is mistaken in representing the relation of base to superstructure in terms of an image-object model that is in turn dependent upon an underlying narrative of efficient causal determination. We may also conclude, this time more positively, that a careful reading of Marx's account of the exchange relation suggests that the relation between consciousness and social being needs to be conceived dialectically, as a relation between two interdependent, mutually reflexive moments of the

---

<sup>54</sup> For an argument in favour of the possibility of a *rechtsfrei* description of production relations see G.A.Cohen's *Karl Marx's Theory of History*, pp. 217-225.

social life process.

Having said this it must be admitted that Korsch's Hegelian inspired reading of Marx, whilst representing an advance upon the various forms of mechanistic orthodoxy current at the time, faces a number of serious objections. In the first place, it can be argued that even if a case can be made for the *Constitutivity Thesis* with respect to certain forms of consciousness it is by no means obvious that the thesis is capable of application across the whole range of superstructural phenomena. In the case, for instance, of philosophy, there is a piece of conventional wisdom which informs us that this theoretical tradition is concerned with problems that are essentially timeless. As P.F. Strawson puts it, metaphysics deals with that "massive central core of human thinking which has no history ... categories and concepts, which in their most fundamental character, change not at all."<sup>55</sup> In consequence, when considering concepts such as substance and causation, the traditional material of metaphysical enquiry, there is no point in seeking to discover a social content or element of historical determination because the very nature of these concepts place them outside of history and society. Similar although certainly less plausible arguments can be made with respect to the socially transcendent or autonomous nature of art and religion.

To some extent Korsch is aware of this problem: he warns his readers against the view that all superstructural elements bear as close a relationship as legal and political forms of consciousness to the material base of social life. In fact he regards the superstructure as a multi-layered complex of ideas and belief systems, each of which is more or less closely

---

<sup>55</sup> *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*, p.10. For a counter argument to the Strawson position see Marcuse's essay 'The Concept of Essence' in *Negations*, pp.43-87.

related to the economic life of society. Thus in addition to legal-political forms, there are the "higher forms of social consciousness", such as religion and philosophy, as well as "medium levels" of consciousness associated with fundamental social institutions such as the family.<sup>56</sup> Although Korsch admits that it may be difficult to immediately relate these higher or medium forms to production relations, he insists nevertheless that these forms "express bourgeois society as a totality in a particular way" and that "their ensemble forms the *spiritual structure* of bourgeois society, which corresponds to its economic structure, just as its legal and political superstructure corresponds to this same basis."<sup>57</sup> Unfortunately, *Marxism and Philosophy* does not get much beyond these programmatic announcements: no specific examples of higher or medium forms of consciousness are analysed for their social content nor indeed is any more said to support his general claim that all of these forms must be understood as expressions of an underlying social totality.

In this respect, then, we have to conclude that Korsch's essay is something of a failure. However our judgement should not be entirely negative, for his discussion does succeed in addressing one potentially significant ambiguity in the Marxist theory of base and superstructure. This ambiguity has given rise to a historically influential reading of Marx, a reading which regards all forms of higher consciousness as no more than ideology, and more particularly as ideology understood entirely in the sense of false consciousness.<sup>58</sup>

---

<sup>56</sup> *Marxism and Philosophy*, pp.81-82.

<sup>57</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.84.

<sup>58</sup> In opposition to this position Horkheimer maintains that superstructural phenomena are not simply forms of false consciousness but have to be understood as possessing a truth content, admittedly distorted, relating to the society in which they arise. Commenting upon Kant's ethical thought he writes that: "Morality, therefore, is by no means simply dismissed by materialism as mere ideology in the sense of false consciousness. Rather, it must be understood as a human phenomenon that cannot possibly be overcome for the duration of

Thus Engels argues that religion, for instance, is "nothing but the *fantastic reflection* in men's minds of those external forces which control their daily life."<sup>59</sup> This suggests that for the materialist, forms of consciousness such as religion or philosophy have no truth content whatsoever and should therefore be regarded as simply obstacles on the route to a scientific world view. On this account a large portion of what Marx identifies as the superstructure must be written off as so much false consciousness, as a web of false belief whose only purpose is to mask the conflict between the social classes. To take just one example of the sterility of this kind of approach we may consider the typical vulgar Marxist analysis of Hegel. According to this account German Idealism counts as "bourgeois" Idealism, not because it originates with the emergence of bourgeois society but because the idealist consciousness is, like religion, a "fantastic reflection" of the life process of that society. More particularly, by proposing that the truth of being is thought, Idealism denies the need for a practical transformation of material life and thus serves to maintain the existing bourgeois social order. To summarise: Hegel's philosophy is simply false and in consequence can teach us nothing concerning the real conflicts that characterise this form of life.

It is to his credit that Korsch was one of the first to see that this ruthlessly dismissive approach to the higher forms of consciousness constitutes a profoundly unsatisfactory

---

the bourgeois epoch. Its philosophical expression, however, is distorted in many respects." ('Materialism and Morality' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p.22.) Similarly Adorno, describing his method of criticism, comments that: "It takes seriously the principle that it is not ideology in itself which is untrue but rather its pretension to correspond to reality. Immanent criticism of intellectual and artistic phenomena seeks to grasp through the analysis of their form and meaning, the contradiction between their objective idea and that pretension. It names what the consistency or inconsistency of the work itself expresses of the structure of the existent." ('Cultural Criticism and Society' in *Prisms*, p.32)

<sup>59</sup> *Anti-Duhring*, p.438.

reconstruction of the materialist method. Referring to those Marxists who adhered to this interpretation he writes:

Quoting certain statements by Marx and especially Engels they simply explain away the intellectual (ideological structures) of society as a mere pseudo-reality which only exists in the minds of ideologues - as *error, imagination and illusion*, devoid of any genuine object. At any rate, this is supposed to be true for all the so-called "higher" ideologies.<sup>60</sup> (Italics mine)

He goes on to argue that Marxists who take this position often view the superstructure as consisting of two parts. One part, namely legal and political thought, is accorded a certain degree of reality, for these forms of consciousness define, describe and legitimate the material and political life of society. By contrast the remaining elements of the superstructure, the "higher" ideologies of philosophy and religion, are dismissed because these forms are thought of as failing to correspond to anything in the world.<sup>61</sup> For Korsch, as well as the Frankfurt School, such an approach is clearly unsatisfactory: a genuine materialism cannot simply dismiss "higher" forms of consciousness, for all thought, no matter how abstract, is an expression of our social being. It is for this reason that Korsch quotes with approval Hegel's maxim that every philosophy is "its own epoch

---

<sup>60</sup> *Marxism and Philosophy*, p.72.

<sup>61</sup> The work of G.A. Cohen illustrates another possible approach, namely ignoring those elements of the superstructure which appear to be inconvenient. Thus he interprets the concept of the superstructure as referring principally to the set of legal and political institutions characteristic of a society. Now whilst it is true that, for Marx, these institutions are indeed part of the superstructure it is quite clear from the 1859 Preface, as well as from other writings, that the term "superstructure" is intended to cover a much wider range of phenomena. Cohen, however, seems to ignore this aspect of Marx's original program of historical materialist research. (*Karl Marx's Theory of History*, p.216.)

comprehended in thought".<sup>62</sup> Consequently Korsch, who took this maxim extremely seriously, argues that the task of materialism is to discover the hidden social content of each and every form of thought, no matter how abstract or seemingly remote it might be from the material base. Unfortunately, whilst this is potentially a more fruitful interpretation of Marx's original program, Korsch's essay does very little to advance our understanding of how that program might be realised in detail.<sup>63</sup> Thus even if we resist the tendency to dismiss philosophy, religion and art as forms of false consciousness, we are still left with the question as to how these apparently autonomous forms can be related to the underlying material basis of social life.<sup>64</sup> Until this question is answered, and answered in detail, our judgement must be that the Korschian thesis constitutes a statement of intention rather than a substantial analysis.

The second objection to the *Constitutivity Thesis* can be formulated somewhat provocatively as follows: that Korsch, in seeking to address some of the difficulties associated with materialism, appears to resolve those difficulties by abandoning the very doctrine he is seeking to defend. This charge has some substance: there is a worrying degree of indeterminacy associated with Korsch's concept of a social totality, because the reflexive relation between thought and being which constructs the totality seems to lack

---

<sup>62</sup> *Marxism and Philosophy*, p.40.

<sup>63</sup> A comprehensive answer to the question of the relation between base and superstructure is beyond the scope of this study. However, in Chapter 5 there is some further discussion of this issue.

<sup>64</sup> Criticising the argument that "all culture is ideology" Adorno writes: "This explains the inadequacy of most socialist contributions to cultural criticism: they lack the experience of that with which they deal. In wishing to wipe away the whole as if with a sponge, they develop an affinity to barbarism." ( 'Cultural Criticism and Society' in *Prisms*, p.32)

any underlying principle of organisation. As Raymond Williams puts it:

... if we come to say that society is composed of a large number of social practices which form a concrete social whole, and if we give to each practice a certain specific recognition, adding only that they interact, relate and combine in very complicated ways, we are at one level much more obviously talking about reality, but we are at another level withdrawing from the claim that there is any process of determination.<sup>65</sup>

William's objection can be taken further. For, if as Korsch suggests, consciousness and reality are mutually constitutive, it becomes difficult to see how the doctrine of materialism is to be differentiated from that of idealism. Certainly, it is not alien to the spirit of Hegel's thought to suppose that the subject-object relation is one of mutual dependence, that the subject produces and in turn is produced by the object.<sup>66</sup> But unless Hegel's version of constitutivity can be distinguished from that of materialism, Korsch's "defence" of Marxism threatens to reduce materialism to the philosophical doctrine it supposedly supercedes. This objection applies not only to the work of Korsch but as we shall see later to that of Lukács as well. It illustrates, in fact, the central difficulty faced by Hegelian-Marxism of maintaining a difference from as well as an identity between Hegel's Idealism and Marx's materialism.<sup>67</sup> We can begin to see more clearly the nature of this problem by considering

---

<sup>65</sup> *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, p.36.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. *Hegel's Science of Logic*, §213-215.

<sup>67</sup> The Communist critics of Korsch and Lukács made this very charge, arguing that their emphasis on consciousness, as opposed to laws of historical development, represented a return to Hegel's Idealism.

the vulgar Marxist claim that Marx inverts Hegel by establishing that being is not the product of thought but rather its real determinant. This overly simplistic formula has been effectively criticised by Michael Rosen who argues that:

Such criticism is besides the point ... the dialectical development of Thought furnishes the structure of reality, and, because it encompasses both thought and reality, there is no way to play one off against another.<sup>68</sup>

However, this observation tells as much against Korsch as it does the vulgar Marxist: if thought and reality cannot be played off against one another, and Korsch's argument suggests that they cannot, it becomes unclear how Hegel's idealism can be distinguished from Marx's materialism. But if this distinction cannot be made then the central thesis of Hegelian Marxism, namely that materialism is the sublation of Idealism, must also be discounted, for sublation, it should be remembered, requires *difference* as well as identity.

I shall conclude the present chapter by briefly noting that this particular question is directly addressed in Adorno's later work.<sup>69</sup> Unlike Horkheimer's early programmatic writings, which in many ways represent a largely uncritical appropriation of the Korsch-Lukács heritage, Adorno realised that the subject-object totality of Hegelian Marxism was unsatisfactory from the view point of historical materialism. As he observes:

---

<sup>68</sup> *Hegel's Dialectic and its Criticism*, p.156.

<sup>69</sup> In Chapter 5 I shall consider in more detail Adorno's attempt to formulate a materialist version of the subject-object dialectic.



The less the dialectical method can today presuppose the Hegelian identity of subject and object, the more it is obliged to be mindful of the duality of its moments. It must relate the knowledge of society as a totality and of the mind's involvement in it to the claim inherent in the specific content of the object that it be apprehended as such.<sup>70</sup>

Furthermore, although Adorno recognises the truth of the Constitutivity Thesis he also seeks to transcend by it arguing that whilst mind produces society, a genuinely materialist dialectic is required to accord what he calls "preponderance" to the external reality of society and nature.<sup>71</sup> This suggests not only that there is an essential moment of non-identity in the relation between subject and object but also that the object has a measure of ontological priority over the subject. Korsch, however, in his desire to distance Marx's theory from any form of mechanistic thought, loses sight of this essential aspect of materialism. But if Adorno's criticism reveals that Korsch's version of materialism must ultimately be rejected, his recognition of the importance of the Korschian problematic is nevertheless a measure of the degree to which the central concerns of critical theory are informed by the work of this too often marginalised thinker.

---

<sup>70</sup> 'Cultural Criticism and Society' in *Prisms*, p.33.

<sup>71</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, p.192.

### Chapter 3. Social Theory and the Supersession of Philosophy

We begin this chapter by recalling the claim made in Chapter 1 that the Frankfurt School conceived of their version of materialism as a response to German Idealism, as an attempt to come to terms, albeit from a very different set of premises, with some of the central problems of that earlier tradition of philosophical thought. Indeed, for the critical theorists Marx's historical materialism is to be understood as a critical investigation of the historically developed relation between consciousness and the world rather than as a new positive science of history. Furthermore although the Frankfurt School regarded Marxism as being rooted in the questions of German Idealism, this did not involve any belief in the possibility of the continuation or revival of that tradition; on the contrary, they conceived of materialism as the means by which classical philosophy might be definitively transcended. As Marcuse observes in a review of Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*:

We are dealing with a *philosophical* critique of political economy, for the basic categories of Marx's theory here arise out of his emphatic confrontation with the philosophy of Hegel (e.g. labour, objectification, alienation, supersession, property). This does not mean that Hegel's 'method' is transformed and taken over, put into a new context and brought to life. Rather, Marx goes back to the problems at the root of Hegel's philosophy (which originally determined his method), independently appropriates their real content and thinks it through to a further stage.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> 'The Foundations of Historical Materialism' in *Studies in Critical Philosophy*, p.4.

Hence according to Marcuse the Marxian dialectic is not derived by abstracting Hegel's 'method' from the content of his thought, as Engels supposed, but is grounded in the fundamental problematic of idealist philosophy, of how and to what extent the subject is responsible for the constitution of the object of consciousness. Hegel, whose philosophy is for much of the time an attempt to overcome the problems inherent in Kant's version of Idealism, offered a particularly startling answer to this question: the rational subject through the activity of thought produces as its other nature and society, and in so doing returns to itself by coming to a conscious recognition of the unity underlying the original diremption between subject and object. Now for Marcuse, as for other members of the Frankfurt School, this answer was unsatisfactory. Despite their admiration for the brilliance of Hegel's thought they rejected the idealist conclusion that the world in general, and society in particular, can be recognised as the manifestation of Reason. Contrary to Hegel the critical theorists maintained that society, and more especially bourgeois society, was profoundly irrational and in consequence could not be regarded as an adequate expression of a rational subjectivity.

But if this central aspect of the Hegelian system was rejected by the Frankfurt School, they nevertheless believed that his thought had a continuing relevance. As I shall argue some of the central content Hegel's philosophy is preserved by means of their reconstruction of Marx's materialism, a reconstruction which posits dialectic as the expression of contradictions inherent to the social life process. From this it follows that if philosophical problems are a representation, albeit an indirect representation, of a pre-existing material conflict in the world, then these problems can only be solved by extra-theoretical means. In other words a critical theory of society leads to the demand for a transformative *praxis*

directed towards the social relations governing the productive life of society. Summarising this argument Marcuse advances the following thesis:

A rough formula which could be used as a starting point would be that the revolutionary critique of political economy itself has a philosophical foundation, just as conversely the philosophy underlying it already contains revolutionary praxis. The theory is in itself a practical one; praxis does not only come at the end but is already present in the beginning of the theory. To engage in praxis is not to tread on alien ground, external to theory.<sup>2</sup>

Clearly this passage raises a number of questions concerning the relation between philosophy and *praxis*, not the least of which is the question of the precise nature of the *praxis* that is already “contained” in the philosophical foundations of Marx’s thought.<sup>3</sup> However, leaving these questions aside for the moment one thing is clear. For Marcuse as for other members of the Frankfurt School, Marx’s political economy is more than an economic theory: it represents the practical-critical unity of philosophy and the world. Properly understood therefore, *Capital* is a response to the problems of idealist philosophy, even though through its commitment to *praxis* it transcends that particular philosophical

---

<sup>2</sup> Op.cit., pp.4-5.

<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that there is a similar conception of *praxis* in the work of Adorno. Thus in a reference to Marx’s famous last thesis concerning Feuerbach he writes that: “When Marx reproached the philosophers, saying that they had only variously interpreted the world, and contraposed to them that the point was to change it, then the sentence receives its legitimacy not only out of *praxis*, but also out of philosophical theory. Only in the *annihilation* of the question is the authenticity of the philosophical interpretation first successfully proven, and mere thought by itself cannot accomplish this: therefore the annihilation of the question compels *praxis*.” [Italics mine] ‘The Actuality of Philosophy’, *Telos*, 31, Spring 1977, p.129.

tradition. Thus unlike the idealist philosopher, the materialist does not regard the world as a completed rational order of being, as a reality to be contemplated and perhaps even celebrated. Rather, the latter probes and tests the claim, made by society, that the present order of things constitutes an adequate medium for the realisation of the subject. By interrogating that claim, historical materialism seeks to demonstrate that the project of human self-actualisation demands a very different kind of social objectivity from that which Hegel had described. In short, the materialist encounter with philosophy raises the demand that the world must be changed.<sup>4</sup>

This way of reading Marx, it should be said, is not original to the Frankfurt School but derives in the first instance from the work of Korsch and Lukács. Thus Korsch in *Marxism and Philosophy* had earlier written that “in the very act of surpassing the limits of a bourgeois [philosophical] position - an act indispensable to grasp the essentially new philosophical content of Marxism - *Marxism itself is at once superseded and annihilated as a philosophical object.*”<sup>5</sup> In a subsequent formulation of this same thought he tells us that materialism is “the supersession (*Aufheben*), not only of bourgeois idealist philosophy, but *simultaneously* of all philosophy as such.”<sup>6</sup> These statements suggest that whilst Korsch believed that Marxism possessed its own philosophical content he nevertheless regarded it as the terminus of independent philosophical enquiry. Similarly Lukács, whilst celebrating the achievement of Hegel and his predecessors, points to the inherent limitation

---

<sup>4</sup> In this chapter I shall be mainly concerned with the relation between philosophy and social theory. The final chapter of this thesis will explore in more detail how it is that a theory of society is necessarily connected to critique and socio-political *praxis*.

<sup>5</sup> *Marxism and Philosophy*, p.43.

<sup>6</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.45.

of philosophical reflection, observing that

... classical philosophy is able to think the deepest and most fundamental problems of the development of bourgeois society through to the very end - on the plane of philosophy. It is able - in thought - to complete the evolution of class. And - in thought- it is able to take all the paradoxes of its position to the point where the necessity of going beyond this historical stage in mankind's development can at least be seen as a problem.<sup>7</sup>

The implication here is that classical philosophy, despite its intellectual richness, must ultimately be counted a failure insofar as it seeks a purely theoretical resolution of the socio-historical problems posed by the class nature of society. According to Lukács, the problems which philosophy seeks to address are not autonomous theoretical questions but are in fact rooted in the material basis of the social life process and as such can only be resolved by means of *praxis*. As we have seen, he argues that the question posed by the Kantian *ding an sich* is an expression in the medium of theory of a specific problem arising from the process of social production, namely the problem of commodity fetishism.<sup>8</sup> Thus under the commodity form the appearance of social relations as relations between things gives rise to a form of philosophical consciousness, classically exemplified in Kant's theory of a world of *noumenal* entities. This representation of the world serves albeit unintentionally as a theoretical articulation of the original distortion of consciousness

---

<sup>7</sup> 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' in *History and Class Consciousness*, p121.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Horkheimer's discussion of Kant's Categorical Imperative in his article 'Materialism and Morality' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*.

induced by the commodity form.<sup>9</sup> Now according to Lukács, Marxism, because it is a “practical-critical” theory directed towards the transformation of society, stands in a quite distinct relation to the problems of knowledge, rationality and ethics which concerned Kant and Hegel. Although materialism intends to provide answers to the questions of that tradition, it also understands itself as the end of classical philosophy; it is in effect a philosophical thesis promising to liberate thought from the limitations of the purely philosophical consciousness. For the early Hegelian Marxists, as well as the Frankfurt School, historical materialism is therefore a theory which seeks to *transform* philosophical problems into questions whose solution is dependent upon the investigation and transformation of historically determinate forms of life.<sup>10</sup> Using Hegelian terminology we can summarise the above argument by saying that the relation between Marxism and philosophy is one of difference as well as identity: materialism, which preserves the central questions of the philosophical tradition in the critical theory of society, simultaneously negates that tradition by replacing contemplation with *praxis*.

---

<sup>9</sup> An interesting example of the relation between philosophical problems and the society in which they arise can be found in the work of Abraham Edel. Thus concerning Aristotle’s concept of potentiality he observes “that Aristotle requires the full materials [the bronze of the statue] to be envisaged so that only a single unified activity will be involved in the actualisation of the potentiality. This seems to reflect the craft process inherent in pre-industrial modes of production. Modern machine production, where raw materials pour into one end of the machine and a remote finished product comes out the other, would extend the range of potentiality.” (*Aristotle and his Philosophy*, p.86.)

<sup>10</sup> In some ways this is reminiscent of the later Wittgenstein’s belief that philosophical problems can be resolved by reflecting upon what he calls “the natural history of human beings”. However, for Wittgenstein, this history is immediately available to us: it consists of “observations which no one has doubted but which have escaped remark only because they are always before our eyes.” (*Philosophical Investigations*, §.415) Thus philosophy is disposed of by means of a pre-theoretical meditation upon certain fundamental aspects of the human social condition.

In order to test the truth of the above thesis, so as to determine whether and in what sense Marx's theory can be legitimately regarded as the supersession of the idealist tradition, the proper starting point must surely be with Hegel's *original* account of this concept. For unless we are clear about the meaning of supersession, it seems unlikely that much progress can be made with respect to either of the above questions. Accordingly the following section of this chapter will be largely devoted to a discussion of the role that this concept plays in Hegel's philosophical system.<sup>11</sup> We shall then return to Korsch's essay, and examine his attempt to use this Hegelian notion to articulate the relation between materialism and its idealist predecessor. In the course of the discussion it will become apparent that Korsch, whose work so insistently posed the question of that relation, fails to produce anything like a satisfactory answer. Despite this failure, Korsch's essay is in the context of the present enquiry worth some attention, for it contains a number of ideas which although never fully worked out serve to bring the supersession thesis into sharper focus. The chapter closes by considering some of Horkheimer's early methodological writings, and in particular his argument that the right kind of social theory will serve as the vehicle for the solution of the problems of Idealism. These writings, whilst certainly influenced by Korsch's argument, go far beyond his reconstruction of Marxism, a reconstruction which with hindsight appears as unduly conservative as well as incomplete. Furthermore, and contrary to what a number of commentators have maintained, much of

---

<sup>11</sup> It should be said that Hegel uses the concept of sublation in a number of different ways. In some contexts it functions as an entirely formal principle, that the negation of the negation is a positive, and according to Adorno is utilised to illegitimately establish what might be called the subjective unity of subject and object. Adorno rejects this strategy arguing that: "To equate the negation of negation with positivity is the quintessence of identification; it is the formal principle in purest form. What thus wins out in the inmost core of dialectics is the anti-dialectical principle: that traditional logic which, *more arithmetico*, takes minus times minus for a plus." (*Negative Dialectics*, p.158.) However, in contrast to this quasi-logical version of the concept, it is possible to find in Hegel's work a more substantive, historically concrete notion of



what the young Horkheimer has to say concerning both the nature and purpose of social theory, far from being discarded in the process of evolution undergone by Frankfurt Marxism, turns out to be a fairly accurate description of the Institute's subsequent course of theoretical development. This need not imply that Horkheimer's work is beyond criticism or that it is of greater importance to the Frankfurt School than the contributions of either Adorno or Marcuse; what it does suggest however is that Horkheimer was the first to successfully define the broad programmatic framework of first generation critical theory, and in virtue of this fact his early writings should be regarded as being of particular importance for an understanding of much of the subsequent Frankfurt Marxist project.

### *Sublation and Determinate Negation*

The narrative of Hegel's *Phenomenology* is driven by the idea that history consists of a series of transitions from one form of consciousness to another. This process of transition is described by Hegel as a process of sublation: one form is said to be sublated by another form which in turn is sublated by another and so on until we arrive at the terminus of Absolute Knowledge. In what follows I want to consider the question of what exactly is involved in this account of the way in which one particular understanding of the world gives way to another. We shall begin this investigation with a frequently cited passage from the *Science of Logic* where Hegel offers a general definition of the concept of sublation:

'To sublate' has a twofold meaning in the language: on the one hand it means to preserve, to maintain, and equally it also means to cause to cease, to put an end to ... Something is sublated only insofar as it has entered into a unity with its opposite;

---

sublation. It is this notion which I shall expound and defend in the following pages.

in this more particular signification as something reflected, it may fittingly be called a *moment*.<sup>12</sup>

Applying this definition to the history of ideas we come to the thought that the supersession or sublation (*Aufhebung*) of one theoretical tradition by another means that the sublating tradition preserves the very thought which it seeks to overcome. Thus by transcending as well as incorporating what is past, the contemporary consciousness establishes a unity with its apparent opposite, namely the form that is to be replaced.

These first thoughts, however, should be sufficient to indicate that Hegel's concept of sublation is not an easy one to grasp. Certainly part of the difficulty here is that in translating from German to English we come up against the problem that there is no single English word which could serve as an accurate translation of *aufheben*. This is because, as Colletti explains, in German the word *aufheben* has two meanings, "one negative (annul, abolish) and the other positive (supersede, transcend)."<sup>13</sup> But even if this linguistic constraint could be overcome the problem of providing a determinate sense for the concept of sublation remains. Thus simply conjoining the notions of abolition and transcendence runs the risk of reducing Hegel's historical narrative to the banal assertion that each emergent form of consciousness incorporates something of the past. This is hardly a radical thought, much less a revolutionary one, but so far it seems to be all that can be safely said.

---

<sup>12</sup> *Science of Logic*, p.107.

<sup>13</sup> *Marx: Early Writings*, p.432.

To make progress on this question it is necessary to go beyond the definition given above and recall that for Hegel the concept of sublation is equivalent to that of a double or *determinate negation*.<sup>14</sup> This takes us immediately to the very basis of Hegel's philosophy. Thus in an early description of his method Hegel writes that:

... in speculative [*begreifenden*] thinking, ... the negative belongs to the *content* itself, and is the positive, both as *immanent* movement and determination of the content, and as the whole of this process. Looked at as a result, what emerges from this process is the determinate negative which is consequently a positive content as well.<sup>15</sup> (Italics mine)

A more explicit formulation of the idea of the "determinate negative" is to be found in the *Science of Logic* where Hegel in a comment upon the *Phenomenology* observes that:

Here [in the *Phenomenology*] we are dealing with forms of consciousness each of which in realising itself ... has for its result its own negation - and so passes into a higher form. All that is necessary to achieve scientific progress ... is the recognition of the logical principle that *the negative is just as much positive*, or that what is self-contradictory does not resolve itself into a nullity, ... but essentially only into the negation of its particular content, that such a negation is ... the negation of a specific subject matter which resolves itself, and consequently is a specific negation, and therefore the *result essentially contains that from which it results* ... Because

---

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Mure, G.R., *The Philosophy of Hegel*, p.35.

<sup>15</sup> *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §59.

the result, the negation, is a specific negation it has a content. It is a fresh notion but richer and higher than its predecessor, for it is richer by the negation or opposite of the latter, therefore contains it, ... and is the unity of itself and its opposite.<sup>16</sup> [Italics mine]

In both passages Hegel describes a process of thought developing by means of critical reflexivity; in other words a dialectic through which a shape of consciousness emerges, negates itself and is then replaced by a new shape derived from the negation of the original. This movement is the essential activity of Spirit which qua rational being is continuously compelled to adopt a critical stance towards its own self-articulation. For Hegel, negation is never an arbitrary development, but a consequence of Reason recognising the inadequacy of its own self-production and moving to correct its failure. Accordingly, the condition for all scientific progress is to understand that although the negation of a shape of consciousness is a refutation of that shape, it is not simply a refutation but a form which *contains* that from which it results, and therefore preserves what it negates. This, however, raises the question of what exactly is meant by the claim that the refutation of a form *contains* that which it refutes. Certainly Hegel is not using containment in the formal semantic sense, in the way, for instance, that a logician will say that the statement  $p$  is contained as the argument of the truth function  $\sim(p)$ . Instead Hegel's use of the term refers to the idea that the negation of an entity must be understood as a *result* or *outcome* of a process which presupposes the existence of what it negates. Thus, unlike the assertion of  $\sim(p)$ , which does not require a previous assertion of  $p$ , a determinate negation is essentially constituted by its originating from a specific given positive. For Hegel, then, determinate

---

<sup>16</sup> *Science of Logic*, p.54.

negation is closely akin to a stage in a developmental process: the negative is seen as the consequence of the earlier positive form. Thus the negative is the result of a process of *immanent* development, of the self-activity of a positive form coming up against its own inherent limitation, and in the process of overcoming that limitation, abolishing as well as preserving itself.<sup>17</sup>

This still abstract idea of developmental containment is not yet sufficient to fully specify the principle of determinate negation; what is required is to discover the real content of the process. Here Hegel's *Phenomenology* is decisive for an understanding of this particular aspect of his thought. For the subject matter of this text is rarely an isolated proposition (or concept) but a shape of consciousness *embodied* within a historically specific form of life.<sup>18</sup>

Thus the recognition of negation by Spirit is tantamount to the acknowledgement that thought and being, intention and realisation, are in conflict: the world that thought has produced does not correspond to the world which it intended to produce. Summarising this particular dialectical moment Charles Taylor observes that for Hegel "... certain historical forms of life are prey to inner contradiction, either because they are doomed to frustrate the very purpose for which they exist (e.g. the master-slave relation), or because they are bound to generate an inner conflict between different conditions which are equally essential to the fulfillment of the purpose..."<sup>19</sup> This failure is,

---

<sup>17</sup> I shall return to this argument in Chapter 5.

<sup>18</sup> Dudley Knowles has persuaded me that certain forms of consciousness discussed in the *Phenomenology*, such as Sense-Certainty and Perception, are general epistemological-metaphysical stances which recur in numerous guises in the history of philosophy. For this reason they should perhaps be distinguished from the other more obviously historically determinate forms which figure in Hegel's account of the development of Spirit.

<sup>19</sup> *Hegel*, p.131.

however, not without a certain positive significance. Spirit does not simply recognise that a particular shape of consciousness (and the corresponding form of life) is doomed but understands the failure as a result of its own *immanent* development. In other words Spirit in a determinate form has set forth into the world, and through labour has transformed both itself and its object; yet in this process of self-realisation it also discovers that what has been produced conflicts with its original purpose. Hence by changing reality according to its own design, a shape of consciousness finds that it has negated itself, that its original understanding of the world no longer accords with the world that it has produced. But this negation, Hegel argues, has nevertheless a determinate content because it is the expression of a consciousness which although failing, and failing inevitably, has so altered the world that whatever succeeds it must incorporate not only what was known to Spirit but also recognise the necessity of the transformation that constitutes the moment of negation. Moreover, because consciousness retains knowledge of both the negation and what has been negated, it has the material at hand to develop a new positive or “higher” form of consciousness. This means that although negation is a distinct moment within the dialectical process, it is not a stable moment but must always pass over into a new resolving form. Thus in establishing a new understanding of the world, Spirit launches once again into a fresh cycle of development and frustration. This process will continue, at least according to Hegel, until Spirit has obtained a final and completely adequate understanding of itself, until thought has obtained and thus realised the principle of Absolute Knowledge.

Applying this argument to the history of philosophy, we come to a view of that history quite distinct from the view of those philosophers who regard it as a narrative of errors

---

awaiting correction by the wisdom of the present. Against this position Hegel maintains that a philosophy has to be evaluated by reference to its historical context, to the form of life to which it seeks to give expression. In consequence, philosophical systems cannot be regarded as either simply true or false; instead they should be thought of as more or less *adequate* with respect to the particular set of contextually defined problems they seek to address. Furthermore, as the real context of philosophy changes, so do the problems; the new philosophies which arise in response to this change partially embody what has gone before but also, because the problems themselves have changed, go beyond what has thus far been achieved.<sup>20</sup> This conception of philosophical development is very far removed from the ahistorical notion of argument and refutation current amongst many analytical philosophers. Thus according to Hegel, philosophical arguments do not exist in the abstract as a set of propositions, but are embedded within historically specific complexes of social life and can therefore only be fully understood and indeed assessed by reference to the problems characteristic of those complexes.<sup>21</sup> This thought finds expression in Adorno's observation that "the historical problems of philosophy ... are inextricably bound to historical problems and the history of those problems, and are not to be resolved independent of them."<sup>22</sup>

---

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Robert Solomon, *In the Spirit of Hegel*, pp.243-249.

<sup>21</sup> A clear example of this can be found in Hegel's discussion of Stoicism, Scepticism and the Unhappy Consciousness. (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, §197-231.)

<sup>22</sup> 'The Actuality of Philosophy' in *Telos*, 31, 1977 Spring, p.121. Horkheimer makes much the same point in a discussion of the relation between philosophy and history. He writes: "If it is true that we must know what freedom is in order to know which parties in history have fought for it, it is no less true that we must know the character of these parties in order to determine what freedom is. The answer lies in the concrete outlines of the epochs of history. The definition of freedom is the theory of history, and vice versa." (*Eclipse of Reason*, p.168)

The concept of sublation, therefore, points to the fact that developments in philosophical thought, as in other areas of theoretical labour, bear the marks of the very tradition they seek to overthrow. This is not due to a lack of human theoretical originality, but results from the fact that a philosophy is always the expression, albeit a highly abstract expression, of problems that arise from a specific form of life. In turn this form of life is itself a product of a certain shape of consciousness; thus the philosopher, in addressing questions that arise from that form necessarily confronts but must also in part absorb what has resulted from Spirit's earlier activity<sup>23</sup> In other words philosophy, no matter how original, cannot step outside of its material context and in consequence is necessarily conditioned by the principle of thought which gives rise to and maintains that context.

### *Korsch and the Supersession of Idealism*

Having said something concerning Hegel's conception of the history of philosophy I shall seek to apply what has been said to Korsch's claim that Marxism represents the sublation of Idealism. In doing this one is forced to immediately confront the following two questions. First, *what* according to Korsch are the constituent principles of the German Idealist tradition, the tradition which Marxism is supposed to both preserve as well as transcend? Second, and perhaps even more crucially, *how* precisely does materialism succeed in sublating this earlier philosophical movement? Korsch's answer to the first question is to

---

<sup>23</sup> Commenting upon this dialectic of tradition and innovation, Adorno writes that "tradition is immanent in knowledge itself, that it serves to mediate between known objects ... Knowledge as such, even in a form detached from substance takes part in tradition as remembrance; there is no question which we might simply ask, without knowing of past things that are preserved in the question and spur it.." (*Negative Dialectics*, p.54)



argue that Hegel's Idealism is a philosophy whose task it "is to reconcile Reason as a self-conscious Spirit with Reason as an actual Reality, by means of concepts and comprehension."<sup>24</sup> This summary statement can be usefully related to another observation which occurs towards the end of *Marxism and Philosophy*:

For Hegel, the practical task of the Concept in its 'thinking activity' (in other words, philosophy) does not lie in the domain of ordinary 'practical human and sensuous activity' (Marx). It is rather to 'grasp what is, for that which is, is Reason'.<sup>25</sup>

Both of these quotations, we note, portray Hegel as an essentially conservative social philosopher whose primary concern is simply to observe and comprehend what already exists.<sup>26</sup> Indeed Korsch goes further and argues that ultimately the reason that philosophy is important for Hegel is "because it *reconciles* man to reality."<sup>27</sup> On this account then, the hallmark of German Idealism is a complicity with the world as it is; an attitude which appears to find expression in Hegel's dictum that what is reasonable is actual and what is actual is reasonable.<sup>28</sup> This charge of complicity is further particularised by Korsch who argues that the reality Hegel celebrated was none other than the newly emergent bourgeois

---

<sup>24</sup> *Marxism and Philosophy*, p.67

<sup>25</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.82.

<sup>26</sup> Korsch constructs this picture of Hegel almost exclusively on the basis of certain well known passages in the Preface to the *Philosophy of Right*. However, this vision of philosophy as a reconciling mode of *post festum* comprehension can be found elsewhere in Hegel. In the *Encyclopedia Logic*, for instance, he writes: "... it may be held the highest and final aim of philosophic science to bring about ... a reconciliation of the self-conscious reason with the reason which *is* in the world - in other words, with actuality." p.8.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. *Marxism and Philosophy*, pp.38-43.

<sup>28</sup> See footnote #45, *Marxism and Philosophy*.

society of the early nineteenth century.<sup>29</sup> In fact, he goes on to say that Hegel simply expressed in theory what the European bourgeoisie were effecting in practice. It for this reason that Korsch maintains that the essential contrast between Idealism and materialism is that the former is committed to the *interpretation* of the world as it exists whilst the latter, because it disputes the rationality of the present order of things, is the theoretical expression of a *praxis* directed towards the *transformation* of that world.<sup>30</sup>

What are we to make of the above reconstruction of Hegel's thought? In the first place it must be said that Korsch's essay suffers from the usual limitations of the philosophical manifesto, insofar as general principles are advanced with little or no discussion of what they mean or how they might be justified. For instance, and most importantly, on the basis of his essay it is impossible, as I have already briefly argued in Chapter 2, to establish a satisfactory conception of the distinction between Hegel's idealism and Marx's materialism. This argument can now be made out in more detail. Thus if we consider Korsch's claim

---

<sup>29</sup> This somewhat oversimplifies Hegel's attitude to bourgeois society. For whilst Hegel certainly does celebrate bourgeois property rights he is also aware of the fact that by itself civil society cannot constitute an adequate realm of freedom. This tension comes out clearly in the following passage: "Mind that is objective is a person, and as such has a reality of its freedom in property ... But the full realisation of that freedom which in property is still incomplete, still [only] formal ... is achieved only in the State, in which mind develops its freedom into a world posited by mind itself, into the ethical world." (*Hegel's Philosophy of Mind, Zusatz to §385*) To this qualification Korsch would undoubtedly reply that in bourgeois society the State simply reflects the interests of the economically dominant class in civil society.

<sup>30</sup> Yet despite this difference, Korsch argues that there is a significant continuity between Idealism and materialism: Marx's theory discovers that there is a class compelled by its actual life situation to realise the Idealist program of a society constituted on the basis of norms of freedom and rationality. In making this point Korsch is, of course, echoing Marx's famous remark that: "Philosophy cannot realise itself without the transcendence [*Aufhebung*] of the proletariat, and the proletariat cannot transcend itself without the realisation of philosophy." See 'A Contribution Towards the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction', in *Marx: Early Writings*, p.257.

that idealism is distinguished by its *contemplative* stance towards reality whereas the materialism emphasises the role of *praxis* in changing it. Whilst this formula is undoubtedly suggestive, without further explication it is not sufficient to adequately illuminate the distinction between these two positions. For example, Hegel's notion of thought comprehending the world refers primarily to the philosophical consciousness recognising the world as the product of thought, of thought coming to see the world as the result of its own *activity*. This means that the rationality of the world that philosophy discovers is not a simple brute fact nor the result of the activity of a transcendent deity, but rather a *consequence* of the essentially active, externalising nature of thought. In short, if Hegel discovers that the world is rational this can only be because humanity as a vehicle of *Geist* has *made* it so.<sup>31</sup> But if this is true then the distinction between Idealism and materialism in terms of contemplation versus activity begins to seem a lot less clear cut: the Hegelian subject is not the autarchic subject of a Cartesian consciousness philosophy but is rather a historical, world-transforming agent. To this objection Korsch might perhaps reply that it is precisely the emphasis Idealism places upon *thought* that is the point of difference between Hegel and Marx: Idealism envisages a single form of activity, namely the activity of Mind, whereas materialism represents thought as a moment in the richer totality of a historicised conception of human *praxis*. But this response overlooks Hegel's conception of Mind as something whose realisation depends upon its presence in the realm of nature and society. For Hegel, the labour of the Concept is not the activity of the isolated scholar, but the activating principle of every existent social and natural form.<sup>32</sup> It would seem therefore that

---

<sup>31</sup> Korsch, in fact recognizes as much, for as he puts it: "The greatest thinker produced by bourgeois society in its revolutionary period regarded a 'revolution in the form of thought' as an objective component of the total social process of a real revolution." (*Marxism and Philosophy*, p.39.)

<sup>32</sup> As Adorno puts it: "... thought is always accompanied by the moment of violent

on the basis of what Korsch has to say about Hegel, no easy distinction can be drawn between idealism as philosophical contemplation and materialism as world transforming *praxis*.

Indeed, the weakness in Korsch's account of Hegel becomes even more evident if we consider what he has to say concerning the guiding principle of Idealism, namely that the purpose of philosophy is to produce for consciousness a recognition of the *rationality* of the world. Although Korsch is aware of this aspect of Hegel's thought, he offers no substantial analysis of the concept of Reason (*Vernunft*) nor indeed of the closely related concepts of Freedom and Necessity. Indeed, it can be said that despite Korsch's stated intention of discovering the real relation between Marxism and Idealist philosophy, his essay is remarkably light on references to the specific substance of Hegel's thought.<sup>33</sup> Now this failure to adequately determine the theoretical content of the idealist tradition seriously undermines Korsch's argument, because it leaves the supersession thesis without any determinate meaning. In this respect, as we shall see, the Frankfurt School's attempt to address this same question is markedly superior. In contrast to Korsch's somewhat superficial characterisation of Idealism, the work of the early critical theorists is informed by the clear understanding that if it is to be argued that materialism in some sense preserves Hegel's thought, then something must be said about the relation of the latter to Idealism's fundamental conceptual trilogy of Reason, Freedom and Necessity. Until this obligation has

---

exertion - a reflection of the dire necessities of life - that characterises labour; the strains and toils of the concept are not metaphorical." ('Aspects of Hegel's Thought' in *Hegel: Three Studies*, p.21.)

<sup>33</sup> In *Marxism and Philosophy*, the majority of the textual references to Hegel consist of passages from the *Philosophy of Right*; there are no substantial references to either the *Logic* or the *Phenomenology*.

been discharged, the notion that Marx's materialism represents the triumphant sublation of idealist philosophy is no more than a provocative conjecture.

Bearing this in mind, let us see if something of worth can nonetheless be extracted from Korsch's response to the second question associated with the thesis of supersession, the question of *how* precisely Marx's thought constitutes the determinate negation of the idealist tradition. Now in addressing this question Korsch is again seeking to oppose the scientific Marxism of the Second International, and in particular the sharp distinction it made between the philosophical work of the young Marx and his later "scientific" theory of history and society.<sup>34</sup> On this account *Capital*, as a work of political economy, represents the transition from the philosophical critique of society to a purely scientific account of the workings of a capitalist economy. In consequence, those who accepted this interpretation were inclined to view the relation between Marxism and philosophy as being wholly negative; inasmuch as the later Marx *abandons* philosophy in favour of a science of political economy. Indeed, for the Second International theorists, Marxism does not so much sublimate the philosophical tradition as simply negate it.

Clearly this kind of transition, a transition which seems to produce difference without identity, is not the kind that would be acceptable to any thinker schooled in Hegel's dialectic. Thus for Korsch, as for the later Frankfurt School, this account of the relation between Idealism and Marx's *Capital* needs to be rejected. This follows from the fact that the relation between these two moments of thought is one of determinate rather than outright negation: in Hegel's formula the latter is the "the negation or opposite" of the

---

<sup>34</sup> See Colletti's introduction to *Marx: Early Writings* for a discussion of the reception of Marx's writings amongst theorists of the Second International.

former but “therefore contains it, but also something more, and is the unity of itself and its opposite.” What this means with respect to Marx is that it must be possible to construe his critique of political economy as in some way embodying or containing its supposed opposite, namely Hegel’s idealist social theory. Arguably, this idea lies behind Korsch’s observation that Marx and Engels in their later work “far from neglecting the subject [philosophy], ... actually developed their critique of it in a more profound and radical direction.”<sup>35</sup> Korsch justifies this remark by appealing to the fact that Marx and Engels’ post-1848 work “includes not only a critique of the material relations of production of the capitalist epoch but also of its specific forms of social consciousness.”<sup>36</sup> Now as we have seen Korsch, following Hegel, regards philosophy as a form of social consciousness and therefore as part of the subject matter of Marx’s political economy. In other words, Marx’s later work is “a critique of the *whole* of bourgeois society and so of *all* of its forms of consciousness.”<sup>37</sup> Thus the holistic intent of Marx’s thought entails that his political economy is not confined to the realm of the economic but is rather a critique of the totality of consciousness and social being, which by definition includes the philosophical consciousness.

Obviously, this approach raises a number of questions, not the least of which is that at first glance Marx’s *Capital* contains hardly any discussion of consciousness, much less any form of philosophical consciousness. On the contrary it appears to be an elaborate and lengthy treatise on what might be called the logic of the value-form. In consequence many readers

---

<sup>35</sup> *Marxism and Philosophy*, p.75.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

of Marx have responded to this text by understanding *Capital* as primarily a work of political economy, as a radical continuation, albeit highly critical, of the tradition inaugurated by Smith, Mill and Ricardo.<sup>38</sup> Korsch, however, rejects this view, arguing that the world cannot be understood by its partition into a series of independent theoretical domains, the economic, social, political and so forth.<sup>39</sup> Hence, although *Capital* is a critique of political economy it is not merely a criticism of a particular set of economic theories but is rather a critique of the *whole* of bourgeois society, of its thought as well as its material base. This argument can be related to Korsch's view of the relation between consciousness and social being, and in particular to the relation between classical political economy and the exchange society of which it is the expression. As Korsch puts it: "Bourgeois economics belongs with the material relations of productions to bourgeois society as a totality."<sup>40</sup> By this he means to say that the economic theory characteristic of the newly emergent bourgeois society of the nineteenth century represents the self understanding of that society: like Marx's own theory it serves as the systematic, scientific expression of the consciousness of a particular social class. The problem with this is that once again Korsch's discussion remains at an unacceptable level of abstraction. Even if we accept his assurance that forms of consciousness, such as philosophy, express the "spiritual structure of bourgeois society", it is by no means obvious how these forms are to be related to the subject matter of *Capital*. Hence the suspicion must arise that in this case abstraction is serving no other purpose than to obscure the real difficulty of applying the general principle to the specific case. In the absence of any attempt to relate the central concepts of

---

<sup>38</sup> See, for instance, Joan Robinson's *Economic Philosophy*, p.29-47.

<sup>39</sup> This anticipates Horkheimer's conception of materialism as a multi-disciplinary activity. See Chapter 4 for a discussion of the topic.

<sup>40</sup> *Marxism and Philosophy*, p.84.

*Capital* - the commodity form, use and exchange value, labour and capital - to a critique of the philosophical tradition we must judge that Korsch's supersession thesis remains unsubstantiated as well indeterminate from the point of view of meaning. Nevertheless his notion that the key to understanding the relation between the thought of Hegel and that of Marx consists in the application of the dialectical category of sublation to that relation is an insight worth preserving. Indeed, in the second half of this chapter I shall argue that the formation of critical theory should be understood as an attempt to resolve some of these problems, and thus to make good on Korsch's promise to recover the philosophical significance of Marx's thought.

### *From Korsch to Critical Theory*

In a lecture given at Frankfurt University in 1931, Horkheimer sought to address the question of how philosophy, and more particularly post-Hegelian social philosophy, should relate itself to the scientific study of society.<sup>41</sup> As we shall see, the general outline of his answer owes a great deal to Korsch's argument that Marx's theory of history and society represents the supersession of Hegel's idealist philosophy. Indeed, it will be argued that Horkheimer provides a more articulated exposition of the supersession thesis than that which can be found in the pages of *Marxism and Philosophy*. Thus Horkheimer, like Korsch, maintains that after Marx the traditional philosophical enterprise, as exemplified and indeed culminating in the work of Hegel, is no longer tenable: philosophy must give

---

<sup>41</sup> The text of this lecture is reprinted as the 'The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of Institute for Social Research' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*. It was presented on the occasion of Horkheimer's appointment as the director of the Institute for Social Research, and represents his personal vision of the future direction of the Institute.



way to the construction of a scientifically adequate theory of the social life process. This proposal, however, despite what some critics have said should not be understood as a turn towards conventional scientism, to the belief that positive science can simply replace philosophy. For the kind of theory he has in mind, through its commitment to the *interests* of the subject, departs radically from the methodological norms characteristic of the natural sciences; this in virtue of the fact that a concern with human interest leads inevitably towards the notion of a socio-political *praxis* directed towards the realisation of that interest. This transition from philosophical contemplation to the practical struggle for human emancipation is mediated by a social theory which transcends the traditional dichotomy between fact and value, descriptive and normative judgements; and insofar as the theory succeeds in this aim it constitutes itself as a “practical-critical” body of knowledge. Unlike Korsch, however, Horkheimer is not content with an abstract description of this process but instead seeks to outline a concrete program of research by means of which such a body of knowledge might be brought into being. For Horkheimer, materialism needs to move beyond the merely programmatic recognition of a possibility, the possibility of transforming philosophy by means of social theory, and demonstrate in a concrete fashion how Marx’s categories enable the central questions of Idealism to be reconstructed as questions about the nature of society.

Before, however, getting into the detail of Horkheimer’s discussion, one other general observation concerning his account of the supersession thesis should be made. In contrast to Engels’ view that materialism preserves the *method* but not the *content* of Idealism, Horkheimer argues that the former doctrine is *immanent* to the idealist tradition itself.<sup>42</sup> In

---

<sup>42</sup> There is a vague recognition of this in Korsch who observes that: “Hegel said that the theoretical consciousness of an individual could not ‘leap over’ his own epoch.

other words, the transition from a philosophy of consciousness to a theory of social being, a transition characteristic of materialist thinking, is not external to Hegel's thought but in fact follows from the very logic of objective Idealism. Here the concepts of containment and determinate negation come into play: Marx's critique of Hegel is not a simple negation but represents the following through of his philosophy to the point where its intention conflicts with the world it seeks to legitimate. Thus Marx takes seriously Hegel's notion that society is the expressive medium of human subjectivity, that the social being of the subject is not a contingent property but rather the necessary means by which the subject realises itself. Marx differs from his idealist mentor, however, by rejecting the thesis that bourgeois society, even one with a State apparatus dedicated to the realisation of an ethical social life, could ever constitute an adequate basis for this project of human self-realisation. Nevertheless, for Marx as for Horkheimer, the idealist celebration of society represents an important theoretical achievement, insofar as it gives expression, albeit at the highest level of abstraction, to the very claim that society makes on its own behalf that society exists for the benefit of its members. In other words Marx is responding as much to the failure of the world as to the errors of the Hegelian system. As Adorno was later to remark : "If one does not want to miss Hegel with one's very first words, one must confront, however inadequately, the claim his philosophy makes to truth, rather than merely discussing his philosophy from above, and thereby from below."<sup>43</sup>

To understand the claim to truth made by Hegel's philosophy, it is necessary to recall that the central philosophical problem of the German Idealist tradition was the question of the

---

Nevertheless he inserted the world into philosophy far more than he did philosophy into the world." (*Marxism and Philosophy*, p.81.)

<sup>43</sup> 'Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy' in *Hegel: Three Studies*, p.2.

relation between consciousness and the external world, between the subject of experience and its object. Now Hegel, under the influence of Kant's first critique but in sharp disagreement with the program of transcendental Idealism, set himself the task of overcoming the apparently unbridgeable gulf separating the realm of *phenomena* from the *noumenal* realm of the Kantian *ding-an-sich*. As Hegel explains the goal of speculative thought "is not abstract but a living concrete unity in virtue of the fact that the opposition ... between a self-determined entity, a subject and a second such entity, an object is known to be overcome."<sup>44</sup> This should not be interpreted as the simple reduction of either the subject or the object to its other, but rather as the study of the forms of thought (or cultures) - philosophical, religious, scientific, aesthetic, political, ethical - by means of which the subject becomes aware that what is external to consciousness, namely nature and society, is nothing other than the manifestation of thought.<sup>45</sup> Now whilst the Frankfurt School were unable to accept this ultimate identification of subject and object they recognised the importance of Hegel's argument that social being is not the consequence of an autonomous, fully-developed self-consciousness but rather its essential condition.<sup>46</sup>

Acknowledging this insight, Horkheimer writes:

---

<sup>44</sup> *Science of Logic*, p.60.

<sup>45</sup> Marcuse correctly emphasises the existential aspect of these forms: "A social or political institution, a work of art, a religion and a philosophical system operate as part and parcel of man's own being, products of a rational subject that continues to *live in them*." (*Reason and Revolution*, p.56)

<sup>46</sup> Describing the influence of Hegel upon the Frankfurt School, Horkheimer declares that "he is the philosopher to whom we are most indebted in many respects." ('The Social Function of Philosophy' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p.270.) On another occasion he describes his position as "materialism schooled in Hegel's logic". ('The Rationalism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p.234.) See also Marcuse's 'Philosophy and Critical Theory' in *Negations*, and Adorno's 'Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy' in *Hegel: Three Studies* for a discussion of the influence of Hegel upon critical theory

The medium of philosophy remains that of self-consciousness. But Hegel liberated this self-consciousness from the fetters of introspection and shifted the question of our essence - the question of the autonomous culture-creating subject - to the *work of history*, in which the subject gives itself *objective form*.<sup>47</sup> (Italics mine)

As this passage describes it, Hegel's achievement is to shift philosophical concern away from the introspective investigation of consciousness, taking it instead towards the study of historically determinate forms of life. Marcuse summarises this succinctly by observing that: "Hegel links the epistemological process of self-consciousness (from sense certainty to reason) with the *historical process* of mankind from bondage to freedom."<sup>48</sup> (Italics mine) Unfortunately from the point of view of the Frankfurt School, Hegel's Idealism also involved the belief that this process of self-realisation is essentially "intellectual in nature" and has as its necessary result "the self-comprehending and thus infinite Idea."<sup>49</sup> This of course entails that the historical life of the world is not in the final analysis the life of empirical (and suffering) individuals but rather of an idealist meta-subject, Hegel's Logical Idea, realising itself by means of embodiment in the finite human subject. History is in consequence spiritualised and thereby acquires a purposive character: it becomes a process determined by a final cause, the realisation of Absolute Knowledge.

---

<sup>47</sup> Cf. 'The Present Situation of Social Philosophy' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p.2. For the relation between the individual and the social totality see also Horkheimer's 1957 essay 'The Concept of Man' in *The Critique of Instrumental Reason*, pp.9-10.

<sup>48</sup> Marcuse, H., *Reason and Revolution*, p.95.

<sup>49</sup> Horkheimer, H., 'The Rationalism Dispute in Contemporary Materialism' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p.244.

Clearly as materialists, Horkheimer and his colleagues could not accept this reconstruction of the historical process; in particular they rejected the idea that the truth of the world is ultimately the activity of an abstract subjectivity realising itself in and through the life activity of real historical subjects. Nevertheless, despite Hegel's idealistic teleology, the Frankfurt School held to the belief that his thought could be utilised by materialism in virtue of the fact that it refuses to address the question of consciousness in a purely *a priori* fashion, and seeks instead to explore the social content of subjectivity as it unfolds in world history.<sup>50</sup> Therefore, Horkheimer argued, progress in both philosophy and social theory depends upon there being "a continuous dialectical penetration and development of philosophical theory and specialised scientific practice".<sup>51</sup> Developing this idea, he explains that the investigation of the relation between "the economic life of society, the psychical development of individuals, and the changes in the realm of culture" effectively constitutes "a reformulation ... of the old question concerning the connection of particular existence and universal Reason, of reality and Idea, of life and Spirit."<sup>52</sup> In other words, the turn towards social theory is not the simple negation of philosophy, but rather the means of realising at least *some* of the original goals of the earlier idealist project.<sup>53</sup> Fundamentally,

---

<sup>50</sup> Compare this with Marx's program for the transcendence of philosophy: "Where speculation ends - in real life - real, positive *science*, the representation of the practical activity and the practical process of development of men, begins. Phrase-making about consciousness ceases, and real knowledge has to take its place. When reality is depicted, philosophy as an *independent activity* loses its *medium of existence*." ( *The German Ideology*, p.43.)

<sup>51</sup> 'The Present Situation of Social Philosophy', in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p.9.

<sup>52</sup> Op.cit., pp.11-12.

<sup>53</sup> It is arguable whether the Frankfurt project is an adequate response to Idealism in its entirety. For instance, it might be said that Horkheimer's proposal has nothing to

Horkheimer's philosophically oriented program of interdisciplinary social research is a variant of the Korschian sublation thesis: where German Idealism recasts the fundamental philosophical problems as problems of social philosophy, Horkheimer takes one step further, and recasts social philosophy as social science. Commenting upon this move, Habermas says that the primary intention is to "continue philosophy by other means, namely, the social sciences" and that in consequence this version of materialism carries with it "a connotation critical of philosophy".<sup>54</sup> In effect, there is the promise of a form of "post-metaphysical thinking", a supersession by means of Marx's materialism, of the philosophical tradition that culminated in Hegel's idealist system.<sup>55</sup> This comment by Habermas raises two obviously important questions. First what are the *grounds* for Horkheimer's belief that philosophy, if it is to continue, can only do so by means of a post-metaphysical scientific theory of society? Second what is the precise *nature* of this kind of theory? More particularly what is the relation between Horkheimer's critical theory of society and the traditional empirical sciences? Are these two enterprises completely different in kind, or does critical theory recognise, at least to some extent, the validity of the cognitive norms characteristic of the traditional sciences? In this chapter I shall concentrate on providing an answer to the first of these questions; the latter question will in one way or another form the subject matter of the subsequent chapters of this thesis.

---

say concerning the epistemological and metaphysical elements in the work of Kant and Hegel. Against this one might pursue the Lukács' argument that many philosophical problems, for example the problem of the *ding-an-sich*, are displaced representations of problems arising in the world of social being. See Lukacs' *History and Class Consciousness*, pp.110-149. One might also consider Adorno's argument that philosophical theories such as determinism or free will are distorted expressions of the individual's situation in a repressive society. (*Negative Dialectics*, pp.264-265)

<sup>54</sup> 'Remarks on the Development of Horkheimer's Work', in *On Max Horkheimer: New Perspectives*, p.50.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

To discover what lay behind Horkheimer's decision to continue philosophy *via* a theory of society we need to consider why he believed that consciousness must be regarded as an *inherently* social phenomenon; in effect why he rejected Kant's model of the autarchic ego in favour of Hegel's socially situated account of subjectivity and consciousness.<sup>56</sup> Indeed, because this question constitutes the fundamental problematic of Idealism, it is reasonable to suppose that to clarify this latter thesis is to clarify the idea that philosophy can be *sublated* by means of a certain kind of social theory. The close connection between these two ideas can be illustrated by examining Horkheimer's approach to the thought of Kant as compared to that of Hegel. Thus concerning the former, we find the original author of the idealist project being charged with the belief that the source of the constitutive principles of the socio-cultural sphere reside in the "closed unity of the rational subject". Ethics, for instance, is the expression of an autonomous will recognising no authority other than that of reason.<sup>57</sup> Against this, Horkheimer argues that Hegel's achievement was to recognise that the subject is necessarily located in "overarching structures of being ... which could only be discovered in the *social* totality."<sup>58</sup> (Italics mine) In articles published later in the *Zeitschrift*, he returns to this theme, observing for example that "neither pure thought, nor abstraction in the sense of the *philosophy of consciousness* ... is capable of creating a

---

<sup>56</sup> Adorno is making much the same point when he criticises Husserl for unconsciously reverting to "the old idealist principle that the subjective data of our consciousness are the ultimate source of all knowledge, and that therefore any fundamental philosophical analysis must be an analysis of consciousness." See 'Husserl and the Problem of Idealism' in *The Journal of Philosophy*, Vol XXXVII, No.1, January, 1940, p.18.

<sup>57</sup> 'The Present Situation of Social Philosophy', in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p.2.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

connection between the individual and the permanent structure of being."<sup>59</sup> (Italics mine) For Horkheimer, the relation between thought and its object can only be discovered in "the historical situation [of the individual] and the theoretical tasks created by it".<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, as a materialist, he believed that the historically specific situation of the individual was to be understood, first and foremost, in terms of the individual's relation to the productive life of society. As Horkheimer puts it: "Consciousness requires clarity concerning the historical context in which it evolves and the praxis within which it emerges, takes effect, and is changed."<sup>61</sup> This, of course, need not entail that consciousness is simply the causally determined product of its historical situation: for Horkheimer, as for other members of the Frankfurt School, the concept of praxis guarantees that consciousness has the potential to become the producer of its own material context. What the above statement does entail, however, is that philosophy, in order to make progress, must abandon the Kantian inspired concern with a socially-isolated consciousness, that is with the form and content of individual experience, in favour of an investigation into the relation between subjectivity and our material social being.

To understand this argument something more needs to be said concerning the way in which Horkheimer and his Institute colleagues interpreted Hegel's thought. Their reading is founded upon the assumption that there is an inherent tension within Hegel's system of

---

<sup>59</sup> 'The Rationalism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p.223.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> 'Remarks on Philosophical Anthropology' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p.159. See also 'History and Psychology' (pp.119-120), where Horkheimer explains that the praxis upon which consciousness depends is the material life process by means of which society produces and reproduces itself.



Idealism between on the one hand the productive, world-constituting nature of thought and on the other the dependence of Spirit upon material embodiment. This tension, as we shall see, will prove fatal to the project of Absolute Knowledge, founded as it is upon an extravagant imperialism of the mind. Returning, however, to the topic presently under discussion, we note that the Frankfurt reading of Hegel credits him with the view that the subject is not an ahistorical given but is formed in and through its historically concrete relationship with other subjects and objects. Commenting upon this proto-materialist element in Hegel's thought, Horkheimer writes:

According to [Marx], historically acting human beings are never comprehensible simply on the basis of their internal selves, whether of their nature, or of some ground of Being to be discovered in themselves. Rather, human beings are bound up in historical formations with dynamics of their own. In *methodological* terms, Marx here follows Hegel.<sup>62</sup> (Italics mine)

However, whilst Hegel understands the historical process in terms of the "logic of Absolute Spirit", Marx, according to Horkheimer, derives his account from "consideration of human beings living under definite conditions and sustaining themselves with the aid of specific tools."<sup>63</sup> Unfortunately at this point Horkheimer breaks off the argument, leaving the question of consciousness and its material context still very much in the air. This may be because he failed to understand the complexity of the very thesis he is defending, and simply assumed that the relation between thought and social being, once it has been

---

<sup>62</sup> 'History and Psychology' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p116.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

pointed out, is either wholly transparent or requires little in the way of elucidation. It is perhaps more likely, however, that it was because Horkheimer believed that Hegel and Marx had already definitively established the socio-historical nature of consciousness, and that the theoretical priority was therefore to build upon this thesis. This would mean developing in detail the various consequences of this idea for both philosophy as well as social theory.

But whatever the reason, the fact must be faced that in this respect at least Horkheimer fails to adequately secure the foundations of his program for the social sciences. Fortunately we can remedy the omission by turning to Marcuse's contemporaneous discussion of the Marxian concept of labour and its relation to society. Whilst this discussion is by no means definitive it provides enough material to begin to sketch out the kind of argument required by Horkheimer's program of pursuing philosophy by means of a theory of society. Thus Marcuse, commenting upon the early Marx's theory of labour, argues that his account clearly bears the imprint of Hegel's "ontological concept of labour" as expounded in the *Phenomenology*.<sup>64</sup> According to Marcuse this concept is centred around the idea that:

... labour is 'man's act of self-creation', i.e. the activity through and in which man really first becomes what he is by his nature as man. He does this in such a way that this becoming and being are there *for himself*, so that he can know and 'regard' himself as what he is (man's 'becoming-for-himself'). Labour is a knowing and conscious activity: in his labour man relates to himself and to the object of his

---

<sup>64</sup> 'The Foundations of Historical Materialism' in *Studies in Critical Philosophy*, p.13.

labour ... Man can only realise his essence if he realises it as something objective, by using his 'essential powers' to produce an 'external', 'material', objective world. It is in his work in this world (in the broadest sense) that he is real and effective.<sup>65</sup>

In effect Hegel's view of self-consciousness in the *Phenomenology* is that of a subject positing itself, bringing itself into being, through its status as a world transforming *agent*: only through activity can the subject define *who* or *what* it is, and without this objective moment the subject lacks determinacy.<sup>66</sup> Thus Hegel in his discussion of physiognomy and phrenology declares that "the individual human *is* what the *deed is*", and that "it is the deed alone that must be affirmed as his *genuine being*".<sup>67</sup> By acting upon the world, by transforming it through labour, the subject achieves an external expression of itself; this is what Hegel means when he talks of "the mediation of its [i.e. Substance as Subject] self-othering with itself."<sup>68</sup> Just as thought requires the medium of language to secure determinate expression, so the subject requires an objective realm in order to realise itself. Materialism learns this lesson, discards the philosopher's abstract conception of subjectivity and concerns itself, as Hegel does, with the concrete historical process, the dialectic of Desire and Labour, through which the subject brings itself into being. Summarising this principle of externalisation Marcuse writes:

---

<sup>65</sup> Op.cit., pp.13-14. This passage should be compared with Hegel's discussion of property in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §§ 41-71.

<sup>66</sup> *Reason and Revolution*, pp. 114-120. See also Richard Norman's *Hegel's Phenomenology: A Philosophical Introduction*, p.65.

<sup>67</sup> *Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 322.

<sup>68</sup> Op.cit., §18.

The opposition between subject and object that determined the forms of mind hitherto described [in the *Phenomenology*] has now disappeared. The object, shaped and cultivated by human labour, is in reality the objectification of a self-conscious subject.<sup>69</sup>

If this principle is granted, the transition from labour to society is but a short step. For, according to Hegel, labour is not the activity of an isolated individual seeking to satisfy instinctual needs but is an essentially social phenomenon.<sup>70</sup> Although animals engage in a range of activities that produce and reproduce their species, this activity is instinctive rather than intentional: their needs are satisfied through a repetitive and naturally-determined cycle of consumption. Human labour, by contrast, escapes this cycle by virtue of its *creative* character: human beings through intentional activity do not simply respond to natural impulses but fashion nature according to their own design.<sup>71</sup> They do this, according to Hegel, in two ways: first, the category of need undergoes *social* development and second, the labour by which specific needs are satisfied becomes embedded in a social division of labour. The social nature of production thus entails that human activity, unlike natural behavioural patterns, is subject to historical development, and for the materialist this narrative is the real history of the subject. However, the creativity characteristic of social production demands a reflective capacity, requiring that the subject is capable of

---

<sup>69</sup> *Reason and Revolution*, p. 117.

<sup>70</sup> *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §351. See also *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, especially the discussion of the "System of Needs" in §189-208.

<sup>71</sup> For a discussion of the Hegelian concept of labour see Shlomo Avineri's *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*, pp. 87-98.

consciously imposing their will upon the world. But this is only possible within a social context; for, at the very least it supposes a symbolic order by means of which an intention might be formulated and thereby secure recognition both from the self and others. Furthermore, in order to progress beyond the most primitive levels of productive activity, individuals must learn to produce in a co-operative fashion: labour must become socialised labour. Now as Marx argues, conscious co-operation requires language, for "language is practical, real consciousness": it is the means by which the self relates to itself and to other selves.<sup>72</sup> This prompts Marcuse to observe that:

The sphere of objects in which labour is performed is precisely the sphere of common life activity: in and through the objects of labour, men are shown one another in their reality. The original forms of communication, the essential relationship of men to one another, were expressed in the common use, possession, desire, need and enjoyment, etc. of the objective world. All labour is labour with and for and against others, so that in it men first mutually reveal themselves for what they really are.<sup>73</sup>

In short, if self-consciousness does indeed develop in and through the process of labour, it can only do so insofar as that activity becomes social activity, thereby entailing that the individual's sense of self cannot be derived internally but depends upon the social life of the species. This insight, which we owe to Hegel, is at the centre of the Frankfurt School's

---

<sup>72</sup> *The German Ideology*, p.49.

<sup>73</sup> 'The Foundations of Historical Materialism' in *Studies in Critical Philosophy*, p.24.

materialist restatement of the program of the *Phenomenology*.<sup>74</sup> Furthermore it is the basis of their belief that the traditional philosophical enquiry into a free and rational form of life can no longer be undertaken as an *a priori* exercise but must be pursued by means of a scientific study of existing social conditions.

However, whilst acknowledging the fact that Hegel's influence runs deep amongst the Frankfurt Marxists, it is at the same time essential to emphasise that critical theory transcends Idealism in a number of respects. Thus at the most general level it refuses to posit an identity, however mediated, between subject and object; instead, as Horkheimer comments: "Materialism ... maintains the irreducible tension between concept and object and thus has a critical weapon of defence against belief in the infinity of mind."<sup>75</sup> This remark is directed against the absolutism of the Hegelian subject, against the idea that the world is the result of the subject's activity and therefore ultimately identical with thought. For despite everything that Hegel says concerning the necessity of the subject to establish itself by means of its other, the object, his idealist dialectic leads inevitably to the view that the initial duality of subject and object can be overcome within a higher unity of thought and being, and that within this unity difference gives way to identity. Describing this project Hegel writes:

... it is premised that the Idea turns out to be thought which is completely identical

---

<sup>74</sup> Commenting upon the contradictory nature of Hegel's thought Adorno writes: "The Hegel of the *Phenomenology*, in whom the consciousness of spirit as living activity and its identity with the real social subject was less atrophied than in the later Hegel, recognised the spontaneous spirit as labour, if not in theory at least in his language." ('Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy' in *Hegel: Three Studies*, p.21.)

<sup>75</sup> 'Materialism and Metaphysics' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p.28.

with itself, and not identical simply in the abstract, but also in its action of setting itself over against itself, so as to gain a being of its own, and yet of being in full possession of itself while it is in its other.<sup>76</sup>

The identity that Hegel postulates is, of course, not the bare logical idea of identity ( $A=A$ ), the *a priori* judgement that a thing is identical with itself, but an *a posteriori* judgement made possible by reflection upon the history of the world. In other words, identity is a *result* rather than a given metaphysical truth: the subject, through world-historic activity, produces an adequate external expression of itself and thereby becomes identical with what it is. As a materialist, however, Horkheimer rejected this idealist conclusion; nevertheless he argued that the means for overcoming this particular imperialism of Spirit can be found in Hegel's own system. Thus commenting upon the Hegelian dialectic Horkheimer observes that:

Hegel is an idealist in that he presents his system as absolute, yet he created the conceptual tool for overcoming such a distorted idea. The correct application of the method does not mean simply that the Hegelian system or any of the views prevailing today are to be handled precisely as Hegel handled his predecessors. Rather, they all lose their character of being steps towards the absolute, which earlier doctrines still have in Hegel because of his belief that the dialectic was reaching its goal in him.<sup>77</sup>

---

<sup>76</sup> *Hegel's Logic*, §18.

<sup>77</sup> 'Materialism and Metaphysics' in *Critical Theory*, p.32.

In opposition to the Hegelian absolutism of Mind, materialism teaches that all knowledge, including itself, is contextually limited, that what we know about nature as well as society is conditioned by history. Thus natural science does not confront a ready-made, fixed external order of being but a realm of experience mediated through the activity of the subject. This realm is as much a function of what we do as it is a function of the way the world is, for it is determined by a diverse multiplicity of factors, ranging from techniques and instruments of observation through to mathematical methods and theoretic concepts.<sup>78</sup> Indeed it can be said that in the absence of specific scientific theories certain experiences would not even be possible, for the descriptions provided by the theory are internal to the experiences themselves. As Kant suggested long ago, experience cannot be understood merely as the passive sensory registration of the world upon the subject but must instead be thought of as the result of the understanding bringing concepts to bear upon the manifold of sensation. The materialist agrees with this, adding only that activity must be understood in a concrete historical sense rather than the transcendental sense of that term provided in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*. What this suggests is that, *contra* Hegel, there is no final irrevocable truth concerning the world, for all of our knowledge is subject to the limitation of its socio-historic context. As Horkheimer puts it:

When Feuerbach, Marx and Engels freed the dialectic from its idealist form, materialism achieved an awareness of the ever-changing but irreducible tension between its own teaching and reality, and acquired in the process its own

---

<sup>78</sup> As one philosopher of science has observed: "... the most successful and most accurate physical theory of all time, quantum mechanics, has no 'realistic interpretation' that is acceptable to physicists. It is understood as a description of the world *as experienced by observers*; it does not even pretend to the kind of Absoluteness the metaphysician aims at ..." See Hilary Putnam's article 'Why there isn't a ready made world' in *Synthese*, 51, 1982, p.164.



conception of knowledge ... materialism, unlike Idealism always understands thinking to be the thinking of particular men within a particular period of time. It challenges every claim to the autonomy of thought.<sup>79</sup>

Thought, therefore, cannot escape the historical context of its production and in consequence of the ever changing nature of that context no absolutist conception of knowledge can be sustained. This principle insofar as it applies to the natural as well as the human sciences is entirely general. Horkheimer, however, has another more specific argument against Hegelian identity thinking and the associated project of Absolute Knowledge. In the case of society, Hegel supposes that there is an identity between subject and object because he regards social reality as an expressive order, or medium of subjectivity.<sup>80</sup> Horkheimer, in contrast, maintains that there is no such identity: a society whose productive life is founded upon the commodity form cannot be understood in terms of subjective agency, but must, as Marx argues, be regarded as a realm of objectivity standing over and against its creators. As Horkheimer argues: "Because the human productive process lacks any true organisation or control ... the whole of social life, which in the end depends upon economic factors, is withdrawn from human will. It confronts individuals as an alien power of fate, as nature."<sup>81</sup> Hence under the commodity form social labour is not directed consciously by society but rather by the operation of the law of value.

---

<sup>79</sup> 'Materialism and Metaphysics' in *Critical Theory*, p.32

<sup>80</sup> Although I would defend this formulation it should be appreciated that in Hegel the distinction between subjective and objective is difficult to make in absolute terms. To appreciate the problem one need only consider that the *Philosophy of Right* is the study of Objective Spirit, that is, subjectivity made objective by means of inter-subjective norms actualised in a series of social institutions.

<sup>81</sup> 'Critical and Traditional Theory' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p.??

This means that the productive life of humanity, appearances notwithstanding, stands outside of human decision, and in consequence of this autonomy Hegel's notion of society as a medium of subjectivity remains unrealised.<sup>82</sup> In other words, the total productive life of the subject is not an action on the part of the subject but an external objectivity standing over and against the self. This apparently abstract thought finds confirmation, on a daily basis, in the way in which capitalist society is continuously confronted by what might be called a logic of unintended consequence. For example, no single individual, or indeed group of individuals, ever actually wills a crisis of over-production; nevertheless such a crisis can be nothing other than the consequence of the aggregate of decisions on the part of individual producers and consumers. Thus the result of social activity is very often a result which is as unintended as it is undesired. We act, we produce our lives and yet paradoxically fail to produce ourselves: the totality of human labour results in an inhuman totality governed by laws that are apparently natural as well as eternal. Indeed far from recognising ourselves through our labour, we experience the world we produce as an alien and alienating objectivity. Thus for Horkheimer, Idealism is as contradictory as the society of which it is the theoretical expression: its conception of the world as the product of subjectivity is both true and false. True, insofar as it focuses upon the social and active nature of subjectivity; false in that it postulates a non-existent identity between subject and object. This tension is in fact the result of the dual nature of Hegel's project: it can be seen either as a classical metaphysical system or as a socio-philosophical thesis. Arguably it is

---

<sup>82</sup> Scott Meikle is perhaps thinking of something similar when he observes that: "Marx's *Capital* ... is in fact our greatest work of self-understanding. The condition for the generalisation of that understanding to the whole of humanity, however, is the final and complete demise of the value form. Only when human labour is socially supplied, not as concealed beneath a form, but directly as social labour, as free conscious co-operative endeavour, will men and women really understand themselves and their lives." (*Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx*, p.100).

the latter which is central to the thought of the Frankfurt School whilst the former, as I have argued in my discussion of Engels' scientific materialism, paradoxically plays an important role in the meta-theory of orthodox Marxism.

In this chapter, I have sought to relate Horkheimer's general account of social theory to the Korsch-Lukács thesis that Marxism represents the supersession of the idealist philosophical tradition, that Marx's critical theory of society undermines as well as preserves the content of Hegel's thought. It does this, I have argued, in virtue of the fact that materialism represents the *immanent development* of Idealism's own central problematic: the dialectic of subject and object. Consequently, and as Horkheimer argues, there is a need to move from philosophy to social theory, to move from a concern with the structure of the individual consciousness to an enquiry into the social context of human activity. In making this transition, the Frankfurt School unlike Korsch, were aware of the need to relate this movement to the central categories of Marx's political economy. For these thinkers the Marxian notion of *labour*, and in particular the idea of social labour, provides the bridge between classical philosophy and Marxism: by seeking to understand subjectivity in terms of its real activity in the world, materialism preserves through the medium of social theory the active world-constituting subject of Kant and Hegel.<sup>83</sup> Furthermore, as we shall see in subsequent chapters, the Frankfurt critique of the world thus produced will return us to yet

---

<sup>83</sup> As we shall see in the next chapter, the notion of labour, and in particular *bodily* labour, will turn out to be central to Adorno's materialist critique of the Hegelian subject-object totality. Thus in a caustic comment upon the pretensions of idealism he writes: "Ever since mental and physical labour were separated in the sign of the dominant mind, the sign of justified privilege, the separated mind has been obliged, with the exaggeration due to bad conscience, to vindicate the very claim to dominate which it derives from the thesis that it is primary and original - and to make every effort to forget the source of its claim, lest the claim lapse." (*Negative Dialectics*, p.177)

another central theme of Idealism, namely the relation between Reason and human action. This in turn will take the discussion to the very heart of the Frankfurt enterprise, to the idea that an adequate theory of society is an exercise in self-understanding rather than the description of objective processes. In fact I shall argue that by returning to the category of Reason in the sense of constructing a theory of human interest, the critical theorists transcend the distinction between *is* and *ought*, between fact and value and in so doing make perhaps their most significant contribution to philosophy as well as social theory.

#### Chapter 4. Multi-Disciplinary Materialism : Empiricism or Dialectics?

The argument of the previous chapter has been largely directed towards explaining why *in general* Horkheimer believed that the logic of Hegel's Idealism leads philosophy towards a theory of society. By contrast, this chapter as well as the next will be devoted to a discussion of the *precise* nature of such a theory. In dealing with this latter question, we will need to confront some of the ambiguity that arguably surrounds Horkheimer's original formulation of the Institute's project. On the one hand his argument can be taken as a proposal to simply *eliminate* social philosophy in favour of empirical scientific enquiry. In this case the sublation thesis appears to be entirely superfluous: philosophy, far from being preserved, is abolished altogether. Using the language of Hegel we might say that there is difference but no identity, that this "scientific turn" constitutes the simple rather than the determinate negation of the classical philosophical tradition. Thus, in an apparently scientific formulation of his program, we find Horkheimer arguing that philosophical questions "must themselves become integrated into the *empirical research process*; their answers lie in the advance of objective knowledge, which itself affects the form of the questions."<sup>1</sup> (Italics mine) Given the Frankfurt School's consistent hostility towards positivism, the call for philosophy to re-orient itself towards empirical enquiry looks paradoxically like the positivist demand that philosophy should be replaced by an appropriate union

---

<sup>1</sup> 'The Present Situation of Social Philosophy' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, pp.9-10.

of scientific and meta-scientific theory.<sup>2</sup> This impression is further reinforced when Horkheimer states that the questions posed by the classical tradition must be "integrated" into a process of empirical enquiry and pursued "on the basis of the most precise *scientific* methods ... " as well as being further revised and refined "in the course of ... substantive work".<sup>3</sup> Here there seems to be more than a hint of a positivist end-of-philosophy thesis. Indeed the suggestion appears to be that the task of the social philosopher is in some unspecified fashion to *translate* the traditional philosophical questions concerning Reason, Freedom and Spirit into questions susceptible to the methods of empirical social science. Thus a scientifically transformed philosophy will no longer enquire in a purely *a priori* fashion into the nature of self-consciousness but will instead seek to address this issue by examining the historically evolving relation between the individual, society and nature. Commenting upon this proposal Hauke Brunkhorst writes that:

... Horkheimer has given up the search for a philosophical way out of the crisis of philosophy [in post-Hegelian thought]. Instead his materialism seeks out aporias and does not wish to break out of them at all. Yet Horkheimer does not stop short at deconstructivism. His way out is the needle's eye of social research, through which all philosophy ... must henceforth pass. It is the idea of

---

<sup>2</sup> Compare Horkheimer's proposal with the following remark by Wittgenstein: "The correct method in philosophy would really be the following: to say nothing except what can be said, i.e. propositions of natural science - i.e. something that has nothing to do with philosophy - and then, whenever someone else wanted to say something metaphysical, to demonstrate to him that he had failed to give a meaning to certain signs in his proposition." ( *Tractatus* : 6.53)

<sup>3</sup> 'The Present Situation of Social Philosophy' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p.10.

a social scientific transformation of philosophy.<sup>4</sup>

According to Brunkhorst, then, Horkheimer believed that the crisis in classical philosophy produced by the demise of the Hegelian system could not be resolved from *within* philosophy itself but by making a turn towards the scientific study of social life. As a consequence of this he argues that Horkheimer is an "extreme positivist"<sup>5</sup>, and his anti-philosophy "the overtly aporetic figure of thought of a dialectical positivism."<sup>6</sup> Now if Brunkhorst is correct it would appear that Frankfurt Marxism is founded upon a misguided attempt to combine incompatible modes of thought, to unify speculative philosophy with positivist theory, dialectic with empirical enquiry. Yet as Brunkhorst himself recognises, there are numerous passages in Horkheimer's early writings which cast doubt upon the view that the latter had any kind of sympathy with the empiricist-positivist program. Thus alongside the opposition to traditional metaphysics there is also a desire, in the face of what Horkheimer describes as the "chaotic specialisation" of the individual sciences, to preserve an interest in what is "general" or "essential", to say something about the "degree of reality or ... the value of" the phenomena science observes.<sup>7</sup> This calls to mind a passage from Hegel's *Encyclopaedia Logic* where he argues that philosophy, whilst dependent upon material provided by the various scientific disciplines, has a responsibility to transcend the sphere of experiential

---

<sup>4</sup> Brunkhorst, H., 'Dialectical Positivism of Happiness: Max Horkheimer's Materialist Deconstruction of Philosophy' in *On Max Horkheimer: New Perspectives*, p.68.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Op.cit. p.72.

<sup>7</sup> 'The Present Situation of Social Philosophy' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p.9.

immediacy. As Hegel puts it:

The reception into philosophy of these scientific materials, now that thought has removed their *immediacy* and made them cease to be *mere data*, forms at the same time a development of thought out of itself. Philosophy then owes its development to the empirical sciences.<sup>8</sup> (Italics mine)

Applying this same logic to social philosophy, Horkheimer came to the view that the task of the philosopher is to assist in the construction of a theoretical synthesis of the various social scientific disciplines, which would transcend the limitations of a narrowly empirical approach to theory. In effect, there is to be a transition from the level of concrete research into specific social phenomena to that of a speculative, critical theory of society. Martin Jay has described this process as a dialectic of *Forschung* and *Darstellungweise*: the former activity consisting of detailed empirical study, whilst the latter term refers to the *totalising* synthesis in which individual phenomena as well as general laws of social life come to acquire significance with respect to the project of human emancipation and self-realisation.<sup>9</sup> Clearly, this is some way from the abolition thesis: philosophy instead of being replaced by the various empirical disciplines is now obliged to critically interpret their results, to relate these to the social life process as a whole, and thereby to the struggle between the classes which in large measure defines that process.<sup>10</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> *Hegel's Logic*, §12.

<sup>9</sup> *Marxism and Totality*, pp. 200-201.

<sup>10</sup> 'The Rationalism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, pp. 238-240.



This alternative conception of Horkheimer's proposal, a conception that stands in sharp contrast to the end-of-philosophy thesis described by Brunkhorst, constitutes the subject matter of this present chapter. During the course of the discussion, I will demonstrate that the early Horkheimer's vision of an interdisciplinary theory of society, far from being a positivistic version of Marxism, is in fact a restatement of the essential philosophical dimension of materialism.

In developing this argument, it will be necessary to challenge the view that Horkheimer's work in the period 1931-36 can be sharply distinguished from the position first defined in his landmark essay 'Traditional and Critical Theory' published in the *Zeitschrift* in 1937.<sup>11</sup> Whilst not wishing to deny that this later essay provides an especially clear formulation of the distinction between the natural sciences and a theory of society, I shall maintain that much of the theoretical basis for this distinction is already present in Horkheimer's pre-1937 writings. Despite a measure of rhetorical excess, provoked one suspects by the failure of so many German social theorists, including Marxists, to undertake any empirical research into concrete social formations, Horkheimer was *never* a positivist. On the contrary, he was from the outset a thinker working within the Hegelian tradition, and as a consequence his early commitment to systematic social research should not be regarded as an unfortunate

---

<sup>11</sup> Simon Jarvis, for instance, argues that: "Later in the decade Horkheimer's 'Traditional and Critical Theory' placed much greater emphasis on the criticism of positivism not merely as limited but as false through and through. This shift in emphasis testifies not only to Horkheimer's own autonomous development but also to the strong influence of Adorno's (and Marcuse's) philosophical work." (*Adorno: A Critical Introduction*, p.88.)

concession to positivism but rather as an attempt to locate philosophy in the life process of society.

This thesis will be developed in three stages. First, I shall seek to clarify the relation between empirical social science and the project of a multi-disciplinary materialism, and more particularly I shall argue that there is a need to distinguish Horkheimer's advocacy of various modes of empirical enquiry from the epistemological doctrine of empiricism as it has been applied to social theory. With this distinction secured, the notion of multi-disciplinary materialism will be related to Hegel's belief that systematic Science is only possible as knowledge of the Whole. This task will involve the critical evaluation of the fundamental Hegelian concept of totality, as well as an investigation into the way in which this concept informs the Frankfurt School's conception of social theory, and in particular their reconstruction of Marx's historical materialism. These two stages of the argument will constitute the main subject matter of the present chapter as well as the next. In Chapter 6 the discussion will then move on to a consideration of some of the specific components of Horkheimer's proposed theoretical synthesis. In particular I shall be concerned to assess the validity, or otherwise, of the Frankfurt School's attempt to synthesise Marx's theory of history and society with Freud's depth psychology.

### *The Critique of Empiricism*

Horkheimer's conception of multi-disciplinary materialism is founded upon the idea of a *double theoretical synthesis* involving not only the unification of the individual social

---

scientific disciplines into a comprehensive theory of society but also the transcendence of the division between philosophy and social theory.<sup>12</sup> This double synthesis is intended to overcome the limitations that Horkheimer believed are characteristic of a purely empirical approach to the human sciences, an approach which although it appears to start with what is most concrete, namely individual phenomena, is nevertheless premised upon a form of abstraction. More particularly, empiricism seeks to comprehend the various specific elements of the social totality by isolating them from the whole in which they are situated. Thus empirical social science, marked as it is by an intensive division of intellectual labour, begins its work by selecting for study some *particular* aspect of society, for instance social class, urbanisation, political behaviour, family structure, the socialisation process and so forth. The empiricist will then seek to comprehend the chosen phenomenon in terms of a complex of observable, and if possible quantifiable features; for instance, an empirical concept of social class will make reference to readily verifiable indices of class such as income or membership of occupational groups. Having thereby narrowed the focus of enquiry to an apparently manageable problem, the empirically oriented social scientist will set about the task of gathering some initial evidence so as to suggest a range of hypotheses concerning the selected object of study. These hypotheses, in virtue of their predictive observational content, can then be subjected to a range of further empirical tests, and either confirmed or disconfirmed, a process which Martin Jay aptly describes as the “hypothesis-verification-conclusion model of social research.”<sup>13</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> As Horkheimer puts it : “Materialism requires the unification of philosophy and science.” See his ‘Materialism and Metaphysics’ in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, pp.34-35.

<sup>13</sup> *The Dialectical Imagination*, p.240.

The supposed merit of this approach is that theory emerges from and is supported by observation; that whatever generalisations are proposed derive from the “facts of the matter” rather than the kind of imaginative speculation which empiricists associate with “pre-scientific” social theory. This kind of argument, it should be said, has secured widespread if unthinking acceptance amongst social scientists, and has resulted in the production of a mass of empirical data describing a variety of social institutions, relations and practices. Furthermore, on the basis of this evidence researchers have devised numerous, and complex classificatory systems as well as an equally large mass of generalisations and statistical regularities. Now although these generalisations and regularities fall far short of the theoretical achievements of the natural sciences - they do not, for instance, form part of a unified systematic socio-historical theory - they nevertheless constitute some kind of achievement. Indeed some social scientists who work in this tradition advance an argument to the effect that this form of low-level, detailed empirical research is an essential preliminary for general theory. Thus, just as Brahe’s astronomical observations and Kepler’s theory of planetary motion prepared the way for Newton’s physics, a similarly well established corpus of empirical research, so it is argued, will come to serve as the basis for a truly general theory of social action.<sup>14</sup> In this fashion, empiricism hopes to construct a theory of the social whole on the basis of a knowledge of discrete, particular phenomena, together with a knowledge of the laws governing their behaviour.

---

<sup>14</sup> This approach has been argued for, by amongst others, Robert Merton who, in his influential *Social Theory and Social Structure*, calls upon social scientists to abandon grand theory and concentrate instead upon developing well supported theories of the “middle range”. Popper’s *Poverty of Historicism* contains a very similar argument. For a discussion of the empirical social scientific tradition see Richard Bernstein’s *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory*, Chapter 2.

Furthermore, because the cognitive encounter with the particular is conceived of solely in terms of an *observational* encounter, the laws which the empiricist constructs are statements which associate one observational variable with another. In consequence, empiricism proclaims that it is concerned with a *scientific* as opposed to an ideological theory of society; for what it is developing is a theory that stands or falls strictly according to the observational evidence available to the investigator.<sup>15</sup>

Horkheimer's response to this methodological stance is complex. He was, for instance, by no means hostile to the use and development of specialised quantitative techniques in social theory, observing for instance that "American social research has made great preliminary contributions to the design of survey questionnaires, which we hope to adopt and develop further for our own purposes."<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, he was ready to concede that the empirical social scientific tradition had produced a sizeable bank of data that would be invaluable for the construction of the kind of synthetic theory of society that he had in mind. As Horkheimer observed: "In its acknowledgement of the decisive significance of theory, materialism is to be distinguished from present-day positivism, though not from *concrete research*, which often comes to the same findings as materialism itself."<sup>17</sup>(Italics mine) Of course, to insist that social theory has a necessary empirical moment is in itself neither

---

<sup>15</sup> See Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* (pp. 105-120) for a critique of this particular claim.

<sup>16</sup> 'The Present Situation of Social Philosophy' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p.13. Questionnaire and interview material was in fact used in a number of Institute projects, appearing for instance in *Studien über Autorität und Familie* (1936) and *The Authoritarian Personality* (1951).

<sup>17</sup> 'Materialism and Morality' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p.47.

particularly original nor profound; nevertheless Horkheimer's remark is worth our attention for at least two reasons. In the first place it helps to dispel the frequently propagated myth that the work of the Frankfurt School is an unsupported mass of historical and social speculation divorced from any kind of evidential constraint or discipline.<sup>18</sup> Proponents of this view tend to ignore the fact that the theoretical life of the Institute was a genuinely collaborative affair, and that apparently ungrounded theoretical propositions emanating from Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse often turn out to be related to a corpus of detailed research undertaken by other members of the Institute. For example, Marcuse's analysis of fascism as the inherent consequence of the liberal phase of bourgeois society is based on the thesis that fascism is the logical political expression of the monopoly capitalism into which that society had evolved. This thesis finds support in the work of Franz Neumann, a member of the Institute who produced an extensive, highly detailed study of the relation between the state and the economy in Nazi Germany.<sup>19</sup> By contrast, Adorno and Horkheimer, following the Institute's principal economist Frederick Pollock, maintained that fascism was based upon a radical transformation of production relations which had taken Germany into a form of "post-capitalist" society.<sup>20</sup> Doubtless a great deal more could be said concerning this particular dispute, as well as the more general question of how much empirical support can be found for the other components of the high-level theory of late capitalism advanced by the Frankfurt School, but clearly such a discussion is

---

<sup>18</sup> Kolakowski makes this criticism in *Main Currents of Marxism: Vol III*, pp.356-357. For a similar line of argument see Alasdair MacIntyre's *Marcuse*, p.18.

<sup>19</sup> *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism*.

<sup>20</sup> See, for instance, Pollock's article 'State Capitalism: Its Possibilities and Limitations' in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, pp.71-94.

beyond the scope of this thesis.<sup>21</sup> Enough has been said, however, to cast doubt on the notion that Frankfurt Marxism developed in complete isolation from any program of concrete research.

The second reason for remarking upon Horkheimer's belief in the importance of empirical work is that this commitment differentiates critical theory from all those forms of Marxism which eschew genuine research and rely instead upon selective quotation from the work of Marx and Engels to settle whatever question might happen to arise. Against this textual dogmatism, Horkheimer urges a return to Marx's own tradition of concrete research. Thus commenting upon the sort of under-evidenced assertion characteristic of dogmatic Marxism he writes:

It remains unknown precisely how *economic changes* that affect the *psychic constitution* prevailing among members of different social groups in a given period transform their overall life expressions [*Lebensäußerungen*]. Thus the claim that the latter depends upon the former contains *dogmatic* elements that seriously undermine its hypothetical value for explaining the present.<sup>22</sup> (Italics mine)

In contrast then to those vulgar Marxists, for whom the question of class consciousness can be settled in an almost *a priori* fashion, simply by appealing to the

<sup>21</sup> David Held's *Introduction to Critical Theory* ( pp.52-65) contains a useful discussion of the dispute within the Frankfurt School concerning the nature of the newly emerged fascist states.

<sup>22</sup> 'History and Psychology' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p120.

inherently antagonistic relation between capital and labour, Horkheimer advocates a program of detailed research into the series of “psychical mediations” relating the individual consciousness, and particularly biological and psychic drives, to the cultural, social and economic context in which it arises.<sup>23</sup> Such a program, he believed, would reveal that the relation between consciousness and the material base of social life involves a degree of psychological complexity and social mediation quite unknown to cruder forms of materialism which seek to immediately correlate consciousness and class by appeal to the notion of material interest. As we shall see later, the desire to integrate depth-psychology with materialist social theory is *central* to Horkheimer’s notion of a materialism founded upon the synthesis of the various individual social sciences.<sup>24</sup> We shall also discover that it is an instance of a more general concern on the part of the Frankfurt School to pursue the Hegelian program of relating the individual to society, experience to social structure, the particular to the general.

Returning, however, to the matter at hand, we note that Horkheimer, despite recognising the importance of empirical evidence, was implacably opposed to the empiricist’s general conception of how a social scientific theory should be constructed. Here it should be noted that his position was to a large extent influenced by the young

---

<sup>23</sup> Adorno in his correspondence to Benjamin (10.11.38) makes a very similar point in the context of cultural theory. He writes: “... I regard it as methodologically unfortunate to give conspicuous individual features from the realm of the superstructure a ‘materialistic’ turn by relating them immediately and perhaps even causally to corresponding features of the infrastructure. Materialist determination of cultural traits is only possible if it is mediated through the *total social process*.” (Reprinted in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. R. Taylor, p.129) Interestingly, Adorno prefaces this comment by telling Benjamin that he has had an exhaustive discussion with Horkheimer on this very topic.

<sup>24</sup> See Chapter 6 for a discussion of this question.



Lukacs' earlier critique of positivist science. Indeed it can be safely said that much of the argument that is developed in *History and Class Consciousness* re-appears in Horkheimer's thinking about the nature of social theory. For this reason I shall first briefly summarise what Lukács has to say concerning the question of social scientific method before considering the way in which his thought was appropriated by members of the Frankfurt School. We begin by considering one particularly important observation Lukács makes concerning the positivist conception of observational data:

... when 'science' maintains that the manner in which data immediately present themselves is an adequate foundation of scientific conceptualisation and that the actual form of these data is the appropriate starting point for the formation of scientific concepts, it thereby takes its stand simply and dogmatically on the basis of capitalist society. It uncritically accepts the nature of *the object as it is given* and the laws of that society as the unalterable foundation of science.<sup>25</sup>

Against this kind of "science" Lukacs argues that to understand a series of individual observations "it is necessary to perceive their historical conditioning ... and to abandon the point of view that would see them as immediately given."<sup>26</sup> This remark draws attention to the fact that the myriad regularities pertaining to the social life process are by and large neither universal nor "natural" features of human society but rather the result of the activity of its members. Thus the various "social facts" which appear to the empiricist as simply "given" are in reality *produced* through historical

---

<sup>25</sup> 'What is Orthodox Marxism?' in *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 7.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

subjects, in particular social classes, acting upon and transforming the natural and social circumstances in which they find themselves. Indeed, it can be said that for Lukacs this is the central truth of *Capital*, and that unlike the classical political economy of which it is a critique, Marx's political economy seeks not only to specify the set of laws governing a society dominated by commodity production but simultaneously discovers their historical character. In other words, Marx's account of capitalism as a system of commodity production demonstrates that this form of production is not an invariant of social life but merely one possible form, amongst others, for extracting surplus labour from the mass of producers. Furthermore, capitalism is itself the result of a conflict between the classes, a conflict which led to producers being separated from the means of production and thereby transformed into a population of *potential* proletarians. In opposition therefore to the political economists, Marx argued that there are definite conditions governing the emergence, maturation, and one must add, the decline of the commodity form, conditions that in the final analysis are the result of the struggle between the social classes.<sup>27</sup> Summarising all of this we might say that for Lukacs the significance of Marx's thought consists in the fact that his critique of the economic categories illuminates the radical historicity of social phenomena, thereby countering the powerful tendency of capitalist society towards the reification of its own life process.

---

<sup>27</sup> Marx's position should also be contrasted with that of Hegel, for whom the form of production described by the classical economists is the *final* historical form of production. Marx, of course, did not believe that the capitalist mode of production represented such a final form. For a useful discussion of Hegel's views on the relation between society and the economy see Shlomo Avineri's *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*, Chapter 7.

Horkheimer's critique of the empiricist tradition draws heavily on this argument. Thus like Lukacs, he believed that the methodological dictates of empiricism, particularly the demands for repeatable observations and quantifiable data, lead its practitioners to view society as a stable system of phenomenal regularities, and in consequence to overlook the essentially *historical* nature of the object of their study. Of course, this is not to suggest that empiricists are unaware of the fact that social forms have specific historical origins. Rather, the criticism is directed against those theories which postulate the immutability of whatever social form happens to be currently established. Commenting upon this theoretical tendency Horkheimer writes:

Analysis proceeds from the particular to the general. It suffices to the extent that thought has only to isolate from actual events that which *repeats* itself. Science thus fulfils its true task for those activities that depend upon the *relative immutability* of natural and social relations. In the liberal period, miracles were expected from the mere development of specialised research, because the foundations of society were considered *static*. The mechanistic approach fails, however, in the effort to understand history. Here, the issue is to understand the dominant tendencies of *incomplete, unique processes*.<sup>28</sup>

(Italics mine)

By concentrating upon isolated but repeatable types of event, the analytical approach runs the risk of *naturalising* what is in reality the result of a specific socio-historic process. Furthermore, rather than situating such regularities as can be discovered

---

<sup>28</sup> 'The Rationalism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, pp. 236-237.

within the wider dynamic structure of social life, empiricism restricts its vision to recurring and hence relatively unchanging phenomena. In consequence, this kind of social theory loses sight of the fact that individual phenomena are essentially conditioned by their relation to the developing whole of which they are a part. More particularly, empiricism forgets that the regularities characteristic of a given society at any given moment are fragile historical products, that they have come into being under very specific circumstances and in other possible future circumstances will break down or disappear altogether. As Horkheimer puts it: "It would ... be wrong to think that events in a future society could be deduced according to the same principles and with the same necessity as the lines of development of the present one."<sup>29</sup> This reflection recognises the possibility that what is true of society as it is presently constituted may in fact not hold of a future society; it is in consequence the essential premise for any kind of radicalism. By contrast empiricism, because it focuses upon what is recurrent in the present, tends whether unwittingly or not, towards an essentially conservative world view. Moreover, because this doctrine emphasises the *constancy* of law-like conjunction, because it equates science with what is universally true, it loses sight of the historically-transitory nature of the regularities it discovers. Thus the laws which govern society as presently constituted are regarded by empiricists as the laws which must govern any possible form of society, past, present or future.<sup>30</sup> This is supposed to follow from the fact that scientific laws by their very nature describe the unchanging structure of the world and in this sense are universal.

---

<sup>29</sup> 'On the Problem of Truth' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p. 205.

<sup>30</sup> See the Introduction (pp.83-111) to Marx's *Grundrisse* for a discussion of this question in relation to political economy.

But here, as is so often the case in social theory, we discover that a seemingly abstract philosophical proposition is in fact serving a particular ideological function. As Lukacs puts it, positivist social theory, however scrupulously it records the facts, suffers from an inability to grasp “the problem of the present as a historical problem.”<sup>31</sup> The empiricist perspective of observation and law-like conjunction forgets that theory cannot stop short at what merely happens to be the case but must seek to express the essential character of the reality that it studies. In the case of social theory this means not only describing that which exists but also engaging with the inherent tendency of the social life process towards *development* and *transformation*. We may therefore conclude, as Horkheimer does, that theory cannot seek to comprehend that which is immediately present without at the same time explaining how the present has come into being by reference to its past as well, as identifying the potential for its future demise.

This takes us to the heart of the Frankfurt School’s critique of positivism: in place of the empiricist paradigm of knowledge their work advances a conception of theory based upon the tension between what is actual and what is potential. This entails that we cannot understand society simply by observing what is the case, for that which exists is in part determined by the fact that it represents the repression of an entirely different social order. In other words, a critical social theory cannot simply accept the laws which happen to govern reality, for it is aware that the operation and maintenance of these laws serves to deny different possibilities of social life. Accordingly, it will

---

<sup>31</sup> ‘Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat’ in *History and Class Consciousness*, p.157.

indicate the contradictions inherent to the operation of those laws, arguing in effect that society as it is presently constituted prepares the basis for its own demise, that what is actual contains within itself the potential for the being of its other.<sup>32</sup> In this fashion Horkheimer hoped to define a radical theory of society, which whilst opposed to empiricist social science was neither utopian nor ignorant of the importance of concrete research.

Against Horkheimer, however, the empiricist may well reply that the kind of historicism which characterises Marx's thought, and then later figures so prominently in the work of both Lukács and Horkheimer, greatly over-emphasises the difficulty of producing general laws of social life. Indeed, it might even be argued that in this respect there is no great difference between the natural and social sciences: both are confronted with the problem of identifying fundamental laws which hold across disparate regions of time and space. Popper, for instance, has claimed that

... there seems no reason why we should be unable to frame sociological theories which are important for all social periods. The spectacular difference between these periods are no indication that such laws cannot be found, any more than the spectacular differences between Greenland and Crete can prove that there are no physical laws which hold for both regions. On the contrary, these differences seem to be, in some cases at least, of a comparatively superficial character (such as differences in habits, in greeting, ritual etc), and

---

<sup>32</sup> Cf. Horkheimer, M., 'Notes on Science and the Crisis' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p.5

more or less the same seems to hold good of those regularities which are said to be characteristic of a certain historical period or of a certain society (and which are now called *principia media* by some sociologists).<sup>33</sup>

Thus the simple fact of radical difference between “social periods” is, according to Popper, not a sufficient reason for supposing that it is impossible to formulate general laws which hold throughout history. Indeed Popper goes on to argue that the much-vaunted differences between societies at different stages of development are very often of a “comparatively superficial character” and should therefore provide no impediment to the development of a genuinely universal social science. What are we to make of this argument? The first thing to note is that Popper’s polemic is in large measure directed against a non-existent opponent. No intellectually serious Marxist, for instance, has ever sought to deny that different societies with different modes of production will have features in common and that some of these features can perhaps be elevated to the status of general laws. As Marx himself observes: “There are characteristics which all stages of production have in common, and which are established as general ones by the mind; but the so-called general pre-conditions of all production are nothing more than these abstract moments with which no real historical stage of production can be grasped.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed in a letter to Kugelmann (July 11, 1868) Marx distinguishes some universal laws of production, for example the necessity of distributing social labour in definite proportions to the various branches of production, from the concrete historical form in which those laws are realised. The historical

---

<sup>33</sup> *The Poverty of Historicism*, p.101.

<sup>34</sup> *Grundrisse*, p.88.

materialist, therefore, does not deny the possibility of universal laws but argues that *by themselves* such laws are incapable of explaining “real historical stages of production”. This is quite a different proposition from the historicist doctrine that Popper has outlined, for it asserts that historical understanding results from a confrontation between general laws of production and the particular social forms in which those laws are realised. In short a given society is the outcome of a complex dialectic involving what is general and what is particular, it is a concrete universal formed in and through the interaction between these two poles.

The other aspect of Popper’s argument that requires some comment is his claim that many differences between social periods are “comparatively superficial”, and as such provide no obstacle to the existence of trans-historical laws. However, from the trivial nature of the examples that Popper cites, rituals of greeting and suchlike, it is difficult to understand what these examples are supposed to establish. Clearly between any two societies there will be a vast range of differences, some of which will be largely superficial whilst others point to significant variations in the way in which these societies function. More particularly, historical materialism maintains that differences in the mode of production will give rise to profoundly divergent patterns of socio-economic behaviour, and that this provide the basis for a belief in historically specific laws. Now if Popper wishes to deny this then he has to make the argument that social production has no real history, that the differences between, say, slavery in the Ancient World and wage labour in late capitalism are superficial, and that in consequence these forms of production share a common essence. Needless to say no such argument can be found in his *Poverty of Historicism*



But if Popper's critique of historical materialism is unconvincing, there is another line of defence available to the empiricist. This argument begins by suggesting that both Lukacs and Horkheimer are misrepresenting the situation, and that the empirical tradition in social theory is simply committed to discovering whatever observable regularities happen to exist. In doing this the empiricist may indeed grant that there are very few, if any, true universal statements governing social life, but that this fact should not preclude research into the numerous regularities which clearly exist in *particular societies at particular times*.<sup>35</sup> Of course, in one sense this is undeniable: all societies are characterised by recurring patterns of individual and group behaviour. But a theory that confines itself to simply describing such patterns would be a very limited enterprise. For whilst it may well succeed in producing a large number of true statements, it would be very far from providing us with a clear picture of whatever society it is purporting to describe. In particular such an approach fails to situate particular patterns of behaviour in any kind of coherent structure; consequently these patterns cannot be related to one another nor understood as historical, and therefore potentially alterable, forms of social life. Against this objection, empiricists might reply that the methodological approach which they advocate is wholly analogous to the practice of natural scientists. Thus in natural science there is a recognition that laws are not always strictly universal but rather hold only under certain determinate conditions. The problem with this response is that the analogy it depends upon is far from exact. For the natural scientist, specifying the limits of the applicability of a

---

<sup>35</sup> This idea finds expression, for instance, in Mannheim's notion of *principia media*: sociological laws that are not universal but characteristic of historically specific societies.

physical law is a fairly straightforward matter; for the social scientist, however, the notion of limiting conditions is necessarily more problematic. Thus physics or chemistry can usually achieve what is required by resorting to some kind of quantitative description of the conditions under which the law holds. The social scientist, on the other hand, confronts a considerably more difficult question. In fact, to make the analogy hold in this area the empiricist has to be able to specify what it is that limits the application of the putative law, and this could only be done by determining what it is about a “particular society at a particular time” that underpins the operation of the law in question. But now the empiricist is involved in an investigation of both the nature and history of that society; in other words they are involved in determining what is *essential* to that particular social life process. Unfortunately this latter question is precisely the kind of question that empiricism is concerned, some would even say designed, to avoid.

Before, however, returning to a consideration of the kind of social theory that Horkheimer advocated I want to consider, albeit briefly, an important response on the part of positivist social science to this very question. What empiricism seems to require is some means of classifying a society without thereby providing an account of the constitutive social relations which define it. This can be done by means a number of ahistorical abstractions which are proposed as a substitute for concrete research into the origins and nature of the society in question. For example, the notion of *industrial society* is sometimes posited as a means of characterising a specific *kind* of society, one for instance marked out by a significant degree of machine based production. However, as Giddens correctly observes, proponents of this theory tend to “presume,

or propose, that there is an essential unity to the industrial order wherever it emerges” and that in consequence this unity provides the basis for a meaningful social typology.<sup>36</sup> Against this kind of presumption, historical materialism argues that the notion of *industrial society* is an illegitimate abstraction because it serves to mask what in reality are profound structural differences between societies. This masking effect prompted Adorno in *Negative Dialectics* to describe the concept of industrial society as “a cover concept”, a concept which functions to conceal rather than reveal the truth about the world. He writes:

The classic case of such a cover concept, of the technique of logical subsumption for ideological purposes, is the current concept of industrial society. It ignores the social conditions of production by resorting to the technological productive forces - as if the state of these forces alone were the direct determinant of the social structure. This theoretical switch can of course be excused by the undeniable convergences of East and West in the sign of bureaucratic rule.<sup>37</sup>

Adorno’s point here is that this concept is the result of an empiricist-technocratic approach to social theory: rather than investigate the “social conditions of production”, the empiricist locates the essence of society by means of the measurement and description of its technological-productive basis. Whilst this accords with the general empiricist approach, forces of production being easily observable, it

---

<sup>36</sup> *Sociology: A Brief but Critical Introduction*, p.27.

<sup>37</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, p.152.

makes for a very poor theory of society. In effect the concept of *industrial society* dispenses with the history of its object, and results in the subsuming of a variety of divergent phenomena which concrete historical research would teach us to keep apart.

From what has been said thus far we may conclude, as Horkheimer does, that a theory seeking to comprehend that which is immediately present can only do so by a process of *mediation*; in other words the theory must not only explain how the present has come into being by reference to its past but also identify the potential for its future demise. Indeed for Adorno and Horkheimer, dialectical thinking distinguishes itself by the fact that it is a form of thought “in which everything is always that which it is, only because it becomes that which it is not.”<sup>38</sup> This remark is central to the Frankfurt critique of positivism: in place of the empiricist paradigm of knowledge it advances a conception of social theory based upon the tension between what is actual and what is potential. This entails that we cannot understand society simply by observing what is the case for that which exists is in part determined by the fact that it represents the repression of an entirely different social order. In other words a critical social theory cannot simply accept the laws which happen to govern reality but should also point to the way in which the operation of these laws serves to deny different possibilities of social life. It should also point clearly the contradictory nature of the reality it describes, to the fact that capitalism is structured through a series of contradictions which ensure that the more it develops, the more it prepares the conditions for its own demise. According to Horkheimer, such a theory would obviously be very different from mainstream social science, for it would continuously raise the possibility of our

---

<sup>38</sup> *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p15.

practically transforming the object of cognition, of moving from theory to revolutionary *praxis*.

### *History and Social Theory*

Horkheimer's critique of empiricism, it should be noted, is a multi-faceted affair: alongside the classical Marxist suspicion of the ahistorical, there is also the influence of the distinctively Germanic tradition of distinguishing *GeistesWissenschaft* from *NaturWissenschaft*, of separating the human from the natural sciences. This tradition impacts upon Horkheimer in both its Hegelian and non-Hegelian forms. In the first instance it leads him to maintain that historical processes are to be distinguished from those occurring in nature by the fact that they are, as he puts it, *incomplete* and *unique*. What this suggests is that unlike the natural sciences, which deal with *determinate types* of objects and events related through a stable structure of causal regularity, social theory is confronted by the radical indeterminacy and singularity of its subject matter. At first sight, however, it seems difficult to understand why Horkheimer as a historical materialist would want to advance such a position. It is, for instance, not at all obvious why he maintains that a specific sequence of historical events, say the French Revolution, is incomplete. Surely, it is possible to comprehend this particular moment of European history as something that is self-contained, as a process with a determinate beginning and end? Indeed, Horkheimer's emphasis upon the indeterminacy of the historical seems to run counter not just to empiricism but to the hope of any kind of systematic theory of history and society, including Marx's theory of historical materialism.

In this section I shall argue that the answer to at least some of these difficulties depends upon our coming to understand that for Horkheimer the notion of the incompleteness of the historical event is closely bound up with the idea that a theory of society is a theory of a *concrete living whole*, and that in consequence an adequate concept of a socio-historical particular must make reference to the life of this whole. As Horkheimer puts it “the function and thus also the content of the concepts applied are affected by every step in the representation of a living process” and in consequence “concepts derived from abstraction change their meaning as soon as they come into relation with each other in the representation of a concrete whole.”<sup>39</sup> Now for Horkheimer, history is just such a living process and therefore is not to be construed as a sequence of discrete occurrences whose nature can be determined without reference to what has gone either before or indeed afterwards. On the contrary, the historical process is seen as a continuous developmental movement involving the formation, transformation and ultimate demise of particular modes of social being. As the historian E.P. Thompson has commented:

In investigating history we are not flicking through a series of stills, each of which shows us a moment of social time transfixed into a single eternal pose: for each one of these “stills” is not only a moment of *being* but also a moment of *becoming* ... Any historical moment is both a result of a prior process and an index towards the direction of its future flow.<sup>40</sup> (Italics mine)

---

<sup>39</sup> ‘The Rationalism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy’ in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p.235.

<sup>40</sup> *The Poverty of Theory*, p.47.

Contra atomism, history is not a sequence of self-contained events but an ever-developing whole, the parts of which are constituted by their relation to what has gone before as well as to what has come after. Applying this thought to the example of the revolutionary process in France, we will say that the nature of that process is conditioned both by the feudal aristocratic order which preceded it and by the European bourgeois society to which it gave birth. To understand that process, therefore, is to understand not only its *origin* but also its *destination*, to see it as a moment of becoming rather than an event that is fixed and determinate in virtue of its ontological independence. Here there is more than a hint of Hegel's belief that the historical process is, at least for most of its duration, opaque to the understanding, that until the process has "attained its completed state" we are unable to truly grasp the nature of what it is that has come into being.<sup>41</sup> (Indeed for Hegel real understanding comes only with the end of history, with the attainment of Absolute Knowledge on the part of a meta-subject that has become adequately conscious of itself in the realm of objectivity.) Of course, this does not mean that for Hegel individual historical phenomena are irrelevant to comprehending the historical process. On the contrary, it needs to be emphasised that his thought seeks to engage with the universal by interrogating the particular. What is entailed, however, is that a history which confines itself to the study of particularities falls far short of its intended object, and represents the kind of analytical mutilation of reality that Hegel so mercilessly criticised throughout his philosophical career.

---

<sup>41</sup> *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p.23.

What Horkheimer took from this can be summarised as follows. Historical materialism posits its subject matter as a living unity, as a social life process whose constituent moments can only be understood by reference to the movement of that process. Thus by way of contrast to the laboratory procedures of natural science which depend upon the assumption that the world consists of a multiplicity of discrete objects and processes, materialism begins with the concept of a historical totality. This means that the identity of a process is not immediately given to the observer but depends upon its position within the *continuously developing totality* of history, and it is in this sense that Horkheimer maintains that knowledge of the historical domain is necessarily characterised by incompleteness. In other words, if history is to be regarded as a text, it is not a stable text but one that is continuously re-writing itself.

Despite this obvious debt to Hegel, it is important to acknowledge real differences between Horkheimer and his idealist predecessor. In the case of the former, as I have already indicated, there is a belief that an adequate historical understanding comes only with the end of history, with the conditions for Absolute knowledge. This form of cognition is the very paradigm of completeness, and as Horkheimer observes:

Until its *completion* the entire conceptual material is in movement in the minds of those who reconstruct it, because the meaning of the individual categories is only fulfilled in the whole. As moments of the mental unity, which for Hegel is not merely a pure reflection but is itself the Absolute, they are supposed to have immutable validity, however ... The complete theory itself is, in Hegel, no



longer drawn into history; it yields an all comprehending thought, the product of which is no longer abstract and transient. The dialectic is closed.<sup>42</sup>

Against this kind of dialectic, Horkheimer proposes a form of thought which refuses any ambition towards completeness. Describing this as “unconcluded” dialectic (*unabgeschlossene Dialektik*), he writes:

The materialist cannot have faith in such certainty. There is no conclusive image of reality, either in essence or appearance. Even the proposition of a suprahistorical subject which alone could grasp reality is a delusion. Furthermore, the overcoming of the one-sidedness of abstract concepts through the art of dialectical construction does not lead to absolute truth as Hegel claims. That process always takes place in the thought of definite, historical human beings.<sup>43</sup>

According to Horkheimer, then, we must understand that any understanding of history is itself always and everywhere historically conditioned. Put another way, there is no extra-historical standpoint from which history may be observed; we theorise the historical process from within that process and in consequence are seeking to reflect upon that which resists completeness. Once again we are returned to the category of *becoming* as opposed to that of being, to a theory that seeks to grasp the inherently

---

<sup>42</sup> ‘The Rationalism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy’ in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p.239.

<sup>43</sup> Op.cit., p.239.

creative process of the movement within and transformation of our own social life.<sup>44</sup>

But whatever differences separated Horkheimer from Hegel, as well from the Hegelian Marxist tradition of Lukács and Korsch, he was nonetheless in broad agreement with the idealist belief that the starting point for a social theory must be with the *developmental* logic of the concrete historical whole. To this extent Horkheimer's critique of empiricism can be said to derive from the tradition of German Idealism. However, in some of his early writings there is evidence to suggest that Horkheimer's approach to history is also influenced by the tradition in German historiography which emphasises the unique, singular nature of historical phenomena. Weber, for instance in his discussion of the concept of the "spirit of capitalism" argues that: "Such an historical concept ... since it refers in its content to a phenomenon significant for its unique individuality, cannot be defined according to the formula *genus proximum, differentia specifica*, but it must be gradually put together out of the individual parts which are taken from historical reality to make it up."<sup>45</sup> For Weber, the historian's task is "not to grasp historical reality in abstract general formulae but in concrete genetic sets of relations which are inevitably of a specifically unique and individual character."<sup>46</sup> This remark suggests that it is a mistake to suppose that history, like the natural sciences, involves general statements relating the occurrence of one *type* of

---

<sup>44</sup> As Lukacs observes: "Thus only when the theoretical primacy of the 'facts' has been broken, only when every phenomenon is recognised to be a process, will it be understood that what we are wont to call 'facts' consists of processes. Only then will it be understood that the facts are nothing but the parts, the aspects of the total process that have been broken off, artificially isolated and ossified." ('Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' in *History and Class Consciousness*, p.184)

<sup>45</sup> *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, p.47.

<sup>46</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.48.

event to the occurrence of another. Instead, Weber emphasises the singularity characteristic of the historian's problem domain, a singularity which requires what might be called a compositional approach to concept formation: the step-by-step formulation of the set of relations that most adequately represent the *particular* historical complex under investigation. By definition, the kind of theoretical constructs which result from this process will not admit of general application but instead, as Weber hoped, will through their very specificity succeed in illuminating concrete historical situations. As Adorno was to put it many years later when he sought to compare as well as contrast the methods of the natural and social sciences:

In sociology one cannot progress to the same degree from partial assertions about societal states of affairs to their general, even if, restricted validity, as one was accustomed to infer the characteristics of lead in general from the observations of one piece of lead. The generality of social-scientific laws is not at all that of the conceptual sphere into which the individual parts can be wholly incorporated, but rather always and essentially relates to *the relationship of the general to the particular in its historical concretion*.<sup>47</sup>

(Italics mine)

It is my contention that Horkheimer's reconstruction of Marxism, as well as his critique of empiricism, owes something of a debt to Weber's reflections upon the nature of historical understanding. Thus according to Horkheimer the goal of empirical

---

<sup>47</sup> 'Sociology and Empirical Research' in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, p.77.

social theory is to produce general statements concerning society, in effect statements that are akin to the laws of natural science. These statements are hypothetical in form, and assert that if such and such conditions hold, then such and such an event will occur. However for Horkheimer, Marx's theoretical project, although it contains these kind of statements, does not emphasise generality but rather focuses upon the "uniqueness" of the historical process. As he observes:

To the extent that the critical theory of society deduces present conditions from the concept of simple exchange, it includes this kind of necessity, although it is relatively unimportant that the hypothetical form of statement be used. That is, the stress is not on the idea that wherever a society based upon simple exchange prevails, capitalism must develop - although this is true. The stress is on the fact that the *existent* capitalist society ... derives from the basic relation of exchange ... the critical theory of society is, in its totality, *the unfolding of a single existential judgement*.<sup>48</sup> (Italics mine)

Thus the hypothetical form of statement is relatively unimportant because the process that Marx is theorising, the emergence of the capitalist system of production, is a unique world historical process incapable of repetition. In other words, the various moments of capitalist development cannot be abstracted from that process and studied in the fashion in which a natural scientist might study a physical, chemical or biological process, for each such moment is essentially defined by its position within the historical totality. To give a concrete example, Marx's notion of primitive

---

<sup>48</sup> 'Traditional and Critical Theory' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p.227.

accumulation is not a general concept capable of application outside of the specific moment in which bourgeois society develops from the decay of the feudal production relations. Rather, primitive accumulation is a *once and for all* occurrence: it is the birth of an entirely new mode of production. This is not to say that subsequently blocs of capital may not be formed by a process similar to that which Marx describes in *Capital*. However, these latter day acts of accumulation take place in the context of a pre-existing world order, a context which profoundly affects their character.

Horkheimer's remark that critical theory represents the unfolding of a singular existential judgement should therefore be interpreted as drawing attention to the fact that the theory is primarily concerned not with objects or processes of a particular type but rather with the developmental logic of a historical totality. Like Hegel's *Phenomenology*, Marx's *Capital* should be read as the life-history of a particular entity, as an account of a social formation that comes into being, matures and eventually declines. It cannot usefully be read as a series of universal propositions asserting that if such and such conditions occur then such and such events must necessarily follow for the very good reason that the initial conditions Marx describes are necessarily a unique historical conjuncture. This point has been well made by Scott Meikle, who in pointing to the essential difference between the reproduction of a natural and social form argues that:

With natural species the process is one of the reproduction over time of the species; the preservation of an identical generic nature by its transmission through successively numerically distinct individuals, each of which equally

embodies that single nature. The historical process however does not preserve a nature through successive generations ; it develops a nature through successive forms.<sup>49</sup>

Unlike natural scientists, social theorists are not confronted with a set of individuals belonging to a particular *species* or *genus* but with a single, unified process of development which effectively defines the nature of the object of their study. Against this, it might be argued that underlying the historical process there is in fact a nature that is preserved through “successive generations”, namely human nature, and that in principle at least it should be possible to develop a theory which shows how social life in all of its historical variations can be traced back to this universal. In essence this is a form of methodological individualism, for it maintains that the various concrete social formations that have appeared in the course of the historical process are capable of being explained in terms of the nature of individual human beings. Against this, Horkheimer holds firmly to the principle of the inherent singularity of the historical process. As he observes:

... contemporary materialism does not build up supratemporal concepts and abstract from the differences introduced by time. Even the possibility of establishing certain general human traits by considering man in his past history does not lead to a hypostatisation of these traits as suprahistorical factors. Society, on which man’s existence partially depends, is *a totality which cannot be compared to anything else and is continuously restructuring itself*. Thus,

---

<sup>49</sup> *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx*, p.36. This observation highlights the error in Engels’ attempt to assimilate historical materialism with the natural sciences.

while the similarity of human traits through the various periods of history allows us to form concepts which are important for understanding contemporary social movements, it by no means allows us to interpret these traits as the ground of history in its totality. (*Italics mine*)

Thus according to Horkheimer, even if a set of “general human traits” could be detected these could not serve as a general explanation of the historical process. The reason for this, is that the *explanandum*, in this case the social totality, is a complex of phenomena that is both *sui generis* and subject to continuous transformation. What Marx describes in *Capital* is not an instance of a type, but a moment in the development of human society, a moment that is specific and never to be repeated. In consequence there is a radical discrepancy between what is purported to be the ground of history, specifically a universal hypostatized human nature, and the dynamic reality of determinate historical being. The former remains entirely general, whilst an adequate specification of the latter tends towards particularity and concreteness; it is this discrepancy which suggests that without further mediation the two levels of theory cannot be brought into contact with one another. This critique of methodological individualism points yet again to the fact that Horkheimer’s theory of history and society is essentially a totalising theory, a form of knowledge focused upon the dynamic logic of the whole and its parts. In the next chapter, I shall argue that this approach not only differentiates critical theory from the natural sciences but also helps to positively determine the essential character of the Frankfurt project.

---

# PAGE NUMBERING AS IN THE ORIGINAL THESIS



## Chapter 5. Totality, Materialism and Dialectic

Horkheimer's rejection of the empiricist model of theory derives, as we have seen in the previous chapter, from a commitment to an essentially historicist methodology, the central premise of which is that social phenomena can only ever be adequately understood by reference to the socio-historical process through which they have come into being. This position contrasts sharply with the empiricist belief that phenomena can be grasped in their immediacy, that reality consists of observable discrete elements whose identity is independent of the historico-structural relations which they bear to one another. To appreciate more exactly what is involved in this methodological difference, we may consider a comment made by Horkheimer concerning the fragmented, partial form of knowledge that he believed is characteristic of the empirical social scientific tradition. Thus he writes:

The product of the analysis, the abstract concepts and rules, are not of course identical with knowledge of events in reality. The individual disciplines yield only the elements of the theoretical construction of the historical process, and these do not remain what they were in the individual disciplines but acquire new meanings. All true thought is thus to be understood as a continuous critique of abstract determinations ...<sup>1</sup>

Here the difference Horkheimer is seeking to establish is the difference between the

---

<sup>1</sup> 'The Rationalism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p.236.

“abstract determinations” of analysis (or empiricism), and what he calls “the theoretical construction of the historical process”. Within the context of this latter activity Horkheimer argues that the elements identified by analysis, the elements which make up the subject matter of the various social scientific disciplines, come to “acquire new meanings”. Consequently in re-constructing the historical process, the theorist who is seeking the deepest possible understanding of that process is compelled to transcend conventional disciplinary boundaries so as to relate its various individual moments to the totality of socio-historical being which not merely encompasses but also constitutes them. This formulation of multi-disciplinary materialism suggests that far from being a kind of positivistic Marxism, the theoretical synthesis first advocated by Horkheimer and later taken up by other members of the Frankfurt School is founded upon Hegel’s conception of knowledge as *knowledge of a concrete developing whole*.

As a straightforward exegetical thesis this statement is not difficult to defend: there are, after all, numerous positive references to Hegel’s doctrine of holism not only in the work of Horkheimer but also in that of Adorno and Marcuse.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, what is more difficult to determine - as well as being a more interesting question - is the precise role that the idea plays in the production of a critical social theory. In other words, how does the logic of totality, a logic which forms the organisational principle

---

<sup>2</sup> Thus Horkheimer in an important formulation of critical theory argues that its subject is “a definite individual in his real relation to other individuals and groups, in his conflict with a particular class, and, finally, in the resultant web of relationships with the *social totality* and with nature.” (Italics mine) See ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’ in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p.211. See also Adorno’s remarks upon the importance of the category of totality in social theory in his article ‘On the Logic of the Social Sciences’ in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*.

of the Hegelian philosophical system, cohere with Marx's historical materialist account of society? To answer this question we will need to refer, as Horkheimer does, to the fundamental principle of Hegel's idealist philosophy, namely that a truly adequate knowledge of reality involves more than the analytic cognition of independent, discrete elements, and is obliged rather to discover the principle of structure which governs the development of the world as a systematic whole. In what follows I shall explore in some detail various assumptions underlying this general methodological stance, and more particularly I shall be concerned to illuminate the relation between Hegel's concept of totality and the Frankfurt School's vision of a form of materialism constructed around an integrated multi-disciplinary approach to social theory. Of necessity this will involve reconstructing some of the original argument underpinning Hegel's totalising vision, a vision that is all too often celebrated by Marxists but rarely subjected to careful scrutiny. Indeed, it is my belief that until the methodological principles underpinning Hegel's account of the Logical Idea have been brought out into the open, any notion of a materialist methodology derived from that account must remain suspect. More particularly, if we are to take seriously the claim that Hegel's method underpins the work of Marx, the problem of constructing a genuinely materialist dialectic on the basis of the Hegelian subject-object totality must be adequately addressed. For as I shall argue in the final section of this chapter, without further refinement the Hegelian Marxism of Lukács and Horkheimer has a strong tendency to obviate the distinction between Hegel's idealist totality and Marx's materialist reconstruction of that system.

*Social Theory and the Concept of Totality*

In a footnote to his discussion of Marx's method and its relation to the Hegelian concept of totality, Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* refers the interested reader to a section in the *Science of Logic* concerning the relationship of Whole and Part.<sup>3</sup> This reference, it should be said, is somewhat misleading, for if we pursue it then we find that the Whole-Part relation is not at all synonymous with Hegel's notion of totality but that on the contrary is regarded by Hegel as "immediate", as a category in the realm of Appearance rather than Essence, and therefore as something which Science is obliged to transcend.<sup>4</sup> As Hegel observes: "The immediate relation is that of the Whole and the Parts. The content is the whole, and consists of the parts (the form), its counterpart. The parts are *diverse* from one another. It is they that possess independent being."<sup>5</sup> In the *Zusätze* to this passage, he goes on to explain that the relation of Whole and Part is an example of an *external* or *mechanical* relation in which terms retain their identity independently of the holding of the relation. Thus, if a part is removed from a whole the identity of that part is unaffected, as is the identity of those parts remaining in the original whole. In the above passage therefore, when Hegel speaks of a Whole, he is referring to what on another occasion he calls a "dead, mechanical aggregate", a contingent grouping of objects each of which is capable of existing independently of the aggregate to which they happen to belong.<sup>6</sup> As Hegel

---

<sup>3</sup> See footnote #14 to 'What is Orthodox Marxism?' in *History and Class Consciousness*.

<sup>4</sup> Despite this footnote Lukács himself does not confuse the concept of totality with Hegel's category of Whole and Part.

<sup>5</sup> *Hegel's Logic*, §135

puts it, the unity of an aggregated Whole is "external to the matter" of its constituent parts, in other words the relations which define the Whole are extrinsic to the being of the individual elements of which it is composed.<sup>7</sup>

Now for Hegel, as for Horkheimer, this way of thinking about the world, of seeing it as a mechanical aggregate, is deeply rooted in the theoretical tradition of Enlightenment. It is the basis of the materialism of thinkers such as Hobbes, d'Alembert, Diderot and Holbach, and constitutes a mode of thought which has been characteristic of bourgeois theoretical culture up to and including the present day. According to this doctrine the world is, at its most fundamental level, a system of material particles whose pattern of interaction determines what will and will not occur at successive levels of macro-reality. As Horkheimer observes: "The direction of physicalist materialism in the seventeenth century ... allowed the definitive equating of reality and body."<sup>8</sup> On the basis of this equation, atomistic science predicted that all phenomena, social as well as natural, would one day reduce to material motion, and in consequence all science to the theory of that motion. Describing the pervasive influence of this kind of atomism on classical bourgeois culture, Charles Taylor has commented that it is a theoretical perspective that "develops through such diverse

---

<sup>6</sup> *Science of Logic*, p.518.

<sup>7</sup> Horkheimer is clearly alluding to this idea when he writes: "The materialism schooled in Hegel's logic has always been aware that the abstract elements derived from analysis cannot be simply added up to coincide with the original phenomena. Abstraction and analysis are transformative activities. Their effect must be sublated again in the act of knowing ..." I shall argue that this act of sublation is achieved by Horkheimer's notion of an inter-disciplinary materialism. ('The Rationalism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy' in *Between Philosophy and Science*, p.234)

<sup>8</sup> 'Materialism and Metaphysics' in *Critical Theory: Selected Writings*, p.25.

thinkers as Bacon, Hobbes, Descartes, Locke; and authenticated by the science of Galileo and Newton, it entrenches itself in the eighteenth century not only as a theory of knowledge, but also as a theory of man and society".<sup>9</sup> One must add that a very similar perspective can be discerned in the work of Engels, Plekhanov, Kautsky and indeed most other orthodox Marxists. For despite the fact that Engels and his followers frequently denied that their materialism could be equated with what they called "mechanical materialism", it is certainly true that these thinkers believed that descriptions of consciousness could be reduced to descriptions of matter or material process.<sup>10</sup> In making this claim, orthodox Marxism, like Enlightenment materialism, prepares the ground for a reductivist account of the behaviour of both the individual subject as well as individuals grouped together in social formations.

In what follows, I shall argue that Hegel's concept of totality is best understood as an argument against this atomistic strand of Enlightenment thought. Thus one way of characterising his dispute with Enlightenment is to focus on what might be called the doctrine of *external relations*, a doctrine which it will be argued provides most of the metaphysical underpinning for atomistic thinking. Sharply opposed to dialectical thought, it proposes that there is a fundamental distinction to be made between the properties of an object and the relations it enters into. More particularly it claims that it is the properties that an object has in itself that are decisive in establishing its

---

<sup>9</sup> Hegel, p.4.

<sup>10</sup> As Engels puts it in *Ludwig Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy*: "our consciousness and thinking, however suprasensuous they may seem, are the product of a material, bodily organ, the brain. Matter is not a product of mind, but mind merely the highest product of matter. This is, of course, pure materialism." (*Selected Works : Marx and Engels*, p.596)

identity, in determining what kind of thing it is. By contrast, the relations which a thing participates in are regarded as extrinsic to the question of its identity. Thus Locke, commenting upon the idea of a relation, writes that: "it be not contained in the real existence of things, but something extraneous and superinduced."<sup>11</sup> In other words, whatever various relations a thing may enter into, these may all cease to hold without affecting the identity of the thing itself. In the context of the above argument, the physical sciences are often cited as an example of a knowledge that holds firmly to the distinction between properties and relations. For instance, in the case of a system of spatial relations we may suppose that all of these might change, without at the same time supposing that the identity of the elements thus related undergoes any kind of modification at all. As one philosopher of science has remarked, for the atomist: "the constituents of every spatio-temporal object lie within its boundaries and its properties follow from them."<sup>12</sup> Now the logic of this position points to a connection that exists between the doctrine of external relations and one particularly influential form of atomistic thinking, namely reductive materialism. This form of materialism, still influential in the natural sciences, argues that fundamentally reality consists of individual material objects standing in specific spatio-temporal relations to each other and that every other feature of the world must at least in principle be reducible to these objects and their changing patterns of configuration. From this it follows that all science reduces to the micro-physical, and insofar as a theory appears to resist or be incapable of such reduction it must be judged as a poor approximation to genuine

---

<sup>11</sup> *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, Book II, Chapter 25, §8.

<sup>12</sup> Mellor, D., 'The Reduction of Society', *Philosophy*, 57, 1982, p.56.

science.<sup>13</sup>

Now from Hegel's point of view what is wrong with the above program is not so much that it is false but that it is significantly incomplete, that it concentrates exclusively upon the activity of *analysis* and thereby ignores the fact that in order to comprehend a concrete living whole there is a need for a complementary process of *synthesis*. He illustrates this idea by means of a number of *organicist* arguments deriving from the biological sciences. Thus in the discussion of philosophical method with which the *Phenomenology* opens, Hegel uses the example of a living body to illustrate the idea of a whole whose parts are resistant to atomistic analysis. As he puts it:

...in the ordinary view of anatomy, for instance (say, the knowledge of the parts of the body regarded as inanimate), we are quite sure that we do not as yet possess the subject matter itself, the content of this science, but must exert ourselves to know the particulars.<sup>14</sup>

In the *Encyclopaedia Logic* Hegel returns to this same argument, observing that: "The single members of the body are what they are only in relation to their unity. A hand e.g. when hewn off from the body is, as Aristotle has observed, a hand in name only,

---

<sup>13</sup> The equivalent of this program in the social sciences is the doctrine of *methodological individualism* which holds that there are no supra-individual entities or structures prior to the individual in the explanation of social phenomena.

<sup>14</sup> *Phenomenology*, §1.



not in fact.”<sup>15</sup> This thought reiterates a familiar Aristotelean thesis, namely that when a part is removed from a body it undergoes a significant qualitative change: the anatomical specimen, although materially identical to the living part, is no longer what it was but has become dead matter. Thus in contrast to the components of an aggregate, the parts of a body are *by nature* neither detachable nor interchangeable: outside of the unity of the body, the individual part, despite preserving temporarily its internal structure and material constitution, loses its functional capacity. More precisely, perhaps, we should say that without presupposing a significant degree of complex technological intervention, the idea that the constituent parts of an organic whole could ever be self-subsistent, identical within and outwith the whole, runs counter to everything we know about the world we live in. This does not entail that the analytical knowledge provided by the anatomist is to be discounted, but it does mean that the study of parts in isolation from the living body will never by itself be sufficient to grasp “organic life in its truth.”<sup>16</sup> For Hegel, therefore, if we wish to determine the nature of an organic constituent, it is essential that we see it in the context of an organised, living whole. As Scott Meikle puts it: “We need to observe the functioning of the whole in order to learn what the part is *for*, i.e. what it *is*.”<sup>17</sup> Thus the identity of the individual part, *what* kind of thing it is, is determined by establishing the specific role that the part plays in the maintenance of the life and well-being of the organic unity in question; conversely, to determine the whole is to

---

<sup>15</sup> *Hegel's Logic, Zusatzse* to §216.

<sup>16</sup> *Hegel's Logic, Zusatzse* to §135.

<sup>17</sup> Meikle, S., *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx*, p.158.

determine the way in which its structure serves to maintain the life of its parts.<sup>18</sup> Now according to Hegel, this functional teleological viewpoint is the key to genuine knowledge, not only in the biological sciences but also in philosophy, because it leads the investigator to see reality as the expression, or activity, of a living entity. Furthermore because Hegel grounds his philosophical Science in the dialectic governing the evolution of human society, the organicist argument adumbrated above can be brought to bear on the understanding of social as well natural life processes. This feature of Hegel's thought, as the Hegelian Marxists including the Frankfurt School were to argue, was later taken up by Marx and serves to distinguish historical materialism from the mechanistic theories of history and society characteristic of the orthodox Marxist tradition.

Hegel's critique of the analytical mind, however, cannot be fully understood without considering another organicist-inspired example of the necessity for a holistic form of knowledge. This time the focus of concern is with the various *developmental* stages or forms constituting the life process of a biological entity. In this context he observes that:

These forms are not just distinguished from one another, they also supplant one another as incompatible. Yet at the same time their fluid nature makes them moments of an *organic unity* in which they not only do not conflict, but in which each is as necessary as the other; and this mutual necessity alone

---

<sup>18</sup> Compare this argument with Adorno's remark that: "to know what a worker is one must know what capitalist society is." See his Introduction to *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, p.44.

constitutes the life of the whole.<sup>19</sup> (*Italics mine*)

For Hegel then, the constituent moments of a process of organic development, whilst distinguishable from one another, are at the same time essentially conditioned by what he calls "the life of the whole", in other words by their relation to the *development* of that life. Unlike a purely contingent sequence of events, the stages of a life process have to be understood by reference to the whole process of which they are a part. This involves not only knowledge of a characteristic developmental sequence, the coming into being, maturing and passing away of the entity in question, but also an understanding of the way in which the stages of that sequence are conditioned one by another.<sup>20</sup> For instance, the fact that the birth of an individual is succeeded by its maturation is neither accidental nor contingent: the latter stage is to be regarded as the potentiality of everything that is born. As Hegel puts it, the fruit is the "truth" of the bud from which it came, which is to say that the potential for this particular development is part of what it is to be a bud. On Hegel's account, therefore, the process of life is not a Humean event sequence, but is marked instead by a necessary order, an order grounded in the internal relations existing between its various developmental stages. To suppose otherwise, to imagine that fully-formed entities might somehow spontaneously come into being is, as Kant might have said, to step outside of the realm of possible experience. As an individual subject, my identity is in part dependent upon the specific physiological process of development which has formed me as a biological entity: it is a history which I cannot coherently put aside. To

---

<sup>19</sup> *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §2.

<sup>20</sup> This idea, as we have seen in Chapter 4, plays a large role in Horkheimer's account of socio-historical explanation.

the objection that it is nevertheless logically possible that an individual might one day discover that they had always existed as a mature adult, that their birth and childhood had never occurred, Hegel would reply that this simply demonstrates the inadequacy of logic when it comes to setting boundaries to the notion of possibility.<sup>21</sup> Unlike the mathematical logician, the speculative thinker does not believe that non-contradiction in a purely formal sense is a sufficient basis for a judgement of possibility. In the same way, according to Hegel, the fact that human society evolved in the way that it did is an essential feature of its identity. To illustrate this claim we need only consider his discussion of the Master-Slave dialectic, which reveals that servitude is the necessary pre-condition for freedom, that the labour extracted from the slave is the basis of human autonomy. Indeed a great deal of the *Phenomenology* can be understood in precisely these terms, as a narrative revealing the unfolding in historical time of the concrete conditions required for human freedom.<sup>22</sup> Summarising, it might be said that for Hegel, judgements of identity, whether of the individual or the species, are bound up respectively with the process of their ontogenesis or phylogenesis, that the history of a thing is not contingently related to its identity but is the essence of its constitution.

Having outlined Hegel's account of the concept of totality, I shall conclude this section by making a number of observations concerning the way in which this notion might come to serve as a methodological principle for the construction of a materialist social theory. First it needs to be emphasised that Hegel's organicism plays an

---

<sup>21</sup> On this question, Marcuse's discussion of the concept of Real Possibility is worth consulting. See *Reason and Revolution*, pp.150-54.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Alexandre Kojève's *Introduction a la Lecture de Hegel*.

important role in Marx's own thinking concerning the nature of capitalist society. For example, in the *Grundrisse* Marx argues in strikingly Hegelian fashion that the bourgeois system of production constitutes an *organic* system, the various parts of which "presuppose" each other. As he puts it:

While in the completed bourgeois system every economic relation *presupposes* every other in its bourgeois economic form, and everything posited is thus also a presupposition, this is the case with every *organic system*. This organic system itself, as a *totality*, has its presuppositions and its development to its totality consists precisely in subordinating all elements of society to itself, or in creating out of it the *organs* which it still lacks. This is historically how it becomes a totality.<sup>23</sup> (Italics mine)

In this passage Marx is equating the notion of totality with that of an organic system, an entity with a determinate *life process*; furthermore, he advances the claim that society, and more specifically bourgeois society, should be understood as just such a system or entity. As we have seen, this aspect of Marx's thought was first recognised by Lukács, who argued that the category of totality is methodologically central to Marxism. Unfortunately, Lukács' attempt to develop this insight is far from satisfactory: indeed some critics have maintained that it is doubtful whether the totality that he constructs in terms of a subject-object dialectic is altogether consistent with the general principles of historical materialism. Nevertheless, as the Frankfurt School realised, Lukács' distinctively Hegelian reconstruction of Marx's method remains an

---

<sup>23</sup> *Grundrisse*, p.278.

essential starting point for any investigation of the nature of the theory adumbrated in *Capital*. Whether they were any more successful than Lukács in formulating a coherent materialist concept of totality is, however, a question which will have to await the final section of the present chapter.

My second observation concerning the methodological significance of Hegel's thought relates to the fact that although both of the examples discussed above derive from the realm of organic nature, there is nevertheless a significant difference between them. In the first example, the focus is on the *mature* form of an entity, a context in which the interest of Science is structural rather than developmental. Here we abstract from the life process in order to better focus upon the internal organisation of the entity in question. In the second case, the concept of totality is intended to capture the idea of a developmental process governed by a *telos*, a sequence of changes tending towards some final end. To distinguish between these two cases I shall make use of a terminological convention derived from Martin Jay, who refers to the first case as a "latitudinal" totality and the second as a "longitudinal" totality.<sup>24</sup> Having made this distinction, Jay argues that for Hegel the two kinds of totality do not exist in isolation but bear an essential relation to each other. Thus if we consider a moment in the ongoing, all-embracing, longitudinal totality of the Idea, we do not find a homogeneous entity but rather a series of hierarchically related sub-totalities each of which can be thought of as a latitudinal whole. Hegel's concept of totality therefore has a double aspect: it is structural as well as genetic, involving stasis as well as movement. This tension is richly illustrated in his philosophical anthropology, the

---

<sup>24</sup> Jay, M., *Marxism and Totality*, p.26, p.59.

major theme of which is the progression of the Idea through a succession of forms of life which in the process of their realisation create the very conditions that will eventually destroy them. For Hegel, the demise of a form is always an *immanent* consequence of its characteristic mode of functioning: the form by articulating its essential structure prepares its own destruction. Thus if we consider the *Phenomenology*, for instance, the history of Spirit (*Geist*) is a history whose focus continuously alternates between on the one hand the ever-developing life of the meta-totality, the Idea, and on the other the various determinate structures of thought and action, most importantly the Family, Civil Society and State, which typify the specific social formations involved in the development of objective Spirit.<sup>25</sup> This aspect of Hegel's thought, namely that the dynamic of the meta-totality of the Idea is founded upon the *immanent* structural conflicts that define its various constituent sub-totalities, was to prove of immense importance in the development of materialism. For materialism, as Horkheimer and his colleagues were to argue, is not a contemplative but a critical theory of society: it is concerned to demonstrate that the matrix of social relations which constitute society do not form a harmonious whole but are essentially antagonistic. This intention finds powerful support in the dialectical movement described above.

My final general observation concerning the role that the concept of totality might play in a materialist social theory relates to the way in which this notion governs the fundamental cognitive progression of Hegel's system, namely the transition from

---

<sup>25</sup> Marcuse uses the example of the family to illustrate the thesis that "every particular moment contains, as its very content, the whole, and must be interpreted as the whole." See *Reason and Revolution*, pp. 159-60.

knowledge of the object to that of the subject.<sup>26</sup> Hegel begins this section by remarking that atomistic thinking remains fixated on one particular aspect or level of objectivity, that of Mechanism in which there is a "complete mutual indifference" of objects to one another, each being ontologically self-subsistent as well as independent of the containing whole.<sup>27</sup> Now for Hegel, an adequate conception of objectivity must go beyond that of Mechanism to higher levels of ontological organisation, namely Chemism and Teleology. Thus at the level of Chemism, the relations that a thing bears to others are regarded as essential to its identity, and in consequence the "mutual indifference" characteristic of the elements of a purely mechanical system is transcended. As Hegel puts it: "in the case of the chemical object the *determinateness*, and consequently the *relation to other* and the kind and manner of this relation, belong to its nature."<sup>28</sup> At this level, therefore, the being of the individual is not comprehensible in itself, in isolation from that to which it is related, for here being is inextricably entwined with the being of another. However, even this enriched relational form of knowledge is insufficient for a philosophical Science, because it tells us nothing concerning the *purpose* of the object in question. Accordingly, Hegel introduces a third level of description, namely Teleology, where the notion of objectivity is explicitly associated with that of an end: at this level to say what a thing is, is to say what it is *for*.<sup>29</sup> It should be noted that this conception of the object goes

---

<sup>26</sup> This transition culminates in knowledge of the subject-object totality : a unity of thought and being which was to fascinate not only Marx but also his latter-day Left-Hegelian interpreters.

<sup>27</sup> *Science of Logic*, p.714.

<sup>28</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.727.

<sup>29</sup> *Op.cit.*, pp.705-755.



beyond the Aristotelean concept of an internal *telos* characteristic of a particular species, for it culminates in a vision of reality as a single, living, *purposeful totality* unfolding through the historical process. It is in short the basis of that most fundamental transition in Hegel's idealist dialectic, the transition which reveals that the truth of the object is the life of the subject.<sup>30</sup> Commenting upon this move, Horkheimer observes that for Hegel: "philosophy has the same absolute content as religion, the complete unity of subject and object, a final and eternally valid knowledge."<sup>31</sup> It was this particular content, however, that the Frankfurt School as materialists were unable to accept. Their view of the matter is perhaps best summarised by Adorno's well-known aphorism: "The Whole is the False", a deliberate inversion of the Hegelian formula that the True is the Whole. By this remark Adorno does not of course mean to deny the importance of totality for social theory; rather, he is concerned to challenge Hegel's tendency to construct history as a kind of theodicy, a narrative of progress describing the self-activity of the Notion as it realises itself ever more adequately in nature and society. This tendency derives in turn from what might be called an "expressivist" conception of history, a conception which regards the historical process as a movement towards a determinate end or goal. All of this becomes clear as soon as we take the trouble to contextualise Hegel's formula concerning the True and the Whole. In the *Phenomenology* the context of this identity is a discussion of the general content of a philosophical Science. Whilst attempting to describe this content Hegel remarks that "everything turns on grasping and expressing the True, not only as *Substance*, but equally as *Subject*." It is shortly after this remark

---

<sup>30</sup> For a more detailed account of this particular dialectic see Charles Taylor's *Hegel*, pp.318-328.

<sup>31</sup> 'On the Problem of Truth' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p.185.

that the identity of the True and the Whole is declared:

The True is the whole. But the whole is nothing other than the essence consummating itself through its development. Of the Absolute it must be said that it is essentially a *result*, that only in the *end* is it what it truly is; and that precisely in this consists its nature, viz to be actual, subject, the spontaneous becoming of itself.<sup>32</sup>

For Hegel, then, the True is the historical development of the whole which takes place in accordance with the essential nature of the Logical Idea. History therefore is akin to a process of organic development, of a nature unfolding itself through a process of growth and maturation.<sup>33</sup> By contrast Adorno's aphorism is a warning against intentionalising the historical process, of crediting it with any kind of purpose or final end. More particularly, it is a warning against Hegel's belief that a narrative of normative progress, progress towards the True, can be discovered by means of an exercise in world-historical speculation. Thus according to Hegel, philosophical Science reveals that history is a process of development, the development of the organic whole which is objective Mind (society) towards freedom and rationality. Counter to this, the Frankfurt School regard history as a narrative of domination, the

---

<sup>32</sup> *Phenomenology*, §20.

<sup>33</sup> As Dudley Knowles has pointed out in a personal communication this view of Hegel as an exponent of a grand teleological narrative, needs to be balanced by reminding ourselves that his conception of Objective Mind places a great deal of emphasis upon the notion of *human freedom*. Thus as makers of our own history we are not compelled to realise what is rational. In consequence, the evolution of Objective Mind is very far from being an orderly logical process of development, but is marked from the outset by a series of false-starts and often murderous regressions.

domination of the subject first by nature and then by society; there is no end, purpose or goal to this process other than perhaps the literal destruction of human beings. Thus Horkheimer, criticising Hegel's organicist social theory, writes that:

Reason cannot become transparent to itself as long as men act as members of an organism which lacks reason. Organism as a naturally developing and declining unity cannot be a sort of a model for society, but only a form of deadened existence from which society must emancipate itself.<sup>34</sup>

This suggests a complex, dialectical attitude towards organicist theories of both history and society. On the one hand, Horkheimer is in agreement with the view that society can be construed as being analogous to some kind of organic structure, as a system whose parts are mutually inter-dependent and functionally co-ordinated. On the other hand, he is concerned to question the rationality of this state of affairs; for insofar as society can be understood in the fashion of a natural process it is to be criticised as an imperfect realisation of the social ideal. For Horkheimer, as for other members of the Frankfurt School, a true society can only be the result of collective purposeful action, of consciously agreed means and ends; capitalist society fails this test because the laws which govern its development are opaque to consciousness. In the words of the young Marx, the world that we produce through our activity stands over and against us as an alien other; it is not the result of reason, but rather of blind material forces acting upon and compelling the individual subject into unfree activity. Hegel, of course, would radically dispute this thesis, but in remarking this difference

---

<sup>34</sup> 'Traditional and Critical Theory' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p 208.

we are simply noting a real point of distinction between Marx's materialism and German Idealism.

By way of conclusion to this section I want to return once again to the work of the young Lukács and compare, albeit somewhat briefly, the role which the category of totality plays in his thought with the way in which that concept figures in the Frankfurt Marxist tradition. Let us begin by considering what is undoubtedly the central claim of *History and Class Consciousness*: that the employment of the category of *totality* constitutes the real point of difference between Marx's thought and any form of positivistic social theory, be it orthodox Marxism or empirical sociology. Thus at the most general level Lukács argues that what is distinctive about Marxism is not any specific substantive thesis concerning history and society, but rather that its *method* consists of integrating "the isolated facts of social life" into the historical process as a whole, of comprehending individual phenomena not in themselves but by reference to their position within the dynamic totality of social existence.<sup>35</sup> Now from what has been said previously concerning the Frankfurt School's commitment to a materialist program of multi-disciplinary research, it should be clear that Horkheimer and his colleagues would have been in broad agreement with this position. They would also have agreed with Lukács' argument that the whole that is the principal concern of Marx's theory is not a mechanical system governed by deterministic universal laws, but rather a complex structured unity, the organising principle of which is the dialectic between *subject* and *object*, *praxis* and the world that is given to it. Indeed for the

---

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, 'What is Orthodox Marxism?' in *History and Class Consciousness*, p.8., p.15.

Frankfurt School the merit of this Hegelian approach is its potential for liberating materialism from the causal determinism which so many orthodox Marxists had read into Marx's metaphor of base and superstructure. Where they parted company with Lukács, however, was with his belief that the dialectic of the historical process tends towards some necessary end or goal, namely the unity of the subject and object as realised through self-knowledge of the subject. This element in Lukács' thought, it should be said, derives fairly directly from the Hegelian conception of the historical process as the activity of a supra-individual subject realising its essential nature.<sup>36</sup> Pursuing this thought through the medium of Marxism, Lukács argues that history is the process by which a socially specific class, the proletariat, constitutes itself as both subject and object. Indeed for Lukács what is unique about this class is precisely its structurally determined potential "to see the social totality as a concrete historical totality; to see the reified forms as processes between men; to see the *immanent meaning* of history that only appears negatively in the contradictions of abstract forms, to raise its positive side to consciousness and put it into practice."<sup>37</sup> (Italics mine) As we have seen, despite the Frankfurt theorist's considerable debt to Hegel, this strong teleological thesis plays no part in their appropriation of his thought; indeed it has been argued that their account of dialectic is defined precisely by its opposition to this central principle of Hegelian thinking. For the Frankfurt School, history lacks the kind of immanent meaning that Lukács seeks to attach to it, because it lacks the meta-subject of the proletariat. Of course, this is not to say that Horkheimer and his

---

<sup>36</sup> In the closing pages of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel summarises his thought by remarking with respect to Spirit that the "the other side of its Becoming, History, is a conscious, self-mediating process - Spirit emptied out into Time." (§808)

<sup>37</sup> *History and Class Consciousness*, p.197.

colleagues ignore the role of this social class in their analysis of society; that would be an altogether nonsensical position. It is to say, however, that for the Frankfurt School, the proletariat cannot come to occupy the place of Hegel's *Geist* as Lukács seemed to think it could. Against his belief that in virtue of the structural position of this class in bourgeois society the proletariat must, of necessity, come to a consciousness of that totality, the Frankfurt School argued that no such necessity existed. On the contrary, such a consciousness would represent a wholly contingent historical achievement, one moreover that is constantly threatened by forces of reaction and even barbarism. Indeed it might even be said of some of the later work of the Frankfurt School that if any logic governs the formation of consciousness in capitalist society it is a wholly negative logic, a logic of what Adorno calls *identity thinking*, where those under the grip of this mode of thought lose any capacity to discover the difference between what society proclaims itself to be and what it is in reality.<sup>38</sup> In the final chapter of this thesis, I shall return to this question, and discuss whether, as Susan Buck-Morrs claims, Frankfurt Marxism really is "Marx minus the proletariat".<sup>39</sup> For the moment, however, my purpose is simply to draw attention yet again to the Frankfurt School's refusal to identify totality with the notion of a historical *telos*. Against the Idealism of Hegel - and, it must be said, Lukács - they held to the view that the historical process, at least to date, represents the domination of the subject by the object, and that furthermore the prospect of emancipation from this process cannot be theorised as a necessity internal to the life of society. In summary, the vision of totality offered by the

---

<sup>38</sup> Fredric Jameson offers a perceptive discussion of the relation between Adorno's critique of identity thinking and Marx's account of commodity production. See *Late Marxism*, especially pp.15-24.

<sup>39</sup> *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*. See Chapter 3 of this work for a discussion of the relation between Adorno's Marxism and that of the young Lukács.

Frankfurt School is one that is thoroughly purged of the imperialism of the subject: as a materialist analysis it returns us to the priority of the object, and thereby to the failure of the subject to constitute itself.

### *Subject-Object Dialectics*

The second half of this chapter is devoted to a discussion of the question of whether the *subject-object* dialectic posited by Hegel can be successfully appropriated by materialism. Of course, such an appropriation will demand some measure of theoretical labour, for a viable materialism must have the capacity to distinguish itself from its Idealist origins. This in turn suggests that in comparing and distinguishing these traditions we should be aware of their difference as well as their identity, that we should be alive to the fact that at some point in the argument materialism must break with Idealism. In what follows, I shall explore this question by focusing upon the relation between Hegel and the Frankfurt School. In particular, I shall be concerned to determine how successful Horkheimer and his colleagues were in offering a genuinely materialist reconstruction of the Idealist subject-object dialectic. Part of this task will involve demonstrating that the Frankfurt School's conception of the social totality is not only consistent with Marx's original thesis, but is indeed superior to the orthodox interpretation of that thesis as the specification of a causal relation between consciousness and the material world.

A useful starting point for this discussion is provided by a lecture given by Horkheimer to the Kant Society in Frankfurt in 1931, and later published in the *Zeitschrift* under

---

the title 'History and Psychology'. During the course of this lecture, Horkheimer engages in a polemic against the Heideggerian notion that history is to be understood as the "inner historicity of *Dasein*". Concerning this idea he comments:

Just as engagement with external history illuminates the individual being (*das jeweilige Dasein*), the analysis of individual existence (*das jeweilige Existenzen*) conditions the understanding of history. *Dasein* is indissolubly implicated in external history, and accordingly its analysis cannot lead to the discovery of any ground that moves in itself, independent of all external determination. Real history, then, with its multifaceted, supraindividual structures is not merely a derivative, subsidiary, objectivated realm, as existential philosophy would insist.<sup>40</sup>

This passage usefully brings together a number of elements in Horkheimer's general account of the nature of social and historical theory. Most significantly, with respect to the question at hand, it illustrates his belief that a theory of society must maintain a tension between the subject, seen as an active, consciously reflective bearer of experience, and the supraindividual structures and relations which appear to individuals as an external objective realm of being determining the content of that experience. In fact for Horkheimer this opposition serves as the basis of his materialist conception of society as totality, because it suggests that an adequate social theory begins with the recognition of the *mutually constitutive* relation between the subject and object of social experience. In other words, to view society as a totality is to

---

<sup>40</sup> 'History and Psychology' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p113.



comprehend it as the result of a *dialectical* relation, the terms of which are constituted according to Hegel by a process of reciprocal interaction. This, however, raises the question of the sense in which materialism can consistently maintain that the subject constitutes the object of experience; for without further clarification the thesis comes uncomfortably close to that version of Idealism, criticised by the young Marx, which proposes to explain social structures by reference to the consciousness of individuals. In response to this kind of concern, Horkheimer argues that there is an important distinction to be made between the subject, conceived of as an individual and the subject interpreted as society. Thus he writes that:

The whole perceptible world as present to a member of bourgeois society and as interpreted within a traditional world-view ... is seen by the perceiver as a sum-total of facts; it is there and must be accepted. But there is at this point an essential difference between the individual and society. The world which is given to the individual ... is in its present and continuing form, a product of the activity of society as a whole.<sup>41</sup>

According to this passage, then, the world as it is perceived by the individual is something that is produced by “society as a whole”. However, this formulation of the constitutivity thesis points to a potential ambiguity in Horkheimer’s concept of society. On the one hand, society exists as object, a “second nature” that is simply given, that confronts the individual as an alien other standing over and above them. On the other, it seems to take on some of the characteristics of the subject: society can be

---

<sup>41</sup> ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’ in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, pp.199-200.

understood as an active, productive force that is in large measure responsible for the world that we live in. This ambiguity, however, is not necessarily a defect in Horkheimer's argument but may instead point to the contradictory nature of the object that he is theorising. Thus commenting upon the failure of bourgeois society to constitute itself as a genuine subject he writes:

The individual sees himself as passive and dependent, but society, though made up of individuals, is an active subject, even if a non-conscious one, and to that extent a subject only in an *improper sense*. This difference in the existence of man and society is an expression of the cleavage which has up to now affected the historical forms of life.<sup>42</sup> (Italics mine)

The cleavage to which Horkheimer refers is the gulf that exists between the activity of society as subject and our perception of that activity. Thus society, through the activity of its individual members, produces and reproduces itself on a daily basis, yet this activity is not the result of a unified intentional design on the part of any human agency, either individual or collective, but is rather the outcome of the aggregation of numerous independent decisions taken by individual agents attempting to pursue and maximise their own self interest. In consequence the world of social phenomena appears to the individual as a largely alien, inhuman world, one which is dominated by relations between things rather than relations between independent subjects. This leads Horkheimer to claim that the sense in which society can be thought of as subject is ultimately an improper sense, because the activity of this subject is not governed by

---

<sup>42</sup> Op.cit., pp.199-200.

any form of consciousness or intentionality. Nevertheless, it is in just this improper sense that Horkheimer sees the world as the expression of human activity rather than as a “totality of facts” that is simply given to us. Indeed this is the paradox behind the original Marxian thesis of reification: the social activity of human subjects takes on and in a certain sense actually becomes a realm of inhuman objectivity, whilst simultaneously preserving itself as a form, albeit a degraded form, of *praxis*.

This thesis clearly raises a number of questions. In the first place there is the problem of de-limiting the notion of the object as an object of *praxis*. Thus there is a serious question as to whether the world that is *given* to the individual but *produced* by the action of society can be equated with the world of nature, a realm of objectivity which appears as completely external and independent of both the individual and social subject. I shall say something concerning this question towards the end of this chapter. For the moment, however, I want to concentrate upon Horkheimer’s claim that in contrast to the natural sciences the object of social theory is not independent of the subject but is the result of human activity, and more particularly is the result of social labour. Thus according to Horkheimer, to conceive of society as either determined or constituted by a set of pre-given nomic regularities is to succumb to a reified form of thinking: it is to mistakenly equate specific socio-historic forms with natural forms, and thereby falsely objectify what is in reality the product of the subject. In making this argument, Horkheimer is representing critical theory as a theory with a *de-reifying* potential, a theory that seeks to recover the mark of subjectivity in a world that the empirical social scientist theorises as an objective realm standing over and above the subject.

Now there is a sense in which this line of argument sits comfortably with Marx's original thought, insofar as it appears to represent a fairly natural extension of the theory of commodity fetishism to the entire realm of social existence. However, there is also a sense in which Horkheimer's dialectic of subject and object departs radically from the fundamental tenets of historical materialism, at least as they are usually understood. We may put the matter like this: for most thinkers, Marxists as well as non-Marxists, historical materialism has been thought to involve some notion of what the later Lukács refers to as *ontological priority*. Explaining this concept Lukács writes that:

If we ascribe one category ontological priority over the others, we simply mean that one of them can exist without the other, without the opposite being the case. This holds for the central thesis of all materialism, that being has ontological priority over consciousness.<sup>43</sup>

Here the being that has priority over consciousness is of course the social being of humanity, an entity that for the historical materialist can arise only in and through the process of material production. Now according to Lukács the priority of this realm depends upon the fact that the functions of production and reproduction are the essential basis for every form of human activity, that, to quote Engels, there is "the simple fact ... that mankind must first of all eat, drink, have shelter and clothing before it can pursue politics, science, art, religion etc." This remark suggests that the "simple

---

<sup>43</sup> *The Ontology of Social Being*, p.31.

fact” that we are dealing with is the Brechtian priority of *Essen* over *Moral*: the fact that we must eat before we can teach morality. Of course, whether historical materialism does indeed reduce to this fact is an arguable matter and one that shall be addressed shortly. For the moment I am interested only in establishing whether this conception of materialism might be thought to challenge Horkheimer’s formulation of the subject-object dialectic by virtue of the fact that his formulation appears not to be couched in terms of the priority of either the subject or the object. Indeed if the subject and object are mutually constitutive of each other as Horkheimer suggests they are, and if therefore neither term can be thought without the other, then the opposition between Idealism and materialism becomes tenuous to the point of non-existence. This was certainly the position at which Lukács eventually arrived with respect to his own earlier work: famously, he judged *History and Class Consciousness* to be an “attempt to out-Hegel Hegel” because of its assumption that an “identical subject-object” can be created by an act of self-knowledge alone.<sup>44</sup> Similarly, in the case of the Frankfurt School, it might be argued that in seeking to escape the constrictions of vulgar Marxist materialism, and in particular the belief that the nature of material production determines consciousness, Horkheimer and his fellow critical theorists end up abandoning historical materialism in favour of a form of Left Idealism.

Critics who take this line tend to assume that it is a relatively simple matter to distinguish materialism from Idealism: they appeal to Marx’s slogan that “social being determines consciousness” and contrast this with the idealist postulate of a world produced by thought. This distinction, however, is not as clear as it might at first

---

<sup>44</sup> See the 1967 Preface to *History and Class Consciousness*

seem; for in Marx's sense of the term, every kind of social being, including the process of material production, is necessarily permeated by forms of consciousness. Thus the determination of consciousness of which Marx speaks involves the determination of certain forms of consciousness by the whole complex of practices, relations and crucially modes of consciousness which constitute the process of material production. As an instance of this determination, we might consider the relation between scientific theory and industrial production. Indeed this relation according to Horkheimer is so close that science itself must be counted amongst the means of production.<sup>45</sup> But if Horkheimer was clear about the way in which various forms of consciousness were part of what Marxists called the material base, he did not appear to be aware of the fact that a *materialist* dialectic requires, as Lukács rightly emphasises, some notion of *ontological priority*. All too often Horkheimer is content to simply assert the mutual relatedness of these terms; thus in describing what is distinctive about dialectic he writes:

A dialectical process is negatively characterised by the fact that it is not to be conceived as the result of individual unchanging factors. To put it positively, its elements continuously change in relation to each other within the process, so that they are not even to be distinguished from each other. Thus the development of human character, for example, is conditioned both by the economic situation and by the individual powers of the person in question.<sup>46</sup>

---

<sup>45</sup> See his 'Notes on Science and the Crisis' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p.3.

<sup>46</sup> 'Materialism and Metaphysics' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p.28.

The problem with this kind of formulation is that, in seeking to avoid the crudity of economic determinism, Horkheimer proposes a conception of dialectic that opens the door for a renascent form of Idealism. This becomes clear if we consider another passage in which Horkheimer defines the subject-object dialectic as a process in which mutually dependent elements act and react one upon the other.

... the subject-object relation is not accurately described by the picture of two fixed realities which are conceptually transparent and move towards each other. Rather, in what we call objective, subjective factors are at work; and in what we call subjective, objective factors are at work.<sup>47</sup>

This somewhat vague formulation of the relation between subject and object fails utterly to establish a viable distinction between Hegel's Idealism and Horkheimer's materialism. Indeed the vagueness of this thesis seems to invite, as many Left Hegelians discovered, a return to the very doctrine which materialism considers itself to have superseded. The reason for this slippage is not difficult to discover: the formula of the mutual relatedness of subject and object immediately invites the thought that this dialectic is nevertheless marked by a certain asymmetry between its two constituent elements. This results from the fact that the object, whether conceived of as society or nature, cannot be thought of as acting consciously in any sense at all. In the case of the subject on the other hand, there is a necessary potential for consciousness and hence creative *praxis*. Thus although it is true that neither

---

<sup>47</sup> Op.cit., p.29

individuals nor collections of individuals are always adequately conscious of the nature of their action - at least in the sense of its real causes and consequences - nevertheless they must be credited with the potential to acquire this kind of understanding. However, in acknowledging this asymmetry there is a danger of privileging the activity of the subject over that of the object, of seeing it as the dominant or determinate moment in the dialectic. Certainly this was the charge made against the young Lukács by his orthodox Marxist opponents, and indeed looking at Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* one may come to feel that there is some justification for this particular criticism. Thus commenting upon the transformation of the consciousness of the working class he writes:

... when the worker knows himself as a commodity his knowledge is practical. *That is to say, this knowledge brings about an objective structural change in the object of knowledge.* In this consciousness and through it the special objective character of labour as a commodity ... now awakens and becomes *social reality.*<sup>48</sup>

In this passage - and there many others like it in the same essay - there is the clear suggestion that a change in consciousness is equivalent to a change in the world, for the world is identified with the activity of the subject, and insofar as the consciousness of the subject changes, so does the world. Thus *praxis* comes to be equated with theoretical knowledge, with knowledge of the social whole which the subject transforms by becoming aware of the dialectic underpinning that whole.

---

<sup>48</sup> *History and Class Consciousness*, p.169.



Now the question of whether or not the above is an accurate representation of Lukács' own position is, in the context of the present discussion, not an issue that is important to discuss. What is important, however, is the fact that this kind of Left Hegelianism, with its emphasis upon the activity of the subject, has an inherent tendency to *look* like Idealism.<sup>49</sup> If this is true, it behoves materialists who wish to appropriate Hegel's subject-object dialectic to take care to formulate that dialectic in such a fashion as to clearly distinguish it from its idealist predecessor. Although this might seem to be a fairly obvious requirement, there is very little in Horkheimer's work which directly addresses this particular question. In the early *Zeitschrift* articles there is some limited discussion of the distinction between Marx's concept of materialism and scientific notions of the relation between mind and matter, but nothing which could be said to constitute a systematic statement of the distinction between Idealism and materialism.<sup>50</sup> If we wish, therefore, to continue to explore this issue from within the Frankfurt Marxist tradition, it will be necessary to turn to the work of Theodor Adorno, a theorist distinguished by a lifelong concern with the question of what it is that separates Marx's materialism from the philosophical tradition of Idealism. Adorno's interest in this problem finds particularly eloquent expression in his late

---

<sup>49</sup> For example according to Lucien Goldmann the Lukacian doctrine amounts to the following: "There is no given world, the object is constructed, and its inseparability with the subject even goes as far as their identity - partial, in my opinion, but total according to Lukacs - in the social sciences. The Lukacsian concept of *Gegenstandsstruktur* has been translated into French as 'objective' - objectivity - but this concept is in opposition to any idea of absolute objectivity. Objectivity does not exist. There is only the structuration of the object by the subject." See Goldmann's *Lukacs and Heidegger*, p.30.

<sup>50</sup> See in particular Horkheimer's article 'Materialism and Metaphysics' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, pp. 10-46.

work *Negative Dialectics*, which although written some thirty years after the first formulation of critical theory constitutes, as I shall demonstrate, a continuation of the debate initiated by the young Lukács', and subsequently taken up by Horkheimer and Marcuse as they sought to formulate the nature of critical theory in the pages of the early *Zeitschrift*.

### *Adorno on the Preponderance of the Object*

At the outset of any discussion of Adorno's work, and in particular his attempt to construct a materialist as opposed to an idealist dialectic, the following pair of observations are worth making. First there is the apparent paradox that Adorno's materialism is based as much upon Hegel's Idealism as upon Marx's critique of that doctrine. The paradox however is more apparent than real: for Adorno, Hegel's thought continuously comes close to the theory of historical materialism. Thus concerning the influence of Hegel on the philosophy of consciousness, he writes:

These days it is hardly possible for a theoretical idea of any scope to do justice to the experience of consciousness, and in fact not only the experience of consciousness but the *embodied experience* of human beings, without having incorporated something of Hegel's philosophy.<sup>51</sup> (Italics mine)

As we shall see, Hegel's notion of embodied experience will play a large role in Adorno's attempt to recover the real meaning of Marx's materialist critique of

---

<sup>51</sup> Adorno, T.W., *Hegel: Three Studies*, p.2.

Idealism.

My second observation is that Adorno, like the later Lukács, is seeking to assign some kind of priority to the notion of the object. As he puts it: “It is by passing to the object’s preponderance that dialectics is rendered materialistic.”<sup>52</sup> The problem, of course, is to specify the nature of that preponderance. For Adorno, who was suspicious of any kind of *prima philosophia*, the materialist thesis cannot be constructed on the basis of a metaphysics of identity, and in particular it is not to be derived as Engels believed, from the scientistic assumption that mind is matter or material process.<sup>53</sup> This is not to say that Adorno favoured a dualist approach to this question, but rather that he rejected the kind of philosophy founded upon ontological first principles of identity and difference. More specifically, his thought takes the dialectical form of denying both the identity as well as the non-identity of subject and object. As Adorno put it, concerning the relation between these two terms: “They are neither an ultimate duality nor a screen hiding ultimate unity. They constitute one another as much as by virtue of such constitution they depart from each other.”<sup>54</sup>

Now at first sight it might seem somewhat strange for a materialist to seek to deny the “ultimate unity” of subject and object; for if materialism is going to successfully appropriate Hegel’s dialectic, then its task is surely to demonstrate that the subject can be reduced to the activity of the object, that to “invert” the logic of Hegel’s Idealism

---

<sup>52</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, p.192.

<sup>53</sup> For a discussion of the influence of Engels’ scientism on the Marxian tradition see S.Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, pp.65-77.

<sup>54</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, p.174.

the truth of the subject is the life of the object. This at least has been the position of those commentators who have taken Marx's statement that his dialectic is the "direct opposite" of the Hegelian dialectic as a proposal to reductively explain consciousness in terms of social and/or natural processes and conditions. Indeed the Frankfurt School, and in particular Adorno, are often held up as theorists who seek to eliminate the subject from social theory, because of their argument that the self-determining individual of classical bourgeois theory has been undermined by the development of industrialised mass culture as well as techniques of socio-psychological manipulation. In other words, the subject has been absorbed by the realm of social objectivity, and thereby reduced to the status of a bearer of the trans-subjective structures and relations which define late capitalist society.

However, despite this analysis of the contemporary consciousness, Adorno refused to equate materialism with the reduction of the subject to any form of objectivity, be it the realm of nature or society. To understand why he was reluctant to do this, it will be helpful to think of the ways in which social theorists have in the past attempted to eliminate the subject in favour of the object. The first such way is to reduce the subject to some kind of mechanistic phenomenon; for instance the early materialists of the Enlightenment, under the influence of Newtonian thought, construed the human subject as in essence a bio-mechanism.<sup>55</sup> Adorno charges that this form of reductionism is an instance of "the reified consciousness that mistakes itself for nature", a consciousness that overlooks the essential relation between the individual and society in favour of a theory grounded purely in

---

<sup>55</sup> Hobbes, for instance, offers this kind of bio-mechanist vision of human beings. See especially Chapters 1-6 of *Leviathan*.

biology.<sup>56</sup> Now in saying this, Adorno is not denying that individuals possess a bio-physical constitution, but rather rejecting the idea that this constitution entails that social phenomena can be *naturalised* through their reduction to a set of processes within the natural order. For Adorno, understanding the action of subjects in society necessarily involves reference to the consciousness of those subjects, and in particular to the various socially-produced forms of self-understanding, forms which Marx refers to as ideologies and which are essential to the *identification* of the action in question. Thus an act of exchange counts as an act of exchange not in virtue of any physiological state of the participants to this economic relation but through the conformity of that act to the norms governing exchange.<sup>57</sup> In other words, social being necessarily involves and is constituted by socio-historically situated forms of consciousness; consequently the being of the subject in society is distinct from the being of an entity in the realm of nature. Commenting upon the importance of consciousness for materialism, Adorno observes: “Dialectics lies in things, but it could not exist without the consciousness that reflects it - no more than it can evaporate into that consciousness. If matter were total, undifferentiated and flatly singular, there would be no dialectics in it.”<sup>58</sup> Contrary, therefore, to the scientific reductionism of vulgar Marxism, a reductionism that equates consciousness with “matter in motion”, critical theory advances a conception of materialism which holds to the irreducibility of the subject, which insists upon the necessity

---

<sup>56</sup> ‘Subject and Object’ in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, p.505.

<sup>57</sup> Commenting upon the role of what he calls “identity thinking” in the exchange process Adorno writes: “The exchange principle, the reduction of human labour to the abstract universal concept of average working hours, is fundamentally akin to the principle of identity. Exchange is the social model of the principle, *and without the principle there would be no exchange*; it is through exchange that non-identical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical.” (Italics mine), *Negative Dialectics*, p.146.

<sup>58</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.205.

of understanding social reality through a consideration of consciousness, without at the same time equating that reality with consciousness.

However, in emphasising the social nature of the subject Adorno was careful to avoid another form of reductionism, namely the reduction of the individual to an instance of supra-individual structures of social being. At first sight this might seem a strange position for a historical materialist to take: certainly within the Marxist tradition there has been a persistent tendency to discount the individual and focus instead upon explanations centred around the macro-processes of social production and reproduction. Although in the next chapter we shall consider in much greater detail why Adorno as well as other members of the Frankfurt School wanted to resist this tendency, a few brief remarks on the topic will not be out of place at this point in the discussion. To begin with, therefore, we observe that in contrast to the tradition of German Idealism which seeks to demote the empirical subject in favour of some kind of transcendental meta-subject, be it Kant's transcendental unity of apperception or Hegel's *Geist*, Adorno and his colleagues held fast to the importance of the contingent, suffering, and necessarily finite individual. Furthermore, this attachment to the individual is maintained not only in the context of philosophical criticism but also with respect to social theory. As Adorno observes: "The separation of sociology and psychology is both correct and false."<sup>59</sup> Correct, because it helps theory to resist the pull of social reductionism, to hold to an irreducible psychological moment in the explanation of human behaviour; false, because this separation encourages academic

---

<sup>59</sup> 'Sociology and Psychology', *New Left Review*, 46 (Nov-Dec 1967), p.78.

specialists to “relinquish the attempt to know the totality”.<sup>60</sup> It is in this context that Martin Jay has argued that the desire to preserve the individual as an object of theoretical concern is motivated by a hedonistic current in Critical Theory, by an insistence upon the importance of “genuine corporeal gratification” for materialist ethical thought.<sup>61</sup> Although Jay qualifies the notion of corporeal gratification by insisting that it be *genuine* gratification the remark is to some extent misleading, in that it suggests a kind of Left Utilitarianism. To guard against this confusion it must be emphasised, as Jay does not, that for the Frankfurt School the notion of “gratification” is not a primitive unanalysable concept but is grounded in the concept of human *need*. However, having said this it is also true to say that for Adorno and his colleagues, unlike so many traditional Marxists, a genuine materialism necessarily returns thought to the *sensuousness* of human existence, to the fact that the subject is an object amongst other objects, a body which acts and is acted upon by the world in which it is situated. In doing this Frankfurt Marxism reminds the theoretician of the sensual nature of the confrontation between the *individual* and the external world of nature and society, and thereby preserves that experience as an essential moment for theory.<sup>62</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> Op.cit., p.78.

<sup>61</sup> *Adorno*, p.88

<sup>62</sup> However, this emphasis upon the fulfilment of human need should not be confused with the productivist project characteristic of orthodox Marxism. Speaking of the moment of truth in the utopian tradition Adorno writes: “Enjoyment itself would be affected, just as its present framework is inseparable from operating, planning, having one’s way, subjugating. *Rien faire comme une bete*, lying on water and looking peacefully at the sky, ‘being, nothing else, without any further definition and fulfilment’, might take the place of process, act and satisfaction, and so truly keep the promise of dialectical logic that it would culminate in its origin. None of the abstract concepts comes closer to fulfilled utopia than that of eternal peace.” *Minima Moralia*, p.157.

But if the subject is not to be reduced to any form of objectivity, whether as bio-physical mechanism or bearer of supra-individual social structures, neither is it to be thought of as apart from the object. Indeed for Adorno, the key to understanding historical materialism, to seeing it as distinct from the various metaphysical forms of materialism, is to consider the way in which for Marx “the object enters into the subject”. By reflecting upon this particular mediation we will discover that in a materialist dialectic of subject and object, the latter is the dominant element. Thus as Adorno observes:

Subjectivity changes its quality in a context in which it is unable to evolve on its own. Due to the inequality inherent in the concept of mediation, the subject enters into the object altogether differently from the way in which the object enters into the subject. An object can be conceived only by a subject but always remain something other than the subject, whereas a subject by its very nature is from the outset an object as well. Not even as an idea can we conceive a subject that is not a object; but we can conceive an object that is not a subject. To be an object also is part of the meaning of subjectivity; but it is not equally part of the meaning of objectivity to be a subject.<sup>63</sup>

According to Adorno, then, there is an important asymmetry between the concept of the subject and that of the object, an asymmetry which depends upon the fact that the very notion of subjectivity logically presupposes a realm of objectivity. Thus we can

---

<sup>63</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, p.183



conceive of a world without subjects, but we cannot conceive of a subject without an object, for subjectivity requires embodiment. That is to say if the subject is not an object amongst other objects, if it does not act and is not acted upon by those objects, then there would be no such thing as subjectivity. This dependence is not a contingent fact but arises from the very concept of subjectivity. In other words the Husserlian project of discovering the subject through the process of “bracketing off” the object is completely misconceived: to exclude the world of the object is to deny the subject. As Adorno puts it:

The pronoun ‘my’ points to a subject as an object among objects, and again without this ‘my’ there would be no ‘I think’. The being of a subject is taken from objectivity - a fact that lends a touch of objectivity to the subject itself

...<sup>64</sup>

Here Adorno is arguing that the object is a logical condition of the subject, that the Kantian “I think” depends upon the existence of the human body “as an object amongst other objects”. To this it might be objected that Adorno is equivocating between two quite distinct notions of objectivity. The first involves the idea of the subject’s active embodiment: the thinker is a doer, or, as Hegel puts it thought and will are not independent categories. The second notion, illustrated in the quotation above, concerns the objectivity involved in an act of self-reference. This latter kind is supposed to be a consequence of a theory of truth and linguistic reference rather than the pattern of dialectical argument associated with Hegel’s philosophy of action. This

---

<sup>64</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 183-84.

objection, however, cannot be sustained. Adorno's reflections upon the use of deictic pronouns refer directly to the dialectic of self and other: to speak of *myself* supposes something that is *not-myself*, a distinction that can only be made, according to him, in the context of selves that are embodied and exist within a common material reality. To put it another way the consciousness that I possess as a subject is predicated upon *my* awareness of *my* body in its sensory as well as practical relation to a world of objects that surrounds it. In making this claim, Adorno is drawing upon the legacy of German Idealism, and in particular the Kantian thesis that "the consciousness of my existence is at the same time an immediate consciousness of the existence of other things outside me."<sup>65</sup> In short consciousness is not some kind of immediate, inner datum as it is for Cartesians and radical empiricists, but is necessarily mediated through the physical life process.

Thus, if we consider the realm of sensation we discover that far from providing the basis for Idealism's constitutive subject, sensation points to something which cannot be reduced to consciousness. This is because sensation is inherently bound up with physicality, that it has, as Adorno puts it, an essential "somatic moment." Hence, our visual experience of colour is dependent upon experience of *coloured objects*, our tactile experience upon experience of the *surface of objects*, and so on. This is not a simple counter-assertion but derives from the phenomenology of sensation itself : to perceive a colour is to perceive *something* that has that colour and moreover stands in a determinate spatial relation to one's own body. As Hegel observes in his discussion of the Thing and its Properties (*das Ding und seine Eigenschaften*), the ability to

---

<sup>65</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason*, B276.

recognise properties depends upon the ability to ascribe them to objects, and that in consequence the notion of experience depends upon the notion of experience of objectivity.<sup>66</sup> In short, if we reflect upon the structure of perception then we come to the conclusion that our perceptual experience is necessarily structured as an embodied experience of *things* and that *contra* Cartesianism, it cannot be radically disconnected from the somatic.

As presented so far, Adorno's reflections on the relation between subject and object, whilst clearly anchored in the Idealism of Kant and Hegel, might seem considerably removed from Marx's historical materialism. But here we need to make a distinction between what Marx himself actually said and the account of his doctrine presented by Marxist orthodoxy, an account which nearly always takes as its starting point the preface to the *Critique of Political Economy*. On the basis of that text, materialism is constructed primarily as a causal hypothesis relating changes in the material base of social life to changes in the superstructure of ideas. However, I shall argue that by focusing upon the corporeal nature of the subject, by - so to speak - prioritising the body, Adorno returns us to the actual principle of Marx's materialism. In essence, my argument is that the notion of an embodied consciousness is necessarily bound up with the concepts of *need* and *labour*. What this means is that the subject, considered as an embodied consciousness, cannot relate to the world in a purely detached or contemplative fashion, but is forced by nature to sustain the body, to satisfy a range of biologically determined needs. In consequence, the human subject exists under a compulsion to act, and specifically to labour, whether directly or through the labour of

---

<sup>66</sup> Having established this thesis Hegel, of course, immediately seeks to re-establish

others. It is this compulsion which, according to materialism, forms the basis not only of consciousness but sociality, for it leads inexorably towards the development of social labour: a system of production in which individual producers do not work directly for themselves but in order to satisfy a portion of the total social demand. However, before saying something about the way in which labour contributes to the formation of consciousness, let us see just how closely Adorno's materialism parallels that of Marx. We may consider, for instance, the following passage from the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*:

Hunger is a natural need; it therefore requires a nature and an object outside itself in order to satisfy and still itself. Hunger is the acknowledged need of my body for an object which exists outside itself and which is indispensable to its integration and to the expression of its essential nature.<sup>67</sup>

The purpose of this observation, as Marx himself makes clear, is to draw attention to the objectivity of biological need, to point to the fact that the human subject does not relate to the world as a disembodied consciousness but as a being marked out, by *interalia*, hunger and thirst. Indeed there is an essential dependency of the subject upon the body: we are constituted as part of nature and in consequence, and on a daily basis, must struggle to maintain that constitution. Against the pretensions of the subject itself - and here it should be said that idealism develops those pretensions to their maximum - Marx reminds us that the human subject is a "natural, embodied,

---

the primacy of Spirit by demonstrating that it is the truth of the object.

<sup>67</sup> Marx: *Early Writings*, p.390.

sentient, objective being” and in virtue of this fact “a suffering, conditioned and limited being.”<sup>68</sup> We might add that this latter description comes out of the former because the objects of human need are independent of us, because we require them whilst they remain indifferent to our condition. Yet according to Marx, this confrontation between the corporeal self and its other is not simply a negative affair; the awareness of need that is unfulfilled is the starting point for the activity through which the subject comes to define itself. This activity is of course *labour*, the process through which the individual, as well as society as a whole, seeks to overcome the condition of need, and in so doing comes to realise what for Marx is the *species being* of humanity.

Now for Adorno this argument, whilst central to historical materialism, does not originate with Marx, but rather with Hegel’s speculative history of the master-slave relation.<sup>69</sup> Thus in the following passage taken from a section in *Negative Dialectics* entitled ‘The Concept of Mind’, Adorno writes:

We know that Hegel, in his chapter on master and slave, develops the genesis of self-consciousness from the labour relation, and that he does this by adjusting the I to its self-determined purpose as well as to heterogeneous matter. The origin of the “I” in “Not I” remains scarcely veiled.<sup>70</sup>

---

<sup>68</sup> Op.cit. p.389

<sup>69</sup> In conversation Dudley Knowles has pointed out that this idea is also present in Hegel’s discussion of “the right of the objectivity of the action”. See *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §120.

<sup>70</sup> Marx: *Early Writings*, p.389

Here Adorno credits Hegel with the discovery that self-consciousness is an emergent feature of the labour process, that in the confrontation between the slave and the world the former comes to recognise itself through a process of externalisation. That is to say, the slave in seeking to transform the world transforms himself, for he learns what he is and what he is capable of in the very moment that he serves the purpose of another. But once again in recognising this element of Hegel's thought Adorno is simply reiterating what Marx himself had to say concerning the significance of Hegelian thought. Thus Marx observes:

The importance of Hegel's *Phenomenology* and its final result - the dialectic of negativity as the moving and producing principle - lies in the fact that Hegel conceives the self-creation of man as a process, objectification as loss of object, as alienation and as supersession of this alienation; that he therefore grasps the nature of labour and conceives objective man ... as the result of his own labour.<sup>71</sup>

But, however, positively one might care to view the labour process - and there can be no doubt that both Hegel and Marx regarded the historical expansion of labour as the basis of human freedom - it is essential to recognise that this process cannot be self-determined, but is driven by the internal need of the subject confronted by scarcity as well as the operation of natural law.<sup>72</sup> For this reason Marx always took care to separate the realm of freedom from that of necessity and to locate the former in that

---

<sup>71</sup> Op.cit., p.389

<sup>72</sup> Hegel, of course, would deny this, arguing that through the system of social labour humanity realises its immanent goal of freedom and self-determination.

portion of human time which has escaped the burden of labour.

To conclude this chapter, I want to draw the various strands of the preceding discussion together so as to suggest what Adorno means by his notion of the preponderance of the object. The first sense which we can attach to his thesis is the idea that there is a realm of objectivity, the world of nature, that exists independently of the subject. More exactly we shall say that this realm, unlike society, is ontologically independent of any kind of human activity: it is neither the product of mental nor manual labour. In taking this position, Adorno is distancing materialism from the idealist conception of nature as being in some sense the creation of thought. Thus for Kant, time and space are not mind-independent realities, but forms of intuition presupposed by the very concept of experience; whilst in the case of Hegel, the whole of Nature is the Idea passed over into its Otherness, and as such is part of the movement by which thought comes to a knowledge of itself. Against this tendency, Adorno holds to the irreducible otherness of nature, to the fact that our experience is to a very large measure an experience of something radically distinct from mind. Of course, this is not to say that we cannot “humanise” nature, that through the labour of generations we have no effect upon the natural world that surrounds us; on the contrary Adorno and his colleagues were all too aware of the capacity of a socialised humanity to control and even dominate nature. What this thesis does remind us of, however, is the brute fact that in its relation to nature the subject is confronted by something that cannot be reduced to itself, inasmuch as it is confronted by its essential other, an other which eludes Hegel’s return to Mind. In consequence a materialist totality, however mediated the relation between subject and object might be, maintains

an essential moment of difference; even if Mind is construed in terms of social labour, as world transforming *praxis*, Nature cannot be reduced to the outcome of that labour.

The immediate consequence of this thesis is the realisation that consciousness is distinct from the object of consciousness, that in becoming aware of something we are aware of something other than ourselves, of something that resists and is independent of our will. This primal confrontation is the basis of materialism: the subject is no longer conceived of as a passive, contemplative entity but as a being located in a world whose indifference to itself it must seek to overcome. Thus for Adorno, as well as for Marx, a genuinely historical materialism is a materialism that locates thought, any kind of thought, within its essential somatic or corporeal context. In the first instance that context is the confrontation between the body and the world, the world of nature as well as society. As Terry Eagleton enquires:

What if an idea of reason could be generated up from the body itself, rather than the body incorporated into a reason which is always already in place? What if it were possible, in a breathtaking wager, to retrace one's steps and reconstruct everything - ethics, history, politics, rationality - from a bodily foundation?<sup>73</sup>

Of course, as the author himself admits, this enterprise is itself fraught with hazard, inasmuch as it threatens at every moment to collapse into a mechanical materialism or "false transcendentalism of the body every bit as disabling as the ideologies it seeks to

---

<sup>73</sup> *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, p197.



oppose”.<sup>74</sup> Nevertheless, for Eagleton the possibility exists that there may “be some way of working laboriously upwards from the opposing thumb or oral drive to mystical ecstasy and the military-industrial complex.”<sup>75</sup> It is this project, he argues, which underlies the work not only of Marx but also of Nietzsche and Freud : in the case of Marx the body is identified with labour; for Nietzsche with power, whilst for Freud, it is the vehicle of desire.<sup>76</sup> To this list I would add Adorno: a theorist whose materialism can best be understood as a synthesis of these distinct but by no means exclusive visions.

---

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> For an interesting discussion of the way in which these conceptions of the body might be unified see Russell Keat’s ‘The Human Body in Social Theory’, *Radical Philosophy*, 42, Spring 1986.

## Chapter 6. Towards a Materialist Theory of the Subject

As we have seen in Chapter 4, Horkheimer's attempt to develop materialism through a strategy of interdisciplinary research is a response to the strengths as well as the weaknesses of the traditional empirical model of social scientific enquiry. Unlike many other Marxists for whom the process of evidence gathering has all too often been a matter of secondary importance, Horkheimer consistently maintained that materialism must learn to utilise the evidential base and sophisticated quantitative techniques characteristic of mainstream social science.<sup>1</sup> Yet in advocating the need for a program of rigorous and detailed empirical research in the development of social theory, he conceded nothing to the general *epistemological* model favoured by empiricism. In fact, Horkheimer's conception of a multi-disciplinary materialism, whilst certainly involving some of the methods characteristic of the empirical social sciences, draws upon certain traditions of thought - noticeably the work of Freud and Weber - which to say the least pose a variety of challenges to the empiricist position.<sup>2</sup> This illustrates the general point that a concern with questions of evidence and observation does not automatically entail a commitment to the principles of empiricism. For that philosophy

---

<sup>1</sup> It is worth recalling that Marx made copious use of various institutional sources of data. The fact that he regarded this kind of detailed empirical study as integral to his method of work whereas Horkheimer's approach appears as something of a controversial novelty for a Marxist theoretician is largely a testimony to the intellectual degeneration of the Marxist tradition in the first half of the twentieth century.

<sup>2</sup> As many commentators have noted, the key Freudian notion of the *unconscious* sits uneasily with the empiricist's view of scientific knowledge. Popper, for example, in *Conjectures and Refutations*, argues that psychoanalytical theory, because it is immune from observational refutation is a pseudo-science (pp.33-59). See also Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* for a discussion of the anti-empiricist quality of Weber's key methodological concept of an *ideal type* (pp.162-166).

goes far beyond the common-place thought that theories must be supported by a body of evidence: it involves a specific and very restrictive interpretation of the concept of evidence, an interpretation which, as I have already argued, was rejected by all of the leading members of the Frankfurt School.

However, the question of the relation between critical theory and empiricism is not the concern of the present chapter. Instead I propose to focus upon the attempt by Horkheimer and his colleagues to unify Marxist social theory with Freudian depth-psychology; for it is this particular theoretical fusion which effectively defines the Frankfurt School's conception of materialism as a multidisciplinary activity. As Douglas Kellner puts it: "The synthesis of Marxism and psychology instantiates the Institute's transcendence of disciplinary boundaries and specialisations and its belief that fruitful theoretical innovation can best be obtained by supra-disciplinary work."<sup>3</sup>

Whilst this is true enough, it should also be said that the Frankfurt School's strategy of theoretical synthesis has been fiercely contested by a variety of critics. On the one hand there are those Marxists who regard the Marx-Engels corpus as a sufficient basis, and indeed the only possible basis, for the development of social theory. And for such ultra-orthodox thinkers any attempt to relate Marxism to insights stemming from other theoretical traditions is regarded as an unnecessary dilution of a body of scientific principles that are entirely adequate with respect to their problem domain. On the other hand, there is a more heterogeneous body of critics who take the line that whatever the merits or otherwise of historical materialism, this doctrine cannot be synthesised with psychoanalytical theory because to do so is to seek to unify

---

<sup>3</sup> *Critical Theory, Marxism and Modernity*, p.36.

traditions which are in reality incompatible.<sup>4</sup> In what follows, the arguments of both groups of critics will be subjected to a close, and it should be said, largely critical analysis. I shall begin by arguing that the attempt to cast Marx's original theory as a completely comprehensive solution to the problem of understanding socio-historical complexes is profoundly mistaken. Marxism, whatever some of its adherents may believe, is neither a closed nor a complete theoretical system. Following on from this critique of ultra-orthodoxy, the discussion will turn to the question of whether, and in what sense, materialism requires a theory of subjectivity. Here it will be argued that Marxists must learn to incorporate into their theory of society some of the concepts and principles of other theoretical disciplines, and in particular those of depth psychology, if they are ever to be in a position to explain the persistence of structures of oppression and exploitation. The chapter will conclude with a general defence of the Frankfurt School's belief in the relevancy of psychoanalytical theory to the Marxian project.

### *Marxism and the Social Scientific Tradition*

It should be noted that the readiness of Horkheimer and his colleagues to give serious consideration to the work of thinkers normally regarded as standing outside of the Marxist tradition serves to distinguish critical theory from the various schools of "know-nothing" vulgar Marxism which seek to construct historical materialism as a universal science of society. Characteristically, adherents of this dogmatic approach display an exclusive, at times obsessive, concern with the task of identifying and

---

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Timpanaro, S., 'Marxism and Idealism' in *New Left Review*, 85, May-June 1974, pp.21-22. Also Kolakowski, L., *Main Currents of Marxism: Vol III*, p.407.

endlessly interpreting a canon of “classical Marxist” texts. Coupled with this doctrinaire stance is a belief that Marxism has very little or indeed nothing to learn from the various theoretical traditions developed independently of, or in opposition to, the work of Marx and Engels. Hence at one fell swoop it becomes possible to dismiss the entire tradition of non-Marxist social scientific thought. Those who adopt this attitude do so because they regard the founders of historical materialism as having produced a body of work that *in itself* is sufficient to develop a wholly adequate theory of history and society. In consequence, reference to any material that stands outside of the “classical” tradition is at best a distraction, and at worst the source of serious errors. Even a thinker as intelligent as Korsch is guilty of being ready, on the basis of often patently flimsy arguments, to summarily dismiss whole schools of thought. For example in a discussion of the relation of Marx’s theory to contemporary sociology he writes:

What is the relation between Marxism and modern sociological teaching? If we think of the sociology originated by Comte, and first named by him, as a special section in the system of constituted sciences, we shall find no link between it and Marxism. Marx and Engels paid no attention to either the name or content of this ostensibly new branch of knowledge.<sup>5</sup>

Here the implication is that just as Marx and Engels effectively discounted the thought of Comte, contemporary materialists should in their turn completely ignore the sociological tradition to which his work gave rise. This dismissive approach is simply

---

<sup>5</sup> *Karl Korsch: Three Essays on Marxism*, p.11.

one instance of a widespread tendency amongst Marxists to assert, usually without much argument, that the various mainstream social sciences constitute a class-based vision of society, in other words a “bourgeois social science”. Indeed for the ultra-orthodox this bloc of theory manages, in some unexplained fashion, to integrate the various, diverse traditions in psychology, sociology, political science, economics, history and cultural theory into a whole that is ideological in nature and which results in a series of misleading and often plainly false views concerning the nature of social reality.<sup>6</sup>

This, of course, is an extremely dubious argument, which falls apart almost as soon as it is examined. For instance, if we consider Korsch’s somewhat tendentious piece of polemic against sociology we note that it presupposes that there is a *single* unified theoretical movement, originating with Comte, and forming the basis of “modern sociological teaching”. In fact at the time that Korsch was writing, sociological theory was already marked by a fundamental methodological dispute between on the one hand, Durkheim’s scientific conception of the sociological method and on the other, Weber’s argument that social theory necessarily involves the *interpretation* of human action.<sup>7</sup> This observation suggests two thoughts: first that the attempt to portray sociology as a unified world view is misconceived, and second that a Marxism which ignores the very real tensions and differences within this theoretical tradition is a

---

<sup>6</sup> Korsch’s argument was echoed some thirty years later in certain New Left critiques of the social sciences. See, for example, Martin Shaw’s New Left Review article ‘The Coming Crisis in Radical Sociology’ reprinted in *Ideology in Social Science*, ed. R.Blackburn, pp.32-34.

<sup>7</sup> For a discussion, from the point of view critical theory, of the differences between Durkheim and Weber see Simon Jarvis’ *Adorno*, pp.44-48.

Marxism which lacks intellectual seriousness.

There is, however, another and certainly more serious problem associated with the kind of theoretical isolationism exemplified in Korsch's statement, namely the assumption that Marx's theory, as originally formulated, constitutes a satisfactory theory of the social life process in its totality. This claim is easily as problematic as the argument we have just considered, for it supposes that Marx's original project of developing a comprehensive materialist social theory was to some substantial degree brought to completion. The truth of the matter, however, is that most of Marx's later writing are principally concerned with political economy, and have very little to say that bears *directly* on the general principles of historical materialism or upon the application of those principles to specific forms of consciousness. Furthermore, if we consider the various political, legal and social structures which correspond to these forms, such as the state or the family, it cannot be said that Marx offers us a substantial account of any of these obviously important phenomena. To suppose therefore, as Korsch and others do, that all superstructural elements can be explained *exclusively* in terms of the original concepts and principles of historical materialism is little more than an act of faith.

The above theoretical deficiency is perhaps most apparent, and certainly most politically significant, when we consider Marx's discussion of the relation between *political-legal* forms of consciousness and modes of production.<sup>8</sup> Here what is so

---

<sup>8</sup> Similar problems emerge if we consider any of the other forms of consciousness which Marx mentions in his 1859 Preface. To take just one example, that of aesthetic consciousness, it is clear that neither Marx nor Engels had a fully-worked out

obviously missing is anything remotely resembling an extended, systematic account of either the concept or reality of the bourgeois state.<sup>9</sup> In consequence of this omission, Marxists interested in the political life of society have found themselves in the unfortunate position of attempting to develop a general theory of that process on the basis of various scattered and, it must be said, not always consistent fragments, in which Marx and Engels sought to address this particular question.<sup>10</sup> The result of this work has very rarely been impressive. As Ralph Milliband puts it: “Marxists have made little attempt to confront the question of the state in the light of the concrete socio-economic *and* political *and* cultural reality of actual capitalist societies.”<sup>11</sup> Instead, discussion has too often focused upon simply iterating certain of Marx’s general statements concerning the nature of the political process in capitalist society, and on this basis making a series of poorly-evidenced assertions concerning whatever specific political formation happens to be under investigation.

---

materialist analysis of either the production or consumption of works of art, nor had they anything to compare with the aesthetic theory of German Idealism. As Terry Eagleton rightly points out: “Their [Marx and Engels] comments on art and literature are scattered and fragmentary, glancing allusions rather than developed positions. This is one reason why Marxist criticism involves more than merely re-stating cases set out by the founders of Marxism.” See his *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, p.2.

<sup>9</sup> It should be noted that Marx originally intended to write a six-volume study of bourgeois society, the fourth volume of which was to deal with the question of the state. In a letter to Engels (April 2, 1858) Marx outlines his plan for *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* in the following terms: “The whole business is to be divided into six books: 1) Capital 2) Landed Property 3) Wage Labour 4) State 5) International Trade 6) world Market”.

<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the failure of the classical Marxist tradition to develop a comprehensive theory of political processes and institutions in capitalist society see the introduction to Ralph Milliband’s *Marxism and Politics*. See also Giddens’s discussion in *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*. Especially Chapter 9, where he reviews various Marxist accounts of the state and its relation to class conflict.

<sup>11</sup> *The State in Capitalist Society*, p.8.



This criticism, however, based as it is upon the failings of individuals rather than any inherent limitations of a Marxist political theory, can perhaps be dismissed with the promise that in future materialism will respect the historical specificity of its object. Yet, this reassurance fails to dispose of the more fundamental objection to a Marxian theory of politics, namely that the theory constitutes no more than a *partial* account of political life. This follows from the fact that both Marx and Engels focus almost exclusively upon the question of state power, in order to demonstrate that in capitalist society the state despite its claim to universality does not exercise power on behalf of society as a whole but rather for the benefit of a specific social class.<sup>12</sup> Whilst this thesis is obviously important for a theory of political life, it is very far from being a comprehensive theory of political life. To appreciate this point we need only to reflect upon the way in which classical Marxism deals hardly at all with the obviously important question of the way in which *power* is transformed into *authority*; in other words the process of *legitimation* by means of which the state secures a normative hegemony over society as a whole. As Horkheimer observes:

The majority of men have always worked under the leadership and command of a minority, and this dependence has always found expression in a more wretched kind of material existence for them. We have already pointed out that simple coercion alone does not maintain such a state of affairs and that men have *learned to approve of it* ... The class system within which the individual's

---

<sup>12</sup> This line of argument derives from Marx and Engels' statement in the *Communist Manifesto* that the modern state executive is "but a committee for managing the common affairs of the whole bourgeoisie".

outward life run its course is reflected not only in his mind, his ideas, his basic concepts and judgements, but also in his inmost life, in his preferences and desires. *Authority* is therefore a central category for history.<sup>13</sup>

Horkheimer's emphasis upon the question of how authority is legitimised, of how individuals come to *internalise* the norms of their society, serves as a useful corrective to the Marxist political tradition. For even where this question has been addressed, the discussion has tended to concentrate upon the question of the *power* that the bourgeoisie undoubtedly exercise over the institutions involved in the process of securing consent to a political regime. What this ignores, however, is any consideration of why these institutions, and the ideas which emanate from them, are accorded legitimacy in the first place, of why it is that the "ideas of the ruling class" should also turn out to be the "ruling ideas of the age". In short, classical Marxism lacks a compelling account of the way in which the capitalist class secures and maintains its political and social domination over society by securing the *consent* of those whom it exploits. To make these criticisms of the classical Marxist tradition is, of course, not to say that the general principles of historical materialism have nothing to contribute towards a theory of political life, nor that materialism is incapable of transcending the limitations of Marx's treatment of this question; it is, however, to recognise that with respect to political theory, as opposed to political economy, the legacy left to us by Marx falls far short of a systematic theory. In consequence the kind of intellectual isolationism exemplified in Korsch's remark above must be recognised as peculiarly self-defeating. It deprives materialism of access to those other traditions

---

<sup>13</sup> 'Authority and the Family' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p.69.

of political thought which although commencing from quite different premises have sometimes arrived at conclusions which are by no means incompatible with, and perhaps may even have the potential to deepen, the political theory of historical materialism.<sup>14</sup>

To summarise, I have argued that Marx's writings cannot be regarded as containing an adequate or substantial theory of social forms of consciousness, and that in consequence the theoretical program formulated by Marx in his 1859 preface remains a statement of intention rather than a description of an actual achievement. This is not to deny that Marx's work says something importantly true about consciousness, namely that the subject is an embodied, socially-situated agent that defines itself through *praxis* directed towards the transformation of both nature and society. But this general philosophical truth, in itself, is not sufficient to yield a theory of the concrete social totality, of the series of mediations which would illuminate the complex dialectic between the subject and object of social experience. As Horkheimer and his Institute colleagues realised, Marx's discussion of this question, whilst it provides a basis for social theory, is no more than a starting point with respect to the task of developing a comprehensive account of the relation between the individual subject and the realm of social objectivity. Although some Marxists recognised this problem - there was for instance frequent talk about "creatively developing" the legacy of Marx and Engels - the Frankfurt School were distinguished by the fact that they openly

---

<sup>14</sup> The obvious example here is provided by Weber's analysis of the origins and function of the bureaucracy in advanced industrial capitalist societies. Unfortunately, most Marxists have either ignored his work or alternatively rejected it as "bourgeois social science". In this respect Lukács is something of an exception: in *History and Class Consciousness* there is a substantial and by no means unsympathetic treatment of Weber's account of bureaucratic rationality.

acknowledged the necessity of incorporating the work of non-Marxist thinkers into their supra-disciplinary version of materialism. More particularly they were interested in producing a fusion of Marx's political economy with Freud's analytical psychology so as to illuminate the two-way process of interaction between the individual and the world, and to thereby produce a richer, more compelling explanation of the capacity of advanced capitalism to integrate and control its subject population than had hitherto been achieved by orthodox Marxism.

This program raises a number of methodological as well as substantive questions. From a methodological perspective one might argue whether a historical materialist explanation could ever be consistent with the kind of explanations characteristic of Freudian depth-psychology, or indeed any form of psycho-analytical theory. Alternatively, from a substantive point of view it is possible to raise all kinds of doubts concerning the explanatory adequacy of the Frankfurt School's specific socio-psychological analyses of various features of life in late capitalist society.<sup>15</sup> Thus one might question, for instance, whether the decay of the classical autonomous individual subject in that society is a real phenomenon, and if it is, whether that particular process of psychic disintegration could serve as a convincing explanation for the incorporation of the proletariat into the capitalist order. However, because an exhaustive discussion of these issues is beyond the scope of this study, I propose to concentrate upon the following two questions. First, does historical materialism require *any* kind of theory of subjectivity, or is it the case that, as Althusser argues the whole point of Marx's

---

<sup>15</sup> For an interesting discussion of this question see Anthony Elliott's *Social Theory and PsychoAnalysis in Transition*, pp.46-76.

thought is to remove, once and for all, the question of the subject from social scientific thought? Second, can the theoretical discourse of psychoanalysis be integrated into classical Marxism without resulting, as many critics have suggested, in a theory that is inconsistent as well as being impossibly eclectic? But even after restricting the discussion in this fashion it must be admitted that what follows is no more than a preliminary treatment of some of the most difficult problems facing the materialist tradition. In consequence, all that I would claim for the ensuing argument is that it may be of some use in preparing the way for a more comprehensive investigation of the relationship between materialism and psychoanalytical thought.

### *Subject and Society*

Martin Jay has suggested that the Frankfurt School's turn towards the question of subjectivity derives from the specific historical context of critical theory, namely the failure on the part of the European proletariat to rise up against a social system that in the first half of the twentieth century was almost continuously enmeshed in a series of profound economic, social and political crises.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, far from engaging in revolutionary struggle as Marx had predicted, large sections of society, including the proletariat, were apparently becoming ever more integrated into the capitalist social order. In the extreme case of European fascism this took the form of irrationalist mass movements founded upon doctrines of racial superiority and class collaboration. Fairly obviously, such developments posed and indeed continue to pose serious problems for the Marxist tradition. To give just one example, there is a clear difference between an

---

<sup>16</sup> *Adorno*, pp.82-85.

explanation of fascism in terms of the *functionality* of that political regime for preserving bourgeois society, and one which illuminates its appeal to the very victims of that society. The first kind of explanation comes relatively easily to the orthodox Marxist; the second is more difficult, for it leads inevitably to a consideration of the various processes by which individuals come to act *against* their own class interests. In response to this difficulty, Marxists point to the role of ideology in promoting various forms of false consciousness which serve to deceive individuals concerning their real interests as members of an exploited class. This move, however, is merely to label a difficulty rather than to resolve it. As Terry Eagleton observes, ideologies “must be ‘real’ enough to provide the basis on which individuals can fashion a coherent identity, must furnish some solid motivations for effective action, and must make at least some attempt to explain away their own flagrant contradictions and incoherencies.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, to be effective an ideology should offer some form of consolation, however minimal or ethereal, by means of which its victims may rationalise, or at least come to terms with their own exploitation.

What Eagleton is criticizing here is the tendency on the part of certain Marxists to stop short at demonstrating, with respect to whatever particular ideology happens to be under consideration, that the system of belief constituting that ideology is a system of *false belief*. In consequence, they fail to discover the specific patterns of concrete social *experience*, and in particular experience of the material life process, which might serve to explain just why what is very often demonstrably false is nevertheless believed by large sections of the population. As Eagleton again puts it: “Any ruling ideology

---

<sup>17</sup> *Ideology*, p.15.

which failed altogether to mesh with its subjects *lived experience* (Italics mine) would be extremely vulnerable and its exponents would be well advised to trade it in for another.”<sup>18</sup> This observation returns us to the problem, previously discussed, of reductivist accounts of consciousness which seek to analyse ideological forms exclusively in terms of interest. The difficulty with such accounts is that they appear to be incapable of explaining why large numbers of individuals give their assent to systems of belief which run counter to their own interests, of why it is that the ruling class can for most of the time rule by means of ideas rather than naked force. To overcome this kind of problem, orthodox Marxists rely upon arguments constructed around the differential power and influence of the various classes. Thus in capitalist society, the ruling class are distinguished from the proletariat by the degree of control and/or ownership of the central politico-cultural institutions of that society.

Now whilst this claim about control and ownership is to a very large extent obviously true, it cannot of itself explain why the beliefs propagated by these institutions command widespread acceptance. Simply pointing to the class origins of those who expound a belief system does not in itself say anything either for or against the acceptability or persuasiveness of that system to the population at large. In short, any theory of ideology which assigns minimal levels of rationality to the individual subject is obliged to produce some account of why particular ideologies appear to the subjects to whom they are addressed as *reasonable* systems of belief.<sup>19</sup> To raise this demand is

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> See Horkheimer, M., ‘History and Psychology’ in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, pp.120-121. Cf. Adorno, T.W., ‘Sociology and Psychology’, in *New Left Review*, Vol 46, 1967, pp,67-68.

to immediately pose another question, namely the question of the nature of the set of beliefs and desires held by individuals to which the ideology either consciously or unconsciously appeals. This thought prompted Horkheimer, as well as other members of the Frankfurt School, to argue that materialism must deepen its analysis of ideology by considering the interplay between the structure of society and the psychic economy of individuals. More particularly, they argued that a materialist account of false consciousness should take into account the instinctual drive structure of human beings. As Horkheimer puts it:

That human beings sustain economic relationships which their powers and needs have made obsolete, instead of replacing them with a higher and more rational form of organisation, is only possible because the action of numerically significant social strata is determined not by *knowledge* but by a *drive structure* that leads to false consciousness. Mere ideological machinations are hardly the only roots of this historically crucial moment ... Psychology must therefore penetrate to these deeper psychic factors by means of which the economy conditions human beings.<sup>20</sup> (Italics mine)

Thus according to Horkheimer, the prevalence of “false consciousness” cannot be explained as some kind of trick perpetrated, either consciously or unconsciously, by the ruling class upon the rest of society but must be understood as the result of the interaction between the instinctual structure of human beings and an exterior social reality. More particularly, ideology should be seen as an adaptive psychic mechanism enabling the individual to function in as well to accept a social order which imposes



unnecessarily high levels of restriction upon instinctual gratification. Any kind of materialism which ignores this interior dimension, and confines its attention simply to the critique of ideology as a system of false belief, threatens to reduce itself, as Horkheimer puts it, to the “rationalistic anthropology of the Enlightenment”.<sup>21</sup> What he means by this remark is that there is a choice to be made between the kind of analysis of ideological forms which reveals their origin in the relation between the individual psyche and society, and the kind which restricts itself to denouncing prevailing forms of thought as a mass cognitive error, to be corrected by the teaching of those individuals fortunate enough to have an awareness of the real interest of society. In the latter case, the theorist is left to impotently assert what it is that individuals *ought* to believe, a position which comes close to the tendency of utopians, denounced by both Hegel and Marx, to build a world in thought “as it ought to be”.<sup>22</sup>

By way of response to this problem, the Frankfurt School sought to discover in the work of Freud a set of concepts and principles capable of serving as the basis for a more comprehensive theory of the social totality, in other words a theory which would have something to say about the way in which subjects experience and come to understand the external, apparently objective world of society. Thus Freud’s account of the formation of the psyche is taken up by the Frankfurt theorists as a means of explaining the phenomena of individuals *identifying* with structures of authority and power which in reality serve to frustrate the satisfaction of their needs. In developing

---

<sup>20</sup> ‘History and Psychology’ in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p.120.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> In the final chapter of this thesis I shall explore the question of whether critical theory is itself guilty of this kind of utopianism.

this kind of explanation, the Frankfurt School believed that they were renewing rather than abandoning the materialist tradition. Furthermore they argued that such a renewal was essential if critical theory was to be capable of meeting the theoretical and practical challenges posed by various developments, unforeseen by Marx and Engels, in the functioning of late capitalist society. However, before discussing in detail what this might involve we need to consider a possible *in principle* objection to the very notion that materialism requires any kind of theory of the subject. Disposing of this objection is by no means straightforward, for it raises some fundamental questions concerning the nature of Marx's theory as well as the general coherence of the Frankfurt School's reconstruction of that theory. Accordingly the remainder of the present section will be devoted to a discussion of this problem.

One way of formulating this objection is to say that Marx's social theory is intended to operate at a level of structure which excludes consideration of the individual subject. Hence, just as natural scientists produce explanations which are operative at specific levels of physical structure, so Marx provides an explanation of historical development which is similarly operative at a specific level of social structure, namely the level of classes and relations between classes. Thus in the preface to the first volume of *Capital* we are informed that "individuals are dealt with only insofar as they are the personifications of economic categories, embodiments of particular class-relations and class interests."<sup>23</sup> This leads to the view that Marxism, considered as an explanation of the historical process, is distinguished from other theories by the fact that it develops an account of that process *exclusively* in terms of relations between social classes

---

<sup>23</sup> *Capital: Volume I*, p.21.

rather than relations between individuals who comprise those classes. From this one might conclude that the Frankfurt School's attempt to synthesise Marx's historical materialism with theoretical traditions centred upon a psycho-biological conception of the subject represents the conflation of two fundamentally different explanatory paradigms. It is not that Marxism is necessarily hostile to psychoanalytical theory, but rather that the problem domain of the former science can be explored satisfactorily without reference to the concepts and principles of a depth-psychology of the individual psyche.

In response to this objection the first thing to be said is that although the argument of *Capital* does indeed operate at an extremely high level of abstraction, and moreover at a level which appears to exclude consideration of the individual, this in itself is not a sufficient reason for supposing that materialism can simply dispense with the category of the subject. This becomes clearer if we consider Paul Sweezy's observation that Marx's political economy is developed on the basis that "all social relations except that between capital and labour must be provisionally assumed away, to be reintroduced one at a time, only at a later stage of the analysis."<sup>24</sup> If this characterisation of Marx's method is correct, then it raises the question of how materialism should proceed in analysing a concrete social formation consisting of a multiplicity of relations other than that of labour and capital. I shall contend that although Marx's own analysis of the process of capitalist accumulation proceeds in a largely abstract fashion, this need not entail that it precludes consideration, at a later stage in the development of the theory, of those relations which stand outside of the sphere of production. This interpretation

---

<sup>24</sup> *The Theory of Capitalist Development*, p. 17.

appears to be borne out by Marx's own discussion of his method of working. In the *Grundrisse* he writes that:

The concrete is concrete because it is the concentration of many determinations, hence unity of the diverse. It appears in the process of thinking, therefore, as a result, not as a point of departure, even though it is the point of departure in reality and hence also the point of departure for observation (*Anschauung*) and conception ... For example, the simplest economic category, say e.g. exchange value, presupposes population, moreover a population producing in specific relations, as well as a certain kind of family, or commune, or state, etc. It can never exist other than as an abstract, one sided relation within an already given, concrete, living whole.<sup>25</sup>

Marx's comment is, intended to remind us that the categories of *Capital* are high level abstractions, the utility of which depends upon their being integrated into the account of specific complexes of social relations and practices, in other words into the account of the total life process of a historically determinate society. Thus in developing his political economy Marx does indeed consider the individual as "the personification of economic categories"; however, as the passage above demonstrates, he is very much aware of the fact that in order to comprehend the concrete reality of "the living whole", materialism will need to advance beyond this kind of abstraction. But in making this advance, political economy is forced to accept the importance of domains of knowledge which are *outside* of the provenance of *Capital*. In other words, in the

---

<sup>25</sup> *Grundrisse*, p.101.

analysis of a living whole, of a historically specific social complex, we encounter a range of phenomena which cannot be explained solely in terms of the concepts and principles of political economy.

This fact has rarely been recognised by Marxists. One exception is the political economist David Harvey, who argues that however much capital may degrade the human material with which it works, workers themselves “are human beings possessed of all manner of sentiments, hopes and fears, struggling to fashion a life for themselves that contain at least minimal satisfactions.”<sup>26</sup> Central to that life is the process of reproducing the next generation of workers, “a process of socialisation and instruction, of learning and being disciplined”, the success of which is essential to the maintenance of the capitalist mode of production. However, as Harvey points out, knowledge of this process is not a “mere addendum” to political economy but “constitutes a *fundamentally different* point of departure to that upon which the theory of *Capital* is based.”<sup>27</sup> Summarising this difference, he writes:

How the reproduction of capital through surplus value production meshes and intertwines with the reproduction of *the lived life* of the labourer becomes problematic. The two dimensions capture, in their opposition, the central tension between the richness of variegated culture and the arid realities of profit seeking.<sup>28</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> *The Limits To Capital*, p.447.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

Now if, as Marx says, the concrete is the unity of many diverse determinations, then this would seem to allow for the possibility of determinations which make reference to what Harvey calls the “lived life” of the subject, and more particularly the life of the subject within the context of that unity. This set of determinations will involve various relations between individuals, for instance relations of power and gender, which cannot be reduced to, nor understood in terms of the categories of Marx’s *Capital*. To take one important example, the relation of a child to its parents is not an exchange relation, at least if exchange is understood in classical Marxist terms as an exchange of value equivalents. Furthermore, the socialisation process in all advanced capitalist states is to a very large extent wholly independent of the market. Unlike processes that are managed by the law of value, and in particular the unplanned, but not unregulated distribution of social labour, socialisation is a process that is *consciously* managed by a range of individuals as well as institutions, by the family as well as by the state. Now although this process has a material aspect, for it must involve the provision of essential use values to the child, it also involves much else. Most critically, it involves what psychoanalytical theory refers to as the process of ego-formation, by means of which the child learns to distinguish itself from the world that surrounds it, to recognise the fact that it is a separate entity capable of acting and being acted upon by the world. Crucial to the construction of this identity is the pattern of physical and linguistic interaction that takes place between the child and its parents. But this process, essential though it is for the reproduction of labour power, cannot be understood simply in terms of its social functionality. On the contrary, the life of the family is characterised by an largely autonomous structure of emotional relations: the

---

“lived life” of which Harvey speaks is one which transcends the sphere of the instrumental and productive. In consequence, this aspect of our social being will need to be explored with the aid of theories possessing the conceptual resources to represent the orders of affective and communicative activity through which the individual comes to social and psychological maturity.

This insight informs Horkheimer’s conception of multi-disciplinary materialism as the unification of social with psychological theory. However, whilst advocating the need for materialism to come to grips with the question of psychology, he was opposed to any idea of what is sometimes called the psychology of mass behaviour. Such a psychology, he argues, makes the assumption of a “mass consciousness”, a supra-individual element subject to its own laws of development and functioning. Horkheimer rejects this assumption as unnecessary, arguing apparently paradoxically that psychology, if it is to contribute to social theory, needs to focus upon the individual rather than upon some fictitious collective psyche. But to focus upon the individual is not to ignore the fact that individuals are constituted in and through their participation in structures of social being, and most especially through their participation in structures of kinship and material production. As Horkheimer puts it:

A differentiated group psychology - that is, inquiry into those instinctual mechanisms common to members of important groups in the production process - takes the place of mass psychology. Above all, this group psychology must investigate the extent to which the function of an individual in the production process is determined by the individual’s fate in a certain kind of

family, by the effect of socialisation at this point in social space, but also by the way in which the individuals own labour in the economy shapes the forms of character and consciousness. It is necessary to investigate the genesis of psychic mechanisms that make it possible to keep latent the tensions between the social classes that lead to conflict on the basis of the economic situation.<sup>29</sup>

Thus for Horkheimer, social theory has a responsibility to explore the ways in which the various macro structures and relations characteristic of a given society impact upon the individual. The outcome of this work will be a social psychological theory that will seek to explain the formation of character types and modes of consciousness with reference to the social situation of the subject. Such an investigation, far from being a diversion from the classic materialist project, is premised upon the belief that the realm of social being penetrates the individual at a multiplicity of levels, including most importantly the various depth-psychological processes associated with the instinctual life of human beings. For the Frankfurt School, the necessity of this kind of work arises from the fact that social life cannot be understood in purely instrumentalist terms, for it is the domain not only of production and consumption but also of activities constituted by layers of affective and symbolic meaning.

An important example of the way in which these various spheres interact and impact upon one another can be found in the Frankfurt School's theory of fascism. Thus in their analysis of the anti-semitism which accompanied that political movement, Adorno and Horkheimer, whilst not ignoring the economic basis of the phenomenon, argue

---

<sup>29</sup> 'History and Psychology' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p.121.



that it represents what they call a “false projection”. In effect, individuals under the grip of this particular political pathology have come to project their own aggressive and sexual impulses onto an Other, namely the Jew, thereby legitimising their murderous rage as an act of self defence. For the anti-semite, the Jew stands as a symbol for a repressed inner life, a life that is so threatening and hostile to the socially-formed ego that it must be destroyed in proxy, by the destruction of its external representative. As Adorno and Horkheimer observe:

Impulses which the subject will not admit as his own even though they are most assuredly so, are attributed to the object - the prospective victim. The actual paranoid has no choice but to obey the laws of his sickness. But in Fascism this behaviour is made political; the object of the illness is deemed true to reality; and the mad system becomes the reasonable norm in the world and deviation from it a neurosis.<sup>30</sup>

Needless to say, most orthodox Marxists would reject such an explanation, arguing that a perfectly good account of anti-semitism can be found by reflecting upon the position of Jews in the system of social production operative in Europe in the 1930's. The problem with this line of argument, however, is that the kind of explanation it favours, namely an explanation in terms of the material interests of this or that sector of German society, is simply unable to account for the degree and extent of the aggression launched against the European Jewish population. To dispossess Jewish financiers and merchants is one thing - the history of capitalism is after all littered with

---

<sup>30</sup> *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.187.

such forcible expropriations - but to seek the physical extermination of an entire race is an altogether qualitatively different phenomenon. Putting things crudely, one might say that although a material interest explanation might be sufficient to explain the seizure of Jewish capital it cannot account for Auschwitz nor indeed the bizarre racial mythology with which the Nazis sought to legitimise their crimes. Here the *explanans* simply does not fit the *explanandum*, for the truth of the matter is that no material interest was served by the various extermination programs; on the contrary, they served to deny Germany the services of large numbers of highly skilled workers, scientists and professionals. This observation, of course, does not automatically support the Frankfurt School's particular analysis of anti-Semitism but it does lend credence to their view that in the case of the Nazi pogroms we are dealing with something that cannot be explained simply by reference to class interest.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, what this suggests is that just as in the life of the individual there are a range of behaviour patterns, as exhibited for instance in the various neuroses, which resist explanation in terms of a purpose that is both conscious and rationally instrumental; there are similarly areas of social behaviour which have to be understood as the expression of unconscious beliefs and desires. Thus commenting upon the appeal of

---

<sup>31</sup> In an interesting discussion of Marxist writings on anti-semitism, Norman Geras makes the following observation: "Describing the build-up to the pogrom, Trotsky - Marxist -sketches both its political background and something of the social composition of the mob. Then he writes this: 'the gang rushes through the town, drunk on vodka and the smell of blood.' Drunk *on the smell of blood*. What specifically Marxist category is there for that?" (*The Contract of Mutual Indifference : Political Philosophy After the Holocaust*, p158.) This quotation from Trotsky is illustrative of the fact that intelligent Marxists have very often tended to ignore the restrictions imposed by the material interest approach. However, whilst this departure from orthodoxy may well result in a theory that is closer to reality, it raises the problem, as Geras' question indicates, of how the various non-material factors that appear in the explanation are to be integrated into the theoretical apparatus of classical Marxism.

fascist propaganda, Adorno writes: “It is psychological because of its irrational authoritarian aims which cannot be attained by means of rational convictions but only through the skilful awakening of a ‘portion of the subject’s archaic inheritance’”.<sup>32</sup> Now if this true, then materialism is faced with the choice of either ignoring such phenomena or of seeking assistance from other theoretical disciplines so as to construct a social theory capable of modulating between the inner life of the subject and the outer life of society. The Frankfurt School’s project of synthesising Freud and Marx is an attempt to undertake that latter task.

By way of conclusion to this section I shall make the following observations. First, that the Frankfurt’s School concern with the construction of a materialist theory of the subject need not be thought of as being *in principle* in conflict with Marx’s original project. For whilst it is true that Marx himself made no attempt to develop such a theory, he realised that the abstractions of political economy would by themselves be insufficient to develop a theory of the life process of an actual society. If this is true, then it is incumbent upon materialists to investigate the full range of institutions and social relations which mediate between the individual and the social whole. Amongst those institutions, the family stands out as predominantly important, not only as the means by which a new generation of workers is supplied to society but also as the most immediate context for the formation of the human subject. Thus the Frankfurt School’s turn to depth psychology, far from being a methodological error premised upon a confusion concerning the level at which Marx’s theory operates, is in fact an attempt to explore the concrete life of society as the “unity of the diverse”, as the

---

<sup>32</sup> ‘Freudian Theory and Patterns of Fascist Propaganda’ in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, p.124.

dialectic of a truly concrete universal. The second observation that I wish to make arises from the Frankfurt School's analysis of fascist anti-semitism. In their discussion of this phenomenon they point to a number of social-psychological features which quite plainly resist analysis in terms of economic interest. This suggests that with respect to the analysis of specific social formations, Marx's thought cannot be regarded as entirely sufficient. As the case of fascism demonstrates, there are determinants of consciousness which cannot be explained in terms of the categories of political economy but which are nevertheless crucial for an understanding of the way in which the individual acts within a social context. Whether the particular synthesis of historical materialism and depth psychology developed by the Frankfurt School can be regarded as an altogether successful response to this problem is of course another question, but enough has been said by now to indicate that the attempt to produce such a synthesis is, from the standpoint of materialism, an entirely reasonable project.

### *From Marx to Freud*

Having said something to counter the general argument that Marxism does not require a theory of the subject, that it can operate entirely adequately at the level of supra-individual structures, I shall now turn to the more specific question of whether it is possible to integrate Freud's analytical psychology with Marx's theory of historical materialism. Certainly some critics of the Frankfurt School have suggested that the very nature of Freudian theory precludes any such possibility, and that in consequence the project of a Freudian-Marxist synthesis is ill-conceived from the outset. Alasdair MacIntyre, for instance, argues that psychoanalytical theory understands society as

---

primarily a mechanism for managing the inherent conflict between the individual's need for gratification of instinctual impulses and a reality which imposes severe limitations on the capacity of the individual to successfully secure that aim.<sup>33</sup> However, according to MacIntyre: "For Marx the question of the general character of the social order and that of the fate of individuals are inseparable and explanatory primacy belongs to the former; for Freud social phenomena are to be explained in terms of the characteristics of individual human nature."<sup>34</sup> Thus the Frankfurt synthesis of materialism with depth psychology is to be rejected because it disregards what MacIntyre calls "Freudian individualism": the belief that the explanation of society reduces to the explanation of the psychic constitution of individuals.

Now in opposition to MacIntyre I shall argue that the above contrast seriously misrepresents Freud, insofar as it portrays him as a methodological individualist unconcerned with questions of the way in which the human psyche is fashioned by pre-existing objective social structures. In particular the charge of methodological individualism must be rejected for the very good reason that whilst Freudian theory certainly does make reference to the structure of the individual psyche, that structure is understood primarily as the result of the *interaction* between the biological nature of the human subject and the realm of social and natural objectivity. Indeed, central to the whole Freudian enterprise is an ontogenetic narrative describing the formation of the psyche by means of a *social* process, namely family based socialisation, which channels

---

<sup>33</sup> The alleged incompatibility of Weberian theory with historical materialism is discussed later in this chapter.

<sup>34</sup> *Marcuse*, p.50.

pre-social drives into forms of behaviour consistent with material reality.<sup>35</sup> Thus for Freud, as for Hegel and Marx, the Self is produced in and through its *relation* with the Other. Now the primal site of this relation is the immediate relation of the child to its parents, but insofar as family life also represents and recreates principles of social reality this brings the child simultaneously into contact with society.<sup>36</sup> In short, the Freudian individual is as much the bearer of socially-established, supra-individual structures, in this case structures of sublimation and repression, as the individuals who figure in Marx's *Capital*.

But if the contrast between Marx and Freud as posited by MacIntyre turns out to be illusory, it is nevertheless true that there are real differences between these two theoretical traditions. As Habermas in an essay entitled "Psychoanalysis and Social Theory" observes:

Marx conceives the institutional framework as an ordering of interests that are immediate *functions of the system of social labour* according to the relation of social rewards and imposed obligations. Institutions derive their force from perpetuating a distribution of rewards and obligations that is rooted in force and distorted according to *class structure*. Freud, on the contrary, conceives the institutional framework in connection with *the repression of instinctual*

---

<sup>35</sup> Steven Lukes makes this point in his article 'Methodological Individualism Reconsidered' reprinted in *The Philosophy of Social Explanation*, ed. A.Ryan, pp. 119-129.

<sup>36</sup> Freud's keen awareness of the importance of the social dimension is brought out particularly clearly in a discussion of the relation between sexual activity, labour and language. See his *Introductory Lectures To Psychoanalysis*, p.167.

*impulses*. In the system of self-preservation this repression must be universally imposed, independent of a class specific distribution of goods and misfortune (as long an economy of scarcity stamps every satisfaction with the compulsory character of a reward)<sup>37</sup> (Italics mine)

This suggests that there is after all a fundamental divergence between Marxist and Freudian accounts of social institutions: the former explains those institutions as the expression of class structure, whilst the latter understands them as a mechanism for managing the instinctual heritage of sexual and aggressive impulses. Habermas differs from MacIntyre, however, in that he credits Freud with a recognition that the conflict between instinct and society is itself socially and historically conditioned. Hence according to Habermas the difference between psychoanalysis and materialism is not that of methodological individualism versus holism, but rather that Freud utilises a conceptual vocabulary that is quite distinct from the technological productivist orientation of Marx. Whilst this difference is real enough, the question of its significance for a synthesis of historical materialism and psychoanalysis is by no means settled. In particular, it has yet to be established whether the Freudian concern with the instinctual basis of subjectivity entails that psychoanalytical explanations are incompatible with a materialist account of society, or whether alternatively such explanations have the potential to serve as a useful complement to that account. Those who take the former view argue that *Capital* presents an essentially instrumental, economic vision of the human subject. In other words Marx, following the tradition of classical political economy, develops a theory based upon the assumption that the

---

<sup>37</sup> *Knowledge and Human Interests*, pp.276-278.

subject can be adequately represented in terms of a class-relativised concept of *homo economicus*. In consequence of this representation the attempt to construct a theory relating the individual to society in terms of non-economic motivation, that is, in terms other than class interest, must be regarded as necessarily inconsistent with Marx's original intention. This, for instance would appear to be the view of Phil Slater, who argues that Horkheimer's attempt to construct a social-psychological explanation of the appeal of Fascism to sections of the proletariat "militates against any real class analysis" and in particular "hazes over the theoretical need for an analysis of economic manipulation".<sup>38</sup> On this basis, Slater concludes that the Frankfurt project is an eclectic mixture of Marx and Freud, a mixture which fails to avoid the pitfall of what he calls "psychological absolutisation".

Rather than confront head on the specific objections of Slater and others like him, I shall argue in support of the following general thesis: that depth-psychology, far from being incompatible with materialism, is uniquely suited to serve alongside Marx's political economy as a component within a materialist social scientific synthesis. As Marcuse puts it:

The psychoanalytic categories do not have to be 'related' to social and political conditions - they are themselves social and political categories. Psychoanalysis could become an effective social and political instrument, positive as well as negative, in an administrative as well as a critical function, because Freud had discovered the mechanisms of social control in the depth dimension of

---

<sup>38</sup> *Origin and Significance of the Frankfurt School*, p.115



instinctual drives and satisfactions.<sup>39</sup>

At first sight this is a rather surprising statement for a social radical to make. After all, most psychoanalytical explanations of behaviour involve extensive reference to the human *instinctual* apparatus, and in particular to the aggressive and sexual drives. This kind of explanation, however, has found very little favour amongst thinkers of the left. On the contrary, socialist theoreticians have tended to concentrate upon the task of demonstrating that human behaviour is to a very large extent determined by so-called objective socio-historical conditions. This is due to the fact that theories of human nature have very often been used by conservative thinkers to justify the *status quo* - i.e., that society as it exists reflects the unfortunate reality of human nature - as well to question the very possibility of constructing an alternative social order. In this context, therefore, Marcuse's confident declaration that psychoanalytical theory, and more especially Freud's theory of the instincts, can play a positive role in the development of a critical social theory appears to be somewhat at variance not only with Marxism but with any kind of radical thinking.

To understand why Marcuse as well as other members of the Frankfurt School believed that Freudian theory contained a substantial emancipatory potential, it is necessary to return to the origins of their attempt to integrate the work of Freud with that of Marx. Now although both Adorno and Horkheimer had studied psychoanalysis in the 1920's, the first clear outline of what a Freudian-Marxist synthesis might look

---

<sup>39</sup> 'The Obsolescence of the Freudian Concept of Man' in *Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics and Utopia*, p.44. This represents the text of a lecture that Marcuse delivered to the American Political Science Association in 1963

like is to be found in the early writings of Erich Fromm.<sup>40</sup> One of the most important of these is the programmatic *Zeitschrift* article, first published in 1932 and entitled “Ueber Methode und Aufgabe einer analytischen Sozial-psychologie”.<sup>41</sup> In this piece Fromm begins by announcing that:

Psychoanalysis is a materialistic psychology which should be classed amongst the natural sciences. It points to instinctual drives and needs as the motive forces behind human behaviour, these drives being produced by physiologically based instincts that are not directly observable in themselves. Psychoanalysis has shown that man’s conscious psychic activity is only a relatively small sector of his psychic life ... In particular, it has unmasked individual and collective ideologies as the expression of particular wishes and needs rooted in the instincts and shows that our “moral” and idealistic motives are in some measure the disguised and rationalised expression of instinctual drives.<sup>42</sup>

With perhaps just one reservation, it can be said that this passage succinctly expresses not only Fromm’s position but also the broad character of the Frankfurt School’s

---

<sup>40</sup> Fromm was a practising psychoanalyst when he joined the Institute, and his early articles in the *Zeitschrift* expressed a relatively orthodox Freudian position. Later, under the increasing influence of Marxist historicist thinking he came to reject large elements of Freud’s original theory, in particular his metapsychology, libido theory as well as the Oedipus complex. By contrast Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse held fast to these central aspects of Freudian depth-psychology. For a discussion of the evolution of Fromm’s thought and its influence upon the Frankfurt School see David Held’s *Introduction to Critical Theory*, pp.110-147.

<sup>41</sup> Reprinted in the *Essential Frankfurt School Reader* as ‘The Method and Function of an Analytic Social Psychology’, pp. 477-496.

<sup>42</sup> *Op.cit.* p.479.

reception of Freud on behalf of materialism. The reservation, of course, is the claim in the opening sentence that Freudian theory should be classed as a “natural science”. Now for an orthodox Freudian this might be taken as a reference to Freud’s early model of the mind as a structure continuously seeking to discharge quantities of psychic energy; thus interpreted, depth psychology appears as closely analogous to theories dealing with systems of physical energy. There is, however, nothing in the Frankfurt School’s appropriation of Freud to suggest that any of its members, including Fromm, understood psychoanalytical theory in this kind of mechanistic fashion. On the contrary, they take as their starting point the idea that psychoanalysis, because it begins with the instinctual structure of human beings, is a theory of a necessarily embodied mind. And it is on this basis, rather than any mechanistic theory of psychic quantum, that Fromm, as well as other members of the Institute, sought to integrate Freud’s theory of the instincts into Marx’s theory of historical materialism.

In the case of Fromm, the attempt to integrate these theories begins with the observation that for Freud the individual’s instinctual structure is conditioned by two factors: an inherited physical constitution, and individually specific life experiences arising from early childhood. This leads Fromm to the view that: “the analytic method is exquisitely historical: it seeks to understand the instinctual structure through the understanding of life history.”<sup>43</sup> Here it should be emphasised that Fromm’s reference to history is more than a loose analogy: it refers us to the life experiences of individuals situated in a determinate social reality. In other words, the history that Fromm is speaking of is a material history, a narrative of the confrontation between a

---

<sup>43</sup> Op.cit. p.480.

particular physical and instinctual structure and the universal of society. As he puts it: “The active and passive adaptation of the biological apparatus, the instincts, to social reality is the key conception of psychoanalysis.”<sup>44</sup> Indeed for Fromm the development of psychoanalytical theory is to be charted in terms of a transition from a discipline primarily concerned with the development of the individual psyche to that of a theory focused upon the question of how it is that society impresses itself upon the mind, conscious as well as unconscious, of the human subject.

It is this notion, namely that the individual psychic structure represents the outcome of a process by means of which the biological is socialised, that is the basis of Fromm’s argument that analytical theory is wholly consistent with materialism. For both theoretical traditions, according to Fromm, are grounded in the conception of the human subject as a subject of *need*, as the site of suffering as well as somatic gratification, of deprivation as well as fulfilment. Furthermore, both Marx as well as Freud related this conception of the subject to the question of social labour. To give an example of just how close analytical psychology comes to Marx’s historical materialism we may consider the following passage from Freud’s *Introductory Lectures on PsychoAnalysis*. Thus in a discussion of sexual instinct and its relation to society he makes the following observation:

The motive of human society is in the last resort an economic one; since it does not possess enough provisions to keep its members alive unless they work, it must restrict the number of its members and divert their energies from sexual

---

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

activity to work. It is faced, in short, by the eternal, primeval exigencies of life, which are with us to this day.<sup>45</sup>

Here Freud clearly recognises that there is a relation between the material basis of a society, and in particular the degree of the development of the productive forces, and levels of sexual repression current in that society. According to Freud, the existence of society is to be explained in economic terms; for social production, rather than the activity of isolated individuals or family groups, is the most effective means of overcoming material scarcity. However, whilst the productive forces of society become ever more powerful, the fact of material scarcity can never be abolished and for this reason society imposes upon its members the obligation to labour. This obligation, in turn, leads to a general restriction upon the individual's capacity to follow a course of immediate instinctual gratification. More particularly, society through the medium of the family, must control and repress the sexual instinct of each new generation of members so as to release energy for the labour process. In summary, what Freud is presenting here is a social psychic economy: a mechanism for distributing portions of libidinous energy to the sphere of productive activity.

On this basis, Fromm argued that psychoanalytical theory, like materialism, takes as fundamental the question of how it is that in the face of a recalcitrant material world human need is satisfied. Indeed both theories give prominence to the concept of social labour, to the world-transforming activity of groups of human beings organised into more or less coherent units of production. This activity has a dual history: the history

---

<sup>45</sup> *Introductory Lectures on PsychoAnalysis*, p.312.

of human society and the history of the human individual as it is integrated initially into the family and subsequently into society at large. Where, of course, Freud differs from Marx is first of all in the emphasis that he places upon one specific human need, namely the gratification of the sexual instinct, and second the rich psychological context in which that instinct is located. Nevertheless it can be said that there is nothing in this central component of Freudian theory which is necessarily inconsistent with Marx's conception of materialism. For example, in the *German Ideology* Marx proposes that the "first premise of all human history is ... the existence of living human individuals." This leads him to argue as follows:

Thus the first fact to be established is the physical organisation of these individuals and their consequent relation to the rest of nature. Of course, we cannot here go either into the actual physical nature of man, or into the natural conditions which he finds himself - geological, oro-hydrographical, climatic and so on. All historical writing must set out from these natural bases and their modification in the course of history through the action of men.<sup>46</sup>

Admittedly, whilst this passage has nothing explicit to say concerning human sexual instinct, the idea that Marx might have regarded this instinct as constituting a natural base or condition of the kind from which "all historical writing must set out" is by no means far-fetched. Marx's thought, at least historically, begins with a concept of human subjectivity as something essentially embedded in nature. In his early writings, he represents the subject as an embodied subject having "real, sensuous objects as the

---

<sup>46</sup> *The German Ideology*, p.37.

objects of his being". Indeed it is through this experience of need, of the subject's dependence upon the other, that the human self is formed.<sup>47</sup> This entails that the subject of materialism is inescapably located in the realm of the sensuous: it is the subject of hunger, suffering, desire, love, pain and fear. But having said this, we come back to the question of whether Marx's thought possesses the theoretical resources to develop this insight; in particular is it capable of providing an account of the way in which an embodied consciousness and society impact upon one another. Certainly, Marx was aware that any such discussion would inevitably have to focus upon the concept of need. For example, having observed that the human subject is a "natural being", he goes on to argue that:

... as a natural, corporeal, sensuous, objective being he is a *suffering*, conditioned and limited being, like animals and plants. That is to say, the *objects* of his drives exist outside him as *objects* independent of him; but these objects are objects of his *need*, essential objects, indispensable to the exercise and confirmation of his essential powers.<sup>48</sup>

Thus for Marx, the relation between consciousness and social being is mediated through the category of *need*, through in the first instance the need of human beings to satisfy a range of primary drives emanating from their status as biological entities. But

---

<sup>47</sup> In his later work Marx continued to emphasise the category of need. Thus at the very beginning of *Capital* he states that: "A commodity is, in the first place, an object outside of us, a thing that by its properties satisfies human wants of some sort another. The nature of such wants, whether, for instance they spring from the stomach or from fancy, makes no difference."

<sup>48</sup> Marx: *Early Writings*, p389.

once this is admitted as a premise of materialism - and I think that it has to be - the following questions quickly present themselves. Does Marx have a satisfactory theory of human need? What needs do human beings have? Are needs entirely innate, or can some of them be thought of as socially produced? What is the nature of relation between the concept of need and that of human well-being? How are needs to be distinguished from mere wants? What mechanisms, whether individual or social, exist for managing potential conflicts between the subject's instinctual goals and the maintenance of social life? How are needs met through specific forms of the social life process? Are some forms intrinsically better than others in performing this task? To simply raise these issues is sufficient to immediately provide an answer in the negative to the original question, namely whether Marx's work has an adequate theory of need. We must conclude, therefore, that Marx who by focusing upon the objective character of the subject helped to liberate the concept of subjectivity from traditional philosophical anthropology, nevertheless failed to provide a satisfactory theory of the process of self-formation through which the subject comes into being.

Now for Fromm, as for other members of the Frankfurt School, psychoanalytical theory offers the best hope from the standpoint of materialism for dealing with this particular problem. In the first place, analytical psychology unlike behavioural psychology, is not encumbered with a positivist methodology but seeks explanations of human behaviour in terms of the beliefs and desires, both conscious and unconscious, which motivate that behaviour. This concern with the psychic life of the subject was important for the Frankfurt School because in contrast with Marxist orthodoxy, they did not conceive of materialism as downgrading the role of



consciousness in the construction of a theory of society. On the contrary, they regard Marx's materialism as an immanent development of the original Hegelian subject-object dialectic, and in consequence as much a theory of consciousness as it is a theory of material activity. However, Marx's account of consciousness, like Hegel's, is not content with a simple description of the self-understanding of the individual, but seeks instead to identify the conflict between our conceptions of how things are and how things actually stand in the world. For Marx, this disjunction between thought and reality is not accidental but is to be explained in terms of its functionality *vis-a-vis* the maintenance of class society. In this respect there is a striking analogy, as Adorno points out, between the Marxist category of ideology and the psychoanalytical account of rationalisation. Thus for Adorno, rationalisation "designates all those statements which, quite apart from their truth content, fulfil certain functions within the psychic economy of the speaker, the commonest being defence against unconscious tendencies."<sup>49</sup> He then goes onto to observe that:

Such utterances are invariably the object of a psychoanalytic critique analogous, as has often been noted, to the Marxist doctrine of ideology: their objective function is to conceal, and the analyst is out to establish both their falsehood and necessity and to bring what was hidden to light.

However, the relation between the account of consciousness offered by materialism and that offered by analytical psychology is more than mere analogy. For it raises the possibility, as Adorno suggests, of the individual's defence mechanism seeking support

---

<sup>49</sup> 'Sociology and Psychology' in *New Left Review*, 46, 1967, p.80.

from socially promoted systems of belief. If this is true the conflict between ego and the instinctual structure becomes inextricably entangled with the conflict inherent to class society. This in turn suggests an explanation for a range of socio-political phenomena, in particular the integration of individuals into the social system, which goes far beyond the kind of explanation traditionally advanced by orthodox Marxism. In short, materialism and psychoanalysis, if properly understood, offer de-mystifying and complementary critiques of forms of consciousness, and because these forms operate at both an individual as well as a social level, an adequate theory of the social totality must have the capacity to modulate between these two theoretical traditions.

However, although the Frankfurt School certainly did conceive of psychoanalytical theory as a form of *Ideologiekritik* complementary to that mounted by historical materialism, their interest in analytical psychology was principally motivated by Freud's commitment to the extra-social, irreducibly natural dimension of human subjectivity. Indeed, what appealed to the members of the Frankfurt School was not simply the possibility of integrating individual psychology with social theory, with demonstrating for instance that conflicts internal to the individual often find expression in the individual's adherence to this or that form of ideology, but rather with the emphasis that classical analytical theory places upon the instinctual life of humanity. Certainly this flies in the face of a great deal of orthodox Marxist thought, which tends to take the line that human history is a largely unproblematic narrative of mankind's ever increasing domination over nature. Paradoxically, this view leads to a certain Hegelian imperialism of the subject, albeit one expressed in an essentially scientific productivist vocabulary. Thus the development of scientific knowledge and technique,

together with the growth of the productive forces, was seen by many Marxists as the means by which human society will ultimately “liberate” itself from the realm of natural necessity. The trouble here, at least from the point of view of the Frankfurt School, is that this represents a return to the kind of dialectical thought which promotes identity over difference. In describing the dialectic of society and nature, the orthodox Marxist tends to prioritise the former over the latter: history represents the increasing socialisation (humanisation) of nature, that is to say, the diminution of the natural in favour of the social.

Against this tendency the Frankfurt School promoted a form of dialectical thinking which emphasises difference over identity, which refuses to assimilate the various fractured narratives of human history into a single over-arching story of either progress or decline. Thus in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Adorno and Horkheimer write that: “Europe has two histories: a well known, written history and an underground history. The latter consists in the fate of the human instincts and passions which are displaced and distorted by civilisation.”<sup>50</sup> Interestingly enough, they go on to suggest that this repression is to a large extent motivated by the division of labour in society, or more accurately by the division of society into on the one hand a class freed from the compulsion to undertake manual labour and on the other a class compelled to engage in the physical struggle against a recalcitrant nature. In consequence, a ruling class emerges which, although wholly dependent upon the labour of others, professes an ideology altogether contemptuous of that labour. Now whatever the truth or otherwise of this particular speculation, Adorno and Horkheimer’s proposal for an

---

<sup>50</sup> *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.231.

underground history of the body bears a striking resemblance to the Freudian concern with the archaic character of the unconscious. To see this, we have only to compare what has just been said with, for instance Freud's discussion of the archaic nature of dreaming where he observes that:

The prehistory into which the dream-work leads us back is of two kinds - on the one hand, into the individual's prehistory, his childhood, and on the other, in so far as each individual somehow recapitulates in an abbreviated form the entire development of the human race, into phylogenetic prehistory too.<sup>51</sup>

The kind of history that Freud is talking about here is precisely the kind of hidden history advocated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a history which focuses upon the suppression of the instinctual basis of human life. And for Freud as well as the Frankfurt School, this narrative of repression is central to the understanding of the formation of both the individual psyche and society.

However, before considering this idea I want to return to the question of the way in which the Frankfurt School's conception of the subject-object dialectic relates to their advocacy of analytical psychology. Now it is often said that the materialism of Adorno and his colleagues represents an immanent but critical development of Hegel's earlier idealist dialectic. Most importantly, it is critical in the sense that as a materialist dialectic it rejects the Hegelian image of an ultimate unity between subject and object and insists instead upon an essential moment of non-identity between these two

---

<sup>51</sup> *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis*, p.199.

poles.<sup>52</sup> This argument, it should be noted, counts not only against Hegel's idealist conception of Nature but also against that version of Marxism, as well other kinds of social theory, which seek not to spiritualise Nature but to socialise it. In opposition to this form of identity thinking, the Frankfurt School, in line with the findings of analytical psychology, emphasise the essential moment of difference, and indeed conflict, between Nature and Society, between the instinctual processes and purposive rationality, between consciousness and the body. For the Frankfurt School, the essential truth of Nature is not that it is Mind but rather that it constitutes a realm of otherness which sets material limits and impacts often painfully upon the life of both the human individual as well as the species. Thus disdaining the standard dialectical move, characteristic of idealism as well as vulgar materialism, of discovering a synthesis which abolishes the difference, Adorno observes:

If speculation on the state of reconciliation were permitted, neither the undistinguished unity of subject and object nor their antithetical hostility would be conceivable in it; rather, the communication of what was distinguished. Not until then would the concept of communication, as an objective concept, come into its own ... In its proper place, even epistemologically, the relationship of subject and object would lie in the realisation of peace among men as well as between men and their Other. Peace is the state of distinctness without

---

<sup>52</sup> "From our point of view mind has for its presupposition Nature, of which it is the truth, and for that reason its *absolute prius*. In this its truth Nature is vanished, and mind has resulted as the 'Idea' entered on possession of itself. Here the subject and object of the Idea are one - either is the intelligent unity, the notion." *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind*, § 381.

domination, and with the distinct participating in each other.<sup>53</sup>

Now from the standpoint of materialist social theory, what is interesting about this formulation of the subject-object dialectic is the suggestion that the current state of antagonism between humanity and its Other is as much the concern of that theory as the intra-social antagonism of the classes described by Marx in *Capital*. Indeed it might be argued, as Adorno does, that these antagonisms are essentially related to one another, that a theory of the one is a theory of the other. As he puts it :

The truth of the whole sides with one-sidedness, not pluralistic synthesis: a psychology that turns its back on society and idiosyncratically concentrates on the individual and his archaic heritage says more about the hapless state of society than one which seeks by its 'wholistic approach' or an inclusion of social 'factors' to join the ranks of a no longer existent *universitatus literarum*.<sup>54</sup>

Thus according to Adorno, classical psychoanalytical theory is superior to the ego psychology which develops from it because the former, unlike the latter, holds firmly to the priority of the instinctual. In so doing, and perhaps somewhat paradoxically, the classical theory lays the basis for an account of the subject as the site of a conflict between goals posited by the instincts and the role that is socially allocated to them in the production process. For this reason Adorno claims that:

---

<sup>53</sup> 'Subject and Object' in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, pp. 499-500.

<sup>54</sup> 'Sociology and Psychology' in *New Left Review*, 46, 1967, p.75.

Rigorous psychoanalytic theory, alive to the clash of psychic forces, can better drive home the objective character especially of economic laws as against subjective impulses, than theories which, in order at all costs to establish a continuum between society and psyche, deny the fundamental axiom of analytic theory, the conflict between id and ego.<sup>55</sup>

Hence, according to Adorno, the conflict that arises between id and ego is driven by the fact that a primary function of the latter is that of *reality-testing*, of instrumentally rational thought that brings objective social interests to bear upon the behaviour of the individual. Thus rather than de-socialising the individual, analytic theory demonstrates that society penetrates consciousness to its innermost core. In this sense the socialised individual is seen as a compromise formation, a structure which effects a compromise between what has been repressed (the primary instincts) and the agency of repression (ego).

Thus a critical theory of society schooled in Freud's analytical psychology will commence with the biological as well as the social life of the species and on this basis identify human well-being in terms of the maximum level of instinctual gratification compatible with the maintenance of society. Marcuse, in particular, makes ingenious use of this idea in *Eros and Civilisation* where he develops the concept of *surplus repression*. This is used to identify those restrictions upon the individual which are "necessitated by social domination" rather than the modification of the instincts

---

<sup>55</sup> Ibid..

necessary for any form of human civilisation.<sup>56</sup> Hence, for Marcuse, part of the responsibility of a critical theory of society is to demonstrate that the present mode of social organisation serves to deny individuals the maximum attainable levels of human well-being. Indeed it is no exaggeration to say that Marcuse intends his theory of surplus repression to rank alongside Marx's theory of surplus value as a complementary critique of the capitalist order. A critique, moreover, which realises the potential of the early Marx's discussion of the subject by basing itself upon a fully articulated theory of the objects which serve to fulfill human need.

To summarise, materialism begins with the recognition that the human subject is rooted in nature, and in consequence is a subject of biological as well as socially-determined need. This dependency upon a realm of externality is the basis of a dialectic of self-formation: in classical Hegelian fashion the subject comes to recognise itself through the recognition of its dependence upon objects that are independent of its will. In other words the concept of 'I' is essentially intertwined with the concept of 'Not-I'. Now according to the argument of Fromm and indeed other members of the Frankfurt School this insight provides the basis for an important link between historical materialism and depth-psychology. The former offers an account of society in terms of its capacity to produce and reproduce material life, whilst the latter provides the means to systematically understand the impact of society upon the instinctual heritage of the human subject. The synthesis of these two disciplines would therefore allow us to alternate between two distinct but related questions. First, how adequately does society satisfy the needs of its members? Second, what is the nature

---

<sup>56</sup> *Eros and Civilisation*, p.35.



and origin of these needs? The first question leads directly to an investigation of the process of material production, the second to a depth-psychology of the individual. The task of a critical social theory is to unify these apparently diverse investigations.

## Chapter 7. Totality and Critique

In this final chapter I want to try to bring together some of the more important themes and arguments that have thus far been developed. Thus the Marxism of the Frankfurt School has been variously characterised as a turn from philosophy to social theory, as a social scientific synthesis, as a materialist reconstruction of the Hegelian dialectic of subject and object and finally as a theory centred around the relation between the individual human subject and society. Now whilst each of these perspectives has something useful to offer in terms of coming to an understanding of the Institute's project, it must be admitted that the discussion of that project remains incomplete in a singularly important respect, namely the absence of any systematic account of Frankfurt Marxism as social *critique*. Indeed, until the nature of that critique has been determined it cannot be said that we have truly come to terms with the object of our study. This becomes apparent if we recall that in Chapter 1 it was argued that the work of the Frankfurt School is characterised by a high degree of meta-theoretical awareness, and in particular an awareness of what it is that distinguishes a theory of society founded upon Marx's materialism from other approaches to the social sciences. We may also recall that the response of Horkheimer and his colleagues to this question was to argue that historical materialism does not constitute a new positive science of society, as Marxist orthodoxy would have it, but a theory that is inherently critical and negative. It is now time to explore the nature of this thesis. Fortunately, however, the issue can be dealt with by returning to, and to some extent reworking the argument of the previous chapters. In this sense, therefore, we are not so much broaching new ground as coming to view the route that has so far been

travelled from another and hopefully illuminating perspective.

Of course, to say that the work of the critical theorists constitutes a critique of society is in itself to say nothing very controversial. What is open to dispute, however, is the question of whether this critical stance can be legitimated from the standpoint of materialism. Thus according to Lucien Goldmann, the Frankfurt School, whilst remaining intensely critical of capitalist society had fairly early on abandoned any belief in the revolutionary potential of the proletariat and as a consequence had reverted to a form of Left Hegelianism, to a dualism between subject and object and a criticism of the world which is outside of history.<sup>1</sup> Interestingly, much the same objection has been levelled by the American analytic philosopher William Maker, who has argued that the logic of Frankfurt Marxism, especially as it unfolds in the early work of Marcuse and Horkheimer, leads to a fatal equivocation, alternating between a historically-conditioned conception of rationality and the more classical notion of Reason as a speculative *a priori* standard.<sup>2</sup> Against these critics I intend to demonstrate that the supposed alternation is not, as Goldmann and Maker would have it, an inherent feature of the Frankfurt project but is in fact the consequence of these critics' failure to appreciate the *dialectical, totalising* quality of critical theory. Accordingly, I shall argue that the real logic of Frankfurt Marxism can only be illuminated by an account which emphasises the central role of the Hegelian notion of critique in the development of Marx's analysis of capitalist society. To recognise this intellectual

---

<sup>1</sup> Goldmann, L., *Lukács and Heidegger*, p.96. Alasdair MacIntyre makes much the same kind of criticism of the Frankfurt School in *Marcuse*, (London: 1970 ), p.40.

<sup>2</sup> Maker, W., 'Critical Theory and its Discontents: Rationality, Contextuality and Normativity', *Idealistic Studies*, Vol. 26, Number 1, Winter/Spring, 1996.

debt, however, is not to revert to a form of Left Hegelianism but is rather a matter of recovering the materialist and revolutionary quality of the thought of Idealism's greatest representative.

In this final and concluding chapter, the argument will proceed as follows. The chapter begins with a general account of the nature of critical theory; this is followed by an exploration of some of the differences that exist between critical theory and the positivist conception of scientific knowledge. The particular goal of this discussion is to establish a clear distinction between the positivist's vision of a value-free, and therefore supposedly objective, social science and the Frankfurt School's unabashed belief in a theory of society that is openly partisan in its defence of human interests. Having established as well as clarified this difference, I shall then present an account of critical theory as a form of *immanent critique*: a practice that finds justification not by reference to any transcendental normative standards, as some of its critics allege, but by locating itself as a moment of the socio-historical complex of which it is a part. This return to the concept of totality is entirely appropriate, for this thesis has been intended to demonstrate, and to demonstrate in detail, that the organising principle of Frankfurt Marxism project derives from a materialist reconstruction of the Hegelian subject-object dialectic. The chapter closes with a discussion of a potentially serious objection to the Frankfurt School's account of critical theory, namely its inability to identify a concrete subject of the emancipatory process. I shall argue that whilst proponents of this objection are often guilty of over stating their case, nevertheless their argument does indeed point to an important deficiency in first-generation critical theory. The thesis concludes by indicating a number of possible strategies for

overcoming this deficit.

*Philosophy, Science and Critical Theory*

As we have seen, critical theory considers itself to be distinct not only from traditional philosophy but also from any of the existing positive sciences. However, as Habermas has observed, this description is formal rather than substantive: it simply positions the theory on an intellectual spectrum without determining its distinctive perspective.<sup>3</sup> Clearly what is required is that we make some attempt to identify those features which constitute the *differentia specifica* of Frankfurt Marxism, distinguishing it both from philosophy as well as the conventional social sciences. In dealing with this question we begin by observing that in traditional scientific theories such as physics and biology, the subject and object of theory remain wholly distinct; physical theories of the universe, for instance, are not usually regarded as participating themselves in the development of the phenomenon with which they are concerned. Thus knowledge of the various physical laws, whilst enabling the technologist to control and manipulate nature does not form a basis for either the modification or overthrow of those laws. Here, the most that can be said is that we free ourselves from the tyranny of nature by coming to a more precise knowledge of the scope of natural necessity. In short, conventional scientific enquiry conceives of the natural world as essentially independent of the cognitive activity of the subject. As Husserl, a philosopher whom both Adorno and Horkheimer had read appreciatively, puts it, natural science: “pretends at every step to posit and know a nature that is in itself - in itself in

---

<sup>3</sup> Habermas, J., *Theory and Practice*, p.212.

opposition to the subjective flow of consciousness.”<sup>4</sup> Now the question of whether we should be sceptical of this claim, as Husserl certainly was, or whether we grant the capacity of the natural sciences to discover the truth about a world that is external to the subject is not an issue that I propose to deal with here; rather, my purpose is simply to establish a general description of the traditional scientific world-view. In this context we therefore additionally note that as subject, scientific consciousness perceives itself to be under a very limited obligation to comprehend its own activity: by large and large the investigator *qua* scientist does not attempt to make scientific enquiry, conceived of as the practice of a concrete historical subject, an object for itself. Indeed what little self-reflection does occur is all too often confined to a purely formal investigation of the logical structure of a scientific theory.<sup>5</sup> By way of contrast to this rigid separation of subject and object, critical theory involves both the understanding and transformation of its object, human society, into a conscious and therefore genuinely social subject, the socialised humanity of Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. Moreover, the theory is concerned to understand itself as a moment of the very same social life process which constitutes the object of its enquiry; in other words to relate itself to the social totality of which it is a part. Thus for Horkheimer “the scientific calling is only one, non-independent element in the

---

<sup>4</sup> ‘Philosophy as Rigorous Science’ in *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, p.88.

<sup>5</sup> This, of course, is not to deny some of the very real achievements of recent philosophy of natural science as it has developed through the work of Quine, Popper, Kuhn, Lakatos, and Feyerabend. But as Richard Bernstein has argued, this tradition had to first laboriously free itself from an obsession with the meaning and reference of isolated singular terms, with the tendency to accord primacy to the practice of ostensive definition, before it could discover by means of a complex dialectic that the rationality of a scientific theory is closely coupled with the nature of science as a social process. See his *Beyond Objectivism and Relativism*, pp.75-79. Interestingly, Bernstein suggests that this particular dialectic instantiates the epistemic dialectic of

work or historical activity of man” and in consequence the social conditions of scientific knowledge, should become, in turn, a topic of investigation.<sup>6</sup> Commenting upon this aspect of critical theory Geuss observes that:

It is an essential task of any complete theory of society to investigate not just social institutions and practices, but also beliefs agents have about their society - to investigate not just ‘social reality’ in the narrowest sense, but also the ‘social knowledge’ which is part of that reality. A full scale social theory, then, will form part of its own object domain. That is, a social theory is a theory *about* (among other things) agent’s beliefs about their society, but it is *itself* such a belief.<sup>7</sup>

This is well said, for it succinctly makes the case that an adequate theory of society is necessarily self-reflexive, that in other words the *content* of a critical theory, the totality of social being, determines its *form* as a consciousness that develops itself as a knowledge that is *for itself* (*fur sich*). Within this dialectical structure of cognition, which according to the Frankfurt School defines the formation of a genuine theory of

---

Hegel’s *Phenomenology*.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Traditional and Critical Theory’ in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p.198. Similarly Marcuse declares that: “Materialist theory ... understands all theory as an element of the social process of life, borne by particular historical interests.” See the ‘Concept of Essence’ in *Negations*, p.79.

<sup>7</sup> *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, p.56. It is interesting to compare Geuss’ observation with Korsch’s argument that Marxists: “must try to understand every change, development and revision of Marxist theory, since its original emergence from the philosophy of German Idealism, as a necessary product of its epoch (Hegel). More precisely, we should seek to understand their determination by the totality of the historico-social process of which they are a general expression (Marx).” See *Marxism and Philosophy*, p.51.

society, subject and object interact to mutually transform one another. The subject becomes the object of theoretical concern whilst the object, namely society, has at least potentially the capacity to come into being as an authentic subject, that is a subject acting under conditions of rationality and freedom. Thus the Marxism of the Frankfurt School is not simply a theory which offers a particular interpretation of the world, an interpretation based upon Marx's thesis that capitalist society is dominated by the operation of the law of value, but is intended as a theoretical *praxis* directed towards transforming that reality. Put more emphatically, the project of changing the world is seen as a rationally compelling and necessary consequence of the interpretation which the theory advances. Of course, this should not be considered as somehow analogous to the kind of technological manipulation of nature characteristic of the application of the natural sciences. Rather, critical theory participates in the transformation of its object into an active historical subject by providing its addressee with a new form of self-understanding. As opposed to the natural sciences, the theory is not external to its object but is in fact part of a practice which reveals the object to itself. Thus on the basis of what exists, the theory identifies the potential for a more adequately realised social subject: that is, a transparent form of social existence in which productive activity is consciously organised towards the satisfaction of human need. More particularly, by demonstrating that the capitalist form of production contains within itself the material basis for a higher form of social life, critical theory points to the need for the transition towards that higher form. Thus as opposed to the utopianism of the early socialist movement, the promise of a good society derives from a dialectic between what is actual and potential; in other words, society discovers what it truly is by reference to what it might become. Furthermore, although awareness of



this potential has so far been successfully repressed, critical theory maintains that this potential is nevertheless preserved in certain socially- significant forms of theoretical and practical consciousness which, if suitably interpreted, will yield an immanent critique of this very repression. To summarise: according to the Frankfurt School, Marx's theory of history and society, unlike the positive sciences, acts upon the world it describes by developing a critical self-consciousness within the social life process, thereby leading those who participate in that process to seek a new form of social organisation centred upon the interests of the majority of society.

From what has been said thus far it should be clear that for the Frankfurt School a genuinely adequate theory of society cannot avoid expressing a judgement of value with respect to the form of life of which it is a theory. As Horkheimer observes, critical theory: "has held onto the realisation that the free development of individuals depends on the rational constitution of society. In analysing present social conditions it becomes a critique of the economy."<sup>8</sup> Here there is an explicit and apparently seamless transition from the *analysis* of social conditions to *critique*, from the study of a mode of production to the judgement that society is irrational and hinders the free development of individuals. In effect, Horkheimer is refusing to respect what has come to be known as the fact-value dichotomy, the idea that statements of fact about a society do not entail value judgements.<sup>9</sup> This refusal, it should be noted, was

---

<sup>8</sup> Postscript to 'Traditional and Critical Theory', *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p.246

<sup>9</sup> Marcuse makes a similar point when he writes: "All materialist concepts contain an accusation and an imperative." See 'The Concept of Essence' in *Negations*, p.86. This finds an echo in Adorno's comment that: "Reality, the object of societal knowledge, can no more be imperative-free [*Sollensfreies*] or merely existent

developed in conscious opposition to the radically distinct account of science offered by positivist philosophers. Indeed, it can be safely said that hostility to positivism in all of its guises was to remain a central defining feature of both early and late variants of first-generation critical theory.

Now although the Frankfurt School's critique of the positivist position is complex and exists in a variety of forms, what is always common to their argument is the complete rejection of the positivist notion that science is defined by its attitude of value-freedom ( *Wertfreiheit* ) towards the object of theory.<sup>10</sup> The classic site of this critique is undoubtedly Horkheimer's programmatic piece "Traditional and Critical Theory" written in the mid-1930s. This article begins with a description of a certain highly influential conception of scientific knowledge, in effect a meta-theory of science, which Horkheimer denotes by the use of the term "traditional theory".<sup>11</sup> Here it is important to emphasise that what concerns Horkheimer is not so much the adequacy or otherwise of this account with respect to the scientific study of the natural world, but rather the illicit and often ideologically motivated attempt to apply a specific

---

[*Daseindes*] - it only becomes the latter through the dissections of abstraction - than can the values be nailed into a firmament of ideas." See 'On the Logic of the Social Sciences' in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, p.117.

<sup>10</sup> This aspect of Frankfurt Marxism has been recognised by a number of commentators. Thus Martin Jay, describing the critical theorists' dispute with the Hegelian tradition writes: "A genuine materialism as the Frankfurt School always contended, also had an ethical function; it must register and draw on the sufferings and needs of contingent human subjects rather than explain them away through a historio-philosophical theodicy." See Jay's *Adorno*, p.59.

<sup>11</sup> At the time of writing, Horkheimer believed that this particular conception of science found its clearest expression in the work of the logical positivist movement.

"regulative idea of the natural sciences" to all other domains of knowledge.<sup>12</sup> His argument should not therefore be construed as a critique of science in general, but rather as an attempt to refute a particular epistemological dogma, namely that a theory of society, if it is to be an adequate theory, should be constructed after the fashion of the natural sciences.<sup>13</sup> For Horkheimer, as for other members of the Frankfurt School, the norms which govern the development of social theory can never be the same as those which hold sway in the natural sciences, for the reason that the relation between the subject and object of a theory of society is quite unlike the relation between the subject and object of a natural scientific theory.

Returning, however, to the matter at hand, we note that according to Horkheimer the notion of a traditional theory has its origins in Cartesianism, and more specifically in Descartes' belief that the axiomatic system characteristic of mathematical thought constitutes the appropriate norm for every kind of theoretical knowledge.<sup>14</sup> Thus in accordance with this standard, traditional theory regards science as a system of general

---

<sup>12</sup> Bernstein, R.J., *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory*, p.179. It should be noted, however, that Horkheimer's usage of the term is somewhat confusing because, on occasion, he describes *specific sciences*, for example physics, as traditional theories. The term is therefore being used in two senses:- (a) to denote a specific regulative ideal of science and (b) to refer to theories which satisfy this ideal. This ambiguity is not, however, damaging to the argument because the context is usually sufficient to resolve it. I shall therefore follow Horkheimer in this respect by using the term to denote both the natural sciences in general as well as a specific meta-theoretical tradition which has sought to define those sciences.

<sup>13</sup> Unlike Engels, and some of his followers, the Frankfurt School had no interest in offering their own account of the natural sciences. Horkheimer, in fact, leaves it an open question as to whether these sciences can in fact be understood as "traditional theories".

<sup>14</sup> See for example Descartes, 'Discourse on Method' in *Descartes Philosophical Writings*, pp.20-23.

propositions whose validity is to be tested by comparing singular propositions, logically derivable from the theory, with observational experience.<sup>15</sup> Typically these theories contain a small number of fundamental principles and basic concepts from which the rest of theory is developed, and insofar as these principles, or laws, admit of precise quantitative expression, the development can proceed in a rigorous mathematical fashion. Here, as I have already indicated, the paradigm is that of mathematical physics; Horkheimer refers to it as "the theory of natural science in the strictest sense", and it is this ideal to which other branches of natural science are supposed to aspire. As he observes: "The derivation as usually practised in mathematics is to be applied to all science. The order in the world is captured by a chain of deductive thought."<sup>16</sup> In this respect Horkheimer's account owes something to Husserl's earlier critique of the Galilean scientific program, the aim of which, according to Husserl, is to present "the completely new idea of *mathematical natural science*".<sup>17</sup> Conceived of in this fashion, science seeks to eliminate qualitative concepts in favour of quantitative concepts, and thereby reduce our description of the world to the measurement of variables such as mass, position, velocity and so on. Although Husserl was ready to admit that Galilean science had achieved a considerable degree of instrumental success, he argued that it was a fundamental philosophical error to try to establish it as a foundational model for knowledge. Philosophers, and scientists, who took this view were overlooking the fact that the scientific consciousness

---

<sup>15</sup> 'Traditional and Critical Theory' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, pp.188 - 194.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* p.189.

<sup>17</sup> Husserl, E., *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, pp. 22-23.

represents an abstraction from the ontologically prior “life-world” (*Lebenswelt*), the world of lived experience which is resistant to quantitative reduction.<sup>18</sup> In summary, for Husserl the mistake of the Galilean program is to downgrade the subjective in favour of a discourse concerning objective nature, and in so doing to reduce the life-world to the realm of mere appearance.

Now whatever the merits or otherwise of Husserl’s argument, it is undoubtedly true that in the twentieth century the Galilean-Cartesian program described above was taken up and enthusiastically pursued by a large number of philosophers and scientists. The axiomatic-deductive conception of theory can be found, for instance, in the work of the early Wittgenstein. Thus in the *Tractatus* he writes:

Mechanics determines one form of description of the world by saying that all propositions used in the description of the world must be obtained in a given way from a given set of propositions - the axioms of mechanics. It thus supplies the bricks for building the edifice of science ... (6.341)

Mechanics is an attempt to construct according to a single plan all the true propositions that we need for the description of the world. (6.343)

According to Wittgenstein, a scientific theory such as Newton’s mechanics consists of a set of entirely general statements describing the behaviour of certain kinds of objects

---

<sup>18</sup> As we shall see, Horkheimer has a somewhat similar critique of the pretensions of traditional theory, but in place of the Husserlian notion of the life-world he accords primacy to the materialist concept of social being.

under certain quantitatively specified conditions. These statements constitute the fundamental laws or axioms of the theory, and together with logic enable the scientist to derive a series of propositions which describe the world by asserting the existence or non-existence of particular states of affairs. Indeed, for Wittgenstein, a genuine scientific theory is a purely *descriptive* enterprise, yielding through a process of deduction, propositions which say how things are in the world. Positivist followers of Wittgenstein, such as Carnap, took the argument of the *Tractatus* one step further and claimed that all genuine science can be reduced to a certain kind of description, namely a physicalist description of the world. Thus Carnap argued that a physicalist language is a potentially universal language, and that "if we adopt the language of physics as ... the language of science, then all science turns into physics".<sup>19</sup>

At this, its most extreme point, the program of traditional theory urges the creation of a unified science, each part of which must be expressible, at least in principle, in the language of physicalism. This kind of scientism, in effect a return to the atomistic mechanism criticised by Hegel, was anathema to Horkheimer and his Institute colleagues. Although they readily acknowledged that the natural sciences, and physics in particular, had proved immensely successful in understanding and mastering nature, they argued nonetheless that this theoretical tradition is of very limited use for comprehending social phenomena. However, as both Horkheimer and Marcuse recognised, the immense practical success of sciences like physics or biology had led many philosophers and social theorists to suppose that advance in the social sciences

---

<sup>19</sup> *Erkenntnis*, 3, 1932, p.108.

consists in the latter becoming as much like the former as possible.<sup>20</sup> In essence, this is the positivist approach to social theory; a program which originates in the nineteenth century with the work of Comte and to this day remains influential for many social scientists. It is, however, an approach that the Frankfurt School consistently sought to challenge. In opposition to positivist social theory they argued that the form and content of a theory define each other, and that in particular the form of a social theory must reflect the fact that its content consists of the way in which the human subject relates in thought and action to the world that surrounds it. For Marxists, this relation is to be understood first and foremost in terms of *praxis*, the act of self-realisation by means of which the subject defines itself in relation to both society and nature. Furthermore, and as we have seen, this process of self-production cannot be treated in mechanistic terms, that is as something that can be described without reference to the various forms of socially-mediated consciousness through which the subject understands and indeed constructs its activity. On the contrary, understanding in this context necessarily involves an appeal to the self-understanding of the subject. In short the social sciences, unlike the natural sciences, are concerned with a form of activity, namely the life process of society, marked out by its essentially self-reflexive nature.

By itself, however, this kind of argument is not sufficient to distinguish the Frankfurt School from other critics of scientific social theory. It has, for instance, become something of a common-place amongst certain philosophers of social science, as well as sociologists, that social theory needs to take account of the *intentional* structure of

---

<sup>20</sup> 'Traditional and Critical Theory' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, pp.190-191.

social action.<sup>21</sup> Thus from a Wittgensteinian perspective, Peter Winch writes: “A man’s social relations with his fellows are permeated with his ideas about reality. Indeed ‘permeated’ is hardly a strong enough word: social relations are expressions of ideas about reality.”<sup>22</sup> In fact, for Winch no account of a social relation can be adequate if it fails to consider the *meaning* which that relation has for the subjects who participate in it. This leads him to conclude that “even if it is legitimate to speak of one’s understanding of a mode of social activity as consisting in knowledge of regularities, the nature of this knowledge must be very different from the nature of the knowledge of physical regularities.”<sup>23</sup> Thus like the Frankfurt School, Winch rejects the notion of a “unity of the sciences”, the idea that there is a common methodological stance applicable not only to nature but also to the social life process. Furthermore this rejection, in both cases, depends upon a shared belief in the importance of coming to terms with the fact that forms of social activity are *constituted* by forms of consciousness, in other words that the way in which subjects comprehend a social relation is internal to the relation itself. Horkheimer, however, would want to deny the claim that “social relations are expressions of ideas about reality”, at least if this means that a society is to be understood *uncritically* in terms of the prevailing principles and norms of that society.<sup>24</sup> On the contrary, for Horkheimer, as for other members of the

---

<sup>21</sup> The theoretical basis for this tradition can be found in the work of amongst others Weber, Husserl and the late Wittgenstein.

<sup>22</sup> *The Idea of a Social Science*, p.23.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, p.88.

<sup>24</sup> Whether this latter day version of idealism can fairly be attributed to Winch is open to some dispute. To pursue this particular question, however, would represent a substantial diversion from the argument of this chapter.



Frankfurt School, the principal function of a social theory is to *interrogate* forms of social consciousness, to point to the way in which these ideas conflict with the reality they purport to describe. In summary, critical theory is concerned to explore the gulf between thought and social being, between our conception of the world and the way that the world actually is.

However, before discussing the nature of this project there is another aspect of the traditional scientific model which requires consideration. According to Horkheimer, this model imposes *substantive* as well as formal restrictions upon what is to count as a scientific theory. This has already been hinted at when it was said that a scientific theory organised as an axiomatic-deductive system yields propositions that *describe* the world; more accurately, it should have been said that science *only* yields certain kinds of propositions, namely propositions that describe the world. This, of course, is the familiar claim that genuine science maintains a clear separation of questions of *fact* from questions of *value*, that it is a descriptive rather than a critical-evaluative activity. In the language of traditional theory, science is a purely *objective* discipline, detached from any kind of normative involvement with whatever its subject matter might happen to be. Obviously this is a very strong claim but, I would argue, difficult to sustain in the face of abundant historical evidence indicating the involvement of both scientists and scientific theories in the life process of society, and in particular with the process of material production. As Horkheimer puts it: “neither the direction nor methods of [scientific] theory nor its object, reality itself, are independent of man.”<sup>25</sup> What this observation points to is the essential socio-historical character of science,

---

<sup>25</sup> ‘Notes on Science and the Crisis’ in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p.4.

and in consequence that its methods, concerns, applications and so forth are inevitably conditioned by a variety of political, social and economic interests, a conditioning which undermines its claim to value neutrality. The standard response to this fact, on the part of those who seek to defend the value-free conception of science, is to urge a distinction between science as a social *institution* and science as a body of *theory*. Thus considered as an institution, it is accepted that science is influenced by as well as influences the wider social setting in which it occurs. But this in no way compromises the value freedom of scientific theory *per se*. On this account judgements of value, insofar as they appear in the work of the individual scientist, are illegitimate additions to a body of theory that simply describes how the world is.

The above defence of the *Wertfreiheit* thesis depends upon an argument which can be summarised as follows: that judgements of fact can be distinguished from judgements of value because the latter are not descriptive, that, as Wittgenstein would put it, they do not assert or deny the existence of any particular state of affairs (*Sachverhalten*). Indeed, according to the *Tractatus* there is strictly speaking no such thing as an ethical proposition because a proposition, if it is to have meaning, must represent by means of its pictorial form a possible state of affairs. Value judgements are not pictures in this sense, and thus Wittgenstein concludes that ethics can only serve to suggest or to "make manifest" in some fashion what cannot be put into words.<sup>26</sup> Now of course it would be wrong to suggest that all those philosophers who sharply distinguish description from evaluation would take this line. On the contrary, some would argue that ethical propositions serve to express attitudes that we have to particular actions or

---

<sup>26</sup> *Tractatus*, 6.522.

states of affairs, whilst others would maintain that ethical discourse is based upon the category of the imperative. But whatever theory of ethics the positivist holds, they will steadfastly maintain that science, insofar as it aims to produce a description of how the world is, can have no room for judgements of value. This is because these judgements, whatever other role they might play in our lives, cannot be understood as picturing the world, as either asserting the existence or non-existence of some particular state of affairs. In short, what a theory says about how the world is exhausts its meaning, and conversely meaning is attributed to a theory, insofar as it has something to say about the world as it exists.

This conception of science, it should be noted, is in general accordance with Horkheimer's account of traditional theory. Thus according to Horkheimer, scientists try to develop laws which *describe* the behaviour of, for instance, a physical or biological system, and because these laws have a universal character, they will support predictions concerning the future behaviour of the system. In doing this, scientists have no conception of how a system *ought* to behave: the system simply behaves as it does. For traditional theory, there is no sense in supposing that science could ever yield principles or laws to which the natural world ought to conform but which unfortunately fail to describe the world as it is. On this account, then, if a scientific theory departs from what we experience, then so much the worse for the theory. To summarise, the positivist project of a value-free science is, in effect, founded upon a typically atomistic strategy: on the one hand there are statements of fact and on the other there are statements of value, and each can be produced and comprehended without reference to the other. In what follows we shall see that the above argument

breaks down, and that the attempt to rigidly distinguish fact from value is the result of a failure to grasp the process of social life as a totality in which forms of consciousness and being consistently penetrate and constitute each other.

### *Immanent Critique*

One of the ways in which Horkheimer seeks to mark the distinction between traditional scientific thought and Marx's critical theory of society is by claiming that the latter is governed by a commitment to the goal of a rational society: a form of life in which the productive activity of individuals is consciously integrated into a system of social labour directed towards the satisfaction of real human interests and needs. Such a commitment, Horkheimer argues, becomes ever more urgent as human labour falls under the control of an instrumentalist logic of production increasingly divorced from any kind of substantive rationality. This is not to say that Horkheimer believed that late capitalist society is a completely irrational social form. On the contrary, he took the position that although society as a whole is characterised by a dangerous irrationality, the parts of that totality may nevertheless be the result of a significant degree of calculation, planning and intentionality. Thus in a limited sense capitalism is a rational system, insofar as the individual units of production are organised according to principles of instrumental rationality; however, in a global sense this social form is irrational by virtue of the fact that productive activity, considered as a whole, is not oriented towards the promotion of human welfare.<sup>27</sup> Now at first sight this stance of radical rejectionism seems to condemn itself as a typical piece of utopianism, as a

---

<sup>27</sup> See Horkheimer's 'Traditional and Critical Theory' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p.203.

largely impotent desire to defy the logic of historical conditions. After all if the world is so thoroughly dominated by the commodity form, if all or most human activity has been reduced to a kind of “pseudo-practice” in which means are efficiently tied to a set of ends unrelated to the creation of the good society, then the prospect of a different order of things appears as something entirely extraneous to our contemporary form of life. Indeed, this has led certain critics to argue that Horkheimer’s rejectionism is a critique which is bereft of any real persuasive force, that it is founded upon premises which nobody, at least under the circumstances described by the Frankfurt School, would be in a position to accept.<sup>28</sup> Some might even say that it is a perfect example of the kind of futile imperative thinking that Hegel has in mind when he makes the following observation:

A further word on the subject of *issuing instructions* on how the world ought to be: philosophy, at any rate, always comes too late to perform this function. As the *thought* of the world, it appears only at a time when actuality has gone through its formative process and attained its complete state.<sup>29</sup>

The clear suggestion here is that the task of philosophy is to serve as a spectator of “a shape of life that has grown old”, to articulate and discover the rationality of the concrete ethic informing that shape rather than to criticise, much less contribute, to the transformation of that which has become actual. In other words, philosophers are

---

<sup>28</sup> Marcuse, for instance, speaks of the ‘Happy Consciousness’, a mode of thought: “which reflects the belief that the real is rational, and that the established system, in spite of everything, delivers the goods.” (*One Dimensional Man*, p.79.)

<sup>29</sup> *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Preface, p.23.

engaged in an essentially descriptive exercise: they seek to interpret the world rather than change it. If this view is correct then the work of the Frankfurt School is doubly flawed: not only are judgements of value illicitly imported into the sphere of scientific study as positivism would charge, but their critique of contemporary life must be seen as a misguided attempt to “issue instructions” to a society that has firmly secured its existence, and has thereby legitimated itself.<sup>30</sup>

Against this negative assessment of critical theory I shall argue that the Frankfurt School’s concern for a rational society is not the expression of a subjective preference, of a wish on the part of a small number of socially isolated intellectuals, Hegel’s “beautiful souls”, that things might be otherwise, but rather a consequence of an immanent critical engagement with the world as it exists.<sup>31</sup> A critique of this kind takes as its starting point the fundamental conceptions that a society has about itself, and on this basis seeks to demonstrate that the self-understanding of that society, including its characteristic mode of legitimation, systematically diverges from its real existence. Now for the Frankfurt School, Marx’s critique of political economy is a paradigmatic example of this kind of argument.<sup>32</sup> Thus according to Marx, early capitalist society

---

<sup>30</sup> This is in effect Kolakowski’s criticism when he writes that “The Frankfurt philosophers were on weak ground ... in their constant proclamation of an ideal ‘emancipation’ which was never properly explained. This created the illusion that while condemning ‘reification’, exchange value, commercialised culture and scientism they were offering something else instead, whereas the most they were actually offering was nostalgia for the pre-capitalist culture of an elite.” (*Main Currents of Marxism: Volume 3*, p.395.)

<sup>31</sup> See Hegel’s *Phenomenology* §632-671 for a discussion of this form of socially-disengaged Romantic consciousness. Cf. Terry Pinkard’s *Hegel’s Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason*, pp.213-220.

<sup>32</sup> As Adorno puts it, Marx: “shows that the society which develops on the basis of

found the theoretical expression of its fundamental *constitutive* principles in the tradition of classical political economy initiated by Smith and Ricardo. For this tradition, the central organisational principle of the newly emergent bourgeois society is that individual commodity owners relate to each other under conditions of free and equal exchange. In place of the forced transfer of goods and labour characteristic of feudalism, the political economists celebrate the progressive nature of a society of universal exchange in which items are freely transferred from one party to another on the basis of equality of value. Indeed for Smith, it is through the existence of institutions of exchange that the highly developed and complex division of labour characteristic of capitalist societies comes into being and forms the basis for the subsequent general expansion of wealth. As he observes: “it is the power of exchanging that gives occasion to the divisions of labour, so the extent of this division must always be limited by the extent of that power, or, in other words, by the extent of the market.”<sup>33</sup> Over time this division of labour leads to a system of genuinely social labour, where producers do not produce use values directly for themselves but instead produce for the purpose of exchange. Thus it can be said that an individual’s needs are satisfied by the labour of others, whilst the individual’s labour contributes as a fraction towards the satisfaction of social demand considered as a whole. This fact greatly impressed Hegel, who cast it as an important moment in the development of civil

---

such principles [free and equal exchange] contradicts these principles whilst the realisation of these principles would supersede the form of society itself.” This quote from the *Philosophical Fragments* appears in Simon Jarvis’ *Adorno*, p.50. In a similar fashion Horkheimer tersely observes that: “Marx ... explained the reality of the ideology of bourgeois economy in the dissection of official economy. He discovered the secret of the economy itself. Smith and Ricardo are disposed of, society is indicted.” (‘The Authoritarian State’ in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, p.108.)

<sup>33</sup> *The Wealth of Nations: Vol I*, p15.

society. Describing this mode of connection between individuals he identifies the following principle: “The mediation of need and the satisfaction of the individual (*des Einzelnen*) through his own work and through the work and satisfaction of the needs of all the others - the system of needs.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, Hegel went on to celebrate the achievements of this system of needs - in other words exchange society - by declaring that it is: “the manifestation of rationality”, that it represents the form of production best suited to the realisation of the individual subject. It should, however, be added that he was by no means uncritical of this form, for whilst celebrating the market he cautions that “this is also the field in which the understanding, with its subjective ends and moral opinions gives vent to its discontent and moral irritation.”<sup>35</sup> For this reason, amongst others, Hegel came to the conclusion that a fully rational society would require the state to stand over and above civil society so as to mediate between the conflicting claims of individuals to which the “system of needs” inevitably gives rise.<sup>36</sup>

Hegel’s defence of the state came under criticism from the young Marx, who argued that the discontent arising from the bourgeois system of production is more than a conflict between, as Hegel puts it, the “subjective ends and moral opinions” of individuals, that it represents a conflict grounded paradoxically enough in the very achievement of exchange society. Now to fully understand Marx’s critique of the

---

<sup>34</sup> *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, §188.

<sup>35</sup> *Op.cit.*, §189.

<sup>36</sup> Commenting upon this element in Hegel’s thought Adorno writes: “This is why Hegel’s idolization of the state should not be trivialised by being treated as a mere empirical aberration or an irrelevant addendum. Rather that idolization is itself produced by insight into the fact that the contradictions of civil society cannot be resolved by its self-movement.” See ‘Aspects of Hegel’s Philosophy’ in *Hegel: Three*



bourgeois order it is necessary to understand that his argument is founded upon an investigation into the historical reality of that society, which reveals how it first came into being and developed into a mature social form. Thus for Marx, the problem with the above analysis is that it does not describe a developed capitalist society but rather a pre-capitalist system of petty commodity production in which individuals possess, on however small a scale, their own means of production, and in consequence are not compelled to sell their labour power to others. By contrast, a mature capitalism is a society in which the great mass of producers have nothing to exchange other than their labour power, and are therefore forced to sell it to the small minority of the population who happen to own the means of production.

It is at this point that Marx's critique comes into play, for it demonstrates that the exchange relation, if generalised to human labour power, results in the development of a pervasive inequality between a class which purchases labour power, and a class forced to sell its labour on pain of social degradation or worse. Here the worker's formal freedom to sell their own labour power masks a substantial degree of compulsion; for where the great majority of society have been separated from the control and ownership of the means of production, that majority has no realistic option but to offer its labour power to those who might wish to buy it.<sup>37</sup> This is not to say that Marx believed that there is no sense in which labour under capitalism can be

---

*Studies*, p.28.

<sup>37</sup> As G.A. Cohen puts it: "The proletarian has the legal right to refuse to work for any given capitalist, and also the legal right to refuse to work for all capitalists whatsoever. But he has no power matching the second right, for he is forced, on pain of death by starvation, to work for some or other member of the capitalist class." (*Karl Marx's Theory of History*, (Oxford: 1978), p. 240.)

spoken of as free labour; as he himself points out, a slave, unlike a wage-labourer, is not the legal owner of their labour power but rather the property of the slave owner. By way of contrast, the wage-labourer and capitalist meet freely in the market-place to mutually determine a contract regulating the act of exchange which is to take place. Concerning this encounter between the buyer and seller of labour power, he observes: "They contract as free agents, and the agreement they come to, is but the form in which they give legal expression to their common will."<sup>38</sup> However, in the context of Marx's overall argument this statement has a clearly ironic intent, for it is situated within a discussion that points to the severely limited sense in which the seller of labour power can be described as a free agent. Thus according to Marx, capitalists and workers do not confront one another as equals in the market place: by and large individual representatives of the former social class enter this process with necessarily more bargaining power than those individuals who are compelled to sell their labour power. The presence of this kind of coercion so Marx would argue, points to a substantial conflict between the concept of free exchange and the practice to which the concept is supposed to apply. Furthermore, according to Marx, the transaction between capitalists and workers results in the appropriation of the surplus product by a particular social class, an appropriation which further reinforces the domination of that class over the rest of society, and which gives the lie to the notion that exchange is the exchange of items that are unproblematically equivalent. Indeed Marx thought that his greatest achievement was to demonstrate how, on the basis of equal values exchanging for equal values the capitalist class is nevertheless able to extract surplus value from the labour that it employs. Thus although workers receive the full value of their labour

---

<sup>38</sup> *Capital: Volume I*, p.172.

power, they remain victims of exploitation for they do not receive the full value of that which they have produced. In this sense, the sale and purchase of labour is founded upon the same familiar and fundamental inequality of every class society, namely the capacity of a ruling class to extract surplus labour from the mass of producers.

For Marx, then, the consequence of free and equal exchange is its antithesis, exchange that is coerced and unequal. Now for the Frankfurt School what is compelling about this critique is that it does not rely upon any external normative reference points, but uses the very logic of the commodity form to confront the principle constitutive rules of exchange society. In other words, the dialectic of the commodity form, as it is developed in *Capital*, reveals that the very principle of bourgeois society breaks down once we begin to examine its claim that all exchange is free and equal. Thus Marx's critique does not proceed by selecting one set of norms from amongst others, but rather begins from a specific socio-historical context, and by comparing the characteristic self-understanding of that context with its reality, demonstrates the contradictory nature of that society. This observation should go some way towards refuting the objections of those critics who charge that Frankfurt Marxism relies upon extra-historical normative standards in order to mount its critique of capitalist society. On the contrary, whatever persuasive force critical theory possesses, it does so by virtue of the fact that it speaks the language of classical bourgeois society, that it mounts its critique on the basis of the traditional Enlightenment norms of Freedom, Equality and Fraternity. This strategy is what lies behind Horkheimer's remark that philosophy must take "existing values seriously"; for in taking such values seriously, the critic can explore the tension that exists between what is and what our concepts

tell us ought to be the case. As he observes:

It [philosophy] opposes the breach between ideas and reality. Philosophy confronts the existent, in its historical context, with the claim of its conceptual principles, in order to criticise the relation between the two and thus transcend them.<sup>39</sup>

From what has so far been argued, then, it should be clear that critical theory regards itself as a form of consciousness derived internally from the self-understanding of society. Now if this true, then it follows that the critical theorist is not faced with the task of justifying one particular normative system against another equally viable but opposing system. On the contrary, the theorist has only to recognise the self declared norms of bourgeois society (i.e., freedom, legal equality and property rights) in order to initiate a critique of that society. As Horkheimer puts it, critical theorists “interpret the economic categories of work, value and production exactly as they are interpreted in the existing order ... at the same time they consider it rank dishonesty simply to accept the interpretation ...”.<sup>40</sup> Later, Horkheimer describes this approach as the “critical acceptance of the categories which rule social life”, by which he means to say that the practice of immanent critique begins by adopting the very principles which it will eventually seek to overthrow. Thus Marx’s analysis of the commodity form, and more especially his description of the evolutionary logic of that form from petty commodity production to monopoly capital, is an analysis that is particularly fateful to

---

<sup>39</sup> *The Eclipse of Reason*, p.182.

<sup>40</sup> ‘Critical and Traditional Theory’ in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p.208.

the capitalist order, for whilst it is based upon the very principles which are constitutive of bourgeois society it concludes by pointing to the need for a radical transformation of that particular social form.

*Immanence, Transcendence and Totality*

The above interpretation of Marxian political economy as a theory that refuses to accept the conventional boundaries of thought, that simultaneously posits itself as description *and* critique, is central not only to Horkheimer's thought but also to that of Marcuse and Adorno. Neither theorist, however, is content simply to restate Horkheimer's original formulation of the concept of critical theory; on the contrary, both of them, albeit in different ways, seek to extend as well as clarify the argument first presented in the pages of the *Zeitschrift*. Now although a comprehensive examination of their work is beyond the scope of this thesis I shall, in the final half of this chapter, try to say something concerning the respective contributions of these two thinkers to the idea of a critical theory of society. In this section I want to consider what Adorno has to say concerning both the nature and in particular the *coherence* of that project. This discussion will focus upon the version of critical theory developed by Adorno, and in particular upon his construction of that theory as a form of radical scepticism concerning the legitimacy of the socially-constructed conceptual universe we inhabit. In the course of my discussion, Adorno's approach to the practice of critique will be compared and contrasted, albeit somewhat briefly, with that of normative transcendentalism: a doctrine which in recent times has been revived through the work of Jurgen Habermas. Against the transcendentalist, I shall seek to

defend Adorno's notion of a dialectic as a practice that is simultaneously immanent to but critical of the very social life process from which it arises. Clearly this strategy is similar to Horkheimer's account of immanent critique which has just been considered. Thus according to Adorno:

The theory of second nature, to which Hegel already gave a critical tinge, is not lost to a negative dialectics. It assumes, *tel quel*, the abrupt immediacy, the formations which society and its evolution present to our thought; and it does this so that analysis may bare its mediations to the extent of the *immanent difference* between phenomena and that which they claim to be in themselves."<sup>41</sup> (Italics mine)

Hence for Adorno dialectic must comply with the requirement of immanence, and therefore begin by describing the gulf that exists between the existing conceptual order of society and the world that that form of consciousness purports to represent. As he puts it:

The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy ... Contradiction ... indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived.<sup>42</sup>

---

<sup>41</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, p.38.

<sup>42</sup> *Op.cit.*, p.5.

Rather like Socratic enquiry, this form of critique interrogates concepts by contrasting their extension with the criteria governing their application: the portion of the criteria which remains unfilled constitutes the challenge of a critical theory. The resulting discrepancy, or “remainder”, is the first premise of a rigorously internal critique of the theory in which the concepts figure. Dialectics therefore is premised upon an awareness of the conflict, -Adorno would say, guilt - which consciousness experiences in the attempt to apply concepts to the existing world. By contrast, ideology makes the false claim that the object corresponds to, or is identical with its concept: that, for instance, exchange under capitalism occurs under conditions of freedom and equality. In the language of Adorno’s negative dialectic, the critical consciousness is one that rejects the claims of identity thinking (*Identitätsdenken*) and in particular its premise that concept (*Begriff*) and object (*Gegenstand*) stand in a relation of harmonious correspondence.

Adorno’s conception of dialectic can be usefully contrasted with an alternative tradition of critical thought, namely that which is founded upon some notion or standard of an autonomous reason. This kind of critique is essentially transcendent in character, for it brings an external standard to bear upon its object rather than standards that are contextually determined by the object itself. Kant’s Categorical Imperative, with its purely formal criterion of morality, and more recently Habermas’ notion of the ‘ideal speech situation’, suggest themselves as examples of transcendentally-grounded criticism. Doubtless, part of the appeal of this approach is that it seems to require a greater degree of intellectual creativity. The critic must first discover or deduce the ground upon which the argument is to occur, instead of having

to start from principles determined by the accident of historical context. Indeed many of Marx's early utopian rivals took precisely this approach and developed their critique of capitalist society from supposedly universal principles of morality and rationality, such as natural rights, distributional equity and so forth, rather than from the categories and values of bourgeois political economy which form the starting point of *Capital*. However, this freedom that criticism grants itself is largely illusory. Thought that is external to its context soon discovers that the grounds of its critique need not and logically ought not to be recognised by the society against which it is directed. As Hegel observes with respect to philosophy, the refutation "that proceeds from assumptions lying outside of the [philosophical] system and inconsistent with it" has little or no persuasive force if the system being criticised refuses "to recognise those assumptions". Against this, the transcendent critic may reply that the very purpose behind their critique is to exhibit principles that compel universal assent, or at least assent that is universal with respect to subjects following principles of cognitive rationality. But this rejoinder simply displaces the immanent-transcendent dispute over ethical norms to another dispute over epistemological norms. The strength of critical theory is that it takes as its starting point the object's own experience of itself, and thus avoids the dilemma faced by transcendent critics, who discover that the principles upon which their criticism is founded do not mesh with the society to whom they speak. Of course, such a critic may object that this leaves critical theory without any ultimate foundations, and that in consequence it remains a prisoner of historical circumstance. But this objection misses the very point of the theory: that it is a theory that refuses any foundation other than real human activity. Asked to justify itself, critical theory will point to the historical achievement of Enlightenment, the agenda of



freedom and rationality that was first set but never completed during the birth of the bourgeois order. To insist from *within* Enlightenment that this agenda must also be justified is to make a senseless demand. As the inheritors of that tradition, we use these ideas as the framework of every inquiry that is to count as a normative enquiry. To suppose that there is something else that could justify our adherence to these standards is to suppose the impossible. Instead of seeking an *a priori* account of the norms that we have, the task of philosophy is to engage immanently with those norms and in doing so to become a force for their complete realisation.

Such a strategy, it should be noted, is in full accord with Hegel's belief that all thought begins *in situ*, and that in consequence the traditional philosophical quest to find a vantage point that is external to our conceptual system is a wholly misguided enterprise. As he observes:

Since consciousness thus finds that its knowledge does not correspond to its object, the object itself does not stand the test; in other words, the criterion for testing is altered when that for which it was to have been the criterion fails to pass the test; and the testing is not only a testing of what we know, but also a testing of the criterion of what knowing is.<sup>43</sup>

Thus by exploring, so to speak, from within, we presuppose only an ability to recognise when the criteria governing the application of a concept are fulfilled (or not); if this cannot be presupposed, then any kind of thought is simply impossible.

---

<sup>43</sup> *Phenomenology*, §85.

Critical theory adopts a similar strategy; it begins with an existing form of social consciousness, including existing standards of rational enquiry, and seeks to demonstrate that by its own internal standards this form of consciousness is inadequate with respect to its object, that the attempt to consistently think this consciousness leads to contradiction. Despite therefore what certain critics of the Frankfurt School have maintained, critical theory is not dogged by any requirement for a transcendental standard against which society may be judged; on the contrary the theory is grounded in pre-existing thought and has no assumptions other than those which society has about itself. This last observation raises the question of the relation between the normative order that critical theory champions and the subject-object totality discussed in previous chapters. By way of an answer, we may say that the norms which define this order are, although currently inadequately realised, central to the maintenance of that totality. Thus unlike conventional socio-ethical theories which develop principles in abstraction from the concrete historical situation, critical materialism commences its argument with forms of consciousness that are actually constitutive of the social life process. In doing this, the theory poses an inescapable challenge to the society it confronts, for the questions it poses are questions which are internal to the form of life itself. By contrast to the utopian, the critical theorist seeks to initiate a discussion directed towards the extension and deepening of the very norms which bourgeois society itself triumphantly proclaims.

In this sense critical theory is a moment that is internal to the social totality: it represents the movement of consciousness towards a more adequate understanding of the world that human activity has created. Thus as we produce society, we necessarily

construct a conceptual and intentional order reflected in a variety of forms of social consciousness constituting the subjective pole of the life process. Now the claim of ideology is that this order corresponds to reality, that the concept describes the object, that the intention is fulfilled by the concrete pattern of life characteristic of society. Against this optimism, the critical theorist returns to dialectical thought, to reflection upon the tensions, inconsistencies and contradictions within that order. Thus by articulating the various conflicts internal to a form of consciousness, the theory is at once part of that form but also the means whereby that consciousness can be transcended. In this fashion, critical theory overcomes the disabling duality of subject and object characteristic of positivist social theory, for like Hegelian dialectic it is not a method external to its object but an element in the life of the very society it seeks to comprehend, evaluate and ultimately transform.

Of course, there is a sense in which this proposition is trivially true: any set of beliefs held about a society by members of that society, including those which result from adherence to specific social scientific theories, constitute a social phenomenon. Thus post-modernist theories concerning the nature of contemporary society are simultaneously theories about that reality as well as part of that reality. This leads to the thought that critical theory is simply one kind of theory amongst many, that it represents a certain specific "approach" to the social sciences which can be put alongside and compared with distinct and rival theoretical perspectives such as positivism, functionalism, ethnomethodology and so forth. However, in a comment upon this attempt to reduce the theory to yet another, albeit highly radical, conception of the social scientific enterprise Adorno writes:

No theory today escapes the marketplace. Each one is offered as a possibility amongst competing opinions; all are put up for choice; all are swallowed. There are no blinders for thought to don against this, and the self-righteous conviction that my own theory is spared that fate will surely deteriorate into self-advertising. But neither need dialectics be muted by such rebuke, or by the concomitant charge of its superfluity, of being a method slapped on outwardly, at random.<sup>44</sup>

To understand Adorno's confident rejection of both of the above charges, we need to recall that critical theory comprehends itself not as a method external to the life of society, but as the conscious articulation of that life. Hence, far from being a method randomly slapped onto the social life process, dialectic is the means by which that process comes to recognise itself for what it is: dialectic is not a theory about the world but rather is part of the movement of the world itself. Describing his conception of philosophy, Adorno writes:

Philosophy would be debasing itself all over again ... if it were to fool itself and others about the fact that it must, from *without*, imbue its objects with whatever moves them from within it. What is waiting in the objects themselves needs such intervention to come to speak, with the perspective that the forces mobilised outside, and ultimately every theory that is brought to bear on the phenomena, should come to rest *in* the phenomena. In that sense, too,

---

<sup>44</sup> *Negative Dialectics*, pp. 4-5.

philosophical theory means that its own end lies in its realisation.<sup>45</sup>

This is an admirable summation of the means by which an immanent but critical theory becomes an emancipating moment in the process of a social totality. The theory begins from without, in that it seeks to reflect upon the life of its object, namely society; but in doing this it is compelled to think in accordance with that society's own norms of rationality and human well-being. Nevertheless these norms, once subject to the process of dialectic, can be made to speak in such a fashion as to pose a threat to the established order. Rather like a psychoanalyst, the critical theorist seeks to reveal the latent content of the concepts which in part constitute the matrix of social relations, and in doing so the theorist lays the essential preconditions for the transformation of those relations. In effect, thought about reality has come to reside in reality, for it gives a new form of expression to the subject: from a state of acceptance of the world as it is the subject moves to one in which he or she understands that their existence is marked by exploitation and un-freedom. Ultimately it is this total commitment to the life of individuals in society, and more particularly to the discovery of the antagonistic nature of the reality that they inhabit, which renders Adorno's dialectic a paradigm of materialist thinking. For in exploring that antagonism, in allowing the object of thought to speak for itself, thought discovers that it is rooted in the non-conceptual. As he puts it:

Freedom follows the subject's urge to express itself. The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth. For suffering is objectivity that weighs

---

<sup>45</sup> Op.cit.

upon the subject; its most subjective experience, its expression, is objectively conveyed.<sup>46</sup>

In making that experience of suffering conscious of itself, philosophy by means of interpretation takes the first step towards its abolition.

### *From Theory to Praxis*

By way of conclusion to this thesis, I want to consider a potentially serious objection to the project of critical theory as it has been outlined above. Curiously, this objection gains whatever force it has from the Frankfurt School's own account of the nature of late capitalist society. In summary form, the objection can be put like this: if the Frankfurt analysis of the formation of social consciousness is correct, then the possibility of realising the emancipatory aspiration of critical theory must be rated as negligible, if not wholly non-existent. For the conclusion of their analysis is that late capitalist society, through a variety of means, has succeeded in its quest of ideologically dominating the great majority of the population. Thus although dissent based on the theory is possible, it is rendered politically meaningless because the class to whom the theory is addressed has become wholly incorporated into the present social order.

This argument, whilst somewhat crude, nevertheless highlights a fundamental tension within the broad theoretical framework of Frankfurt Marxism. By way of illustration, I

---

<sup>46</sup> Op.cit. pp.17-18.

shall consider part of the general argument of Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution*. In a passage which reads very much like a piece of classical Marxism Marcuse writes:

The implications of the free labour contract lead Marx to see that labour produces and perpetuates its own exploitation. In other words, in the continuing process of capitalist society, freedom produces and perpetuates its own opposite. The analysis is in this wise an immanent critique of individual freedom as it originates in capitalist society and as it develops *pari passu* with the development of capitalism. The economic forces of capitalism left to their own devices, create enslavement, poverty and the intensity of class conflicts. The truth of this form of freedom is thus its negation.<sup>47</sup>

Here we are on the familiar terrain of a critique mounted not from a utopian vantage point but from within a specific form of life. Furthermore, that critique is associated at least implicitly with the logic of the historical process: intensification of the class conflict between capital and labour is seen as one of the necessary outcomes of the process of capitalist accumulation. In a later preface to *Reason and Revolution*, Marcuse amplifies this thought and argues that dialectic, by uncovering the contradictions within social life: "... is not only a critique of conformist logic, which denies the reality of contradiction; it is also *a critique of the given state of affairs on its own grounds* - of the established system of life which denies its *promises* and *potentialities*." <sup>48</sup>(Italics mine) Now this particular formulation of the Frankfurt

---

<sup>47</sup> *Reason and Revolution*, p.309.

<sup>48</sup> 'A Note on Dialectic' in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, p.445.

position suggests that a critical theory of society is obliged not only to reveal the unfulfilled promise of a form of life - in other words, what it claims for itself - but also to identify the *potential* for the realisation of that promise. Hence for Marcuse, the critique of exchange society involves two distinct but nevertheless related tasks. First, the theory is obliged to demonstrate that that society stands in conflict with the very principles upon which it is constructed, or, as he puts it, that the critique of a state of affairs is developed on the basis of its own grounds. Second, that the theory succeeds in identifying the *means* by which this internal conflict might be resolved; that in other words it reveals the possibility of the transformation of an existing but contradictory state of affairs into another state in which the contradiction between conception and reality is resolved. Commenting upon this requirement, Marcuse writes:

Mere possibility belongs to the very character of reality; it is not imposed by an arbitrary speculative act. The possible and the real are in a dialectical relation that requires a special condition in order to be operative, and that condition must be one in fact. For instance, if the existing relations within a given social system are unjust and inhuman, they are not offset by other realisable possibilities unless these other possibilities are also manifested as having their roots within that system. They must be present for example in the form of an obvious wealth of productive forces, a development of the material wants and desires of men, their advanced culture, their social and political maturity, and so on. In such a case, the possibilities are not only real ones, but represent the true content of the social system as against its immediate form of existence.<sup>49</sup>

---

<sup>49</sup> *Reason and Revolution*, pp.150-51.



The argument of this passage relies heavily upon the Hegelian notion of “real possibility”: a form of modality that is not identical with logical possibility, but rather reflects or is mediated by the nature or essence of that which is actual.<sup>50</sup> Thus whilst it is logically possible that an agrarian slave-owning society might overnight be transformed into a modern industrial capitalist state, such a transformation cannot be regarded as a real possibility. For an alternative social order to be possible in this latter sense, the conditions for that order must be immanent to the very society which it is to replace. Thus, in the passage above, Marcuse identifies a number of the conditions which he regards as essential for the realisation of the socialist project. These conditions can be seen as falling into one of two categories. On the one hand, there are those which are primarily associated with the material base of social production, factors such as the general level of scientific-technological development, the capacity of the productive forces of the society in question and so forth.<sup>51</sup> On the other, there are what might be called the subjective conditions of emancipation: basically, the awareness of the need for a transformation of social relations, as well as the desire to implement that transformation. Now according to Marcuse, the material conditions for the transition from capitalism to socialism have, at least in the most advanced capitalist states, been in place for some considerable time. By contrast, the principle subjective condition for that transformation, namely the existence of a political will on the part of the proletariat to move towards a new society, has become increasingly questionable.

---

<sup>50</sup> For a useful discussion of the question of historical change, see Scott Meikle’s *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx*, especially Chapter 3.

<sup>51</sup> See Geuss’ *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, p.76., for a discussion of the role that the objective conditions for emancipation play in the formulation of a critical theory of society.

Indeed for Marcuse, the neutralisation of the proletariat as an agent of social transformation is no temporary or accidental feature of late capitalism but is rather a consequence of the powerful integrative strategies characteristic of that society. Thus under conditions of total administration, Marcuse argues that both the American and European working classes have degenerated into a passive, atomised aggregation of individuals who in the main succumb to the identities foisted upon them by society.

This lack of correspondence between consciousness and the material development of society poses a substantial problem for critical theory, for it raises the question of whether the theory possesses any *practical efficacy*. In other words, although the Frankfurt reconstruction of the Marxian theory of society represents it as a consistently immanent critique of its object, the theory remains external to that reality insofar as it fails to connect with the lived experience of the subject. Thus unlike, say, Lukács, who however problematically managed to identify critical consciousness with the world outlook of the proletariat, the Frankfurt School declare unambiguously for the independence of theory vis-a-vis every existing concrete form of social consciousness.<sup>52</sup> Whilst this stance avoids certain of the problems associated with Lukács' genetic theory of knowledge, it brings in its wake the revival of the very question, which Marx set to solve, of the relationship between theory and practice.

---

<sup>52</sup> Thus Horkheimer observes: "The theoretician whose business it is to hasten developments which will lead to a society without injustice can find himself in opposition to views prevailing even amongst the proletariat... If such a conflict were not possible, there would be no need of a theory; those who need it would come upon it without help." ('Traditional and Critical Theory' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, p.221).

Now for Korsch and Lukács this question is disposed of by declaring that Marxism is the scientific articulation of the proletarian world view. Hence although not all individual members of that class necessarily subscribe to the theory, nevertheless the nature of the situation of the proletariat will lead increasing numbers of workers to adopt a revolutionary consciousness.<sup>53</sup> This answer, however unsatisfactory it might appear, has at least the merit of simplicity: reflection upon the process of capitalist development leads to the view that the process itself will automatically produce the requisite revolutionary subject. By the time that the Frankfurt School were writing, however, this particular solution to the problem of the relation between theory and *praxis* no longer seemed very plausible. In the wake of Fascism and the stabilised affluence of post-war capitalist society in America and Western Europe, it became increasingly unrealistic to argue that the unwinding of the historical process necessarily generates a militant class consciousness on the part of the proletariat. Furthermore, by declaring the independence of theory with respect to the consciousness, - whether imputed or not - of any social group or class the Frankfurt theorists appear to create an unbridgeable gulf between theory and the actual life of society.

In essence, the problem is this: although the Frankfurt critique is developed in a rigorously immanent form, it lacks historical efficacy because the concrete subject - the proletariat - to whom it is addressed is inescapably mired in a system of ideological delusion. Thus according to Marcuse, advanced industrial societies through a variety of means are capable of preventing subjects from becoming aware of any beliefs and desires that they already have which might threaten society, or of acquiring new more

---

<sup>53</sup> For an account of this position see Lukács' 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' in *History and Class Consciousness*, pp. 149-181.

critical attitudes to the world they inhabit. This situation has been well described by Geuss:

Suppose that ... society is so powerful that it can prevent agents from recognising and expressing some wishes and desires that they have. It is likely, then, that frustration of these desires will not be something which is ever allowed to come to full consciousness: clear recognition of the frustration might lead to recognition of the inadmissible unconscious desire. The result will be vague malaise, free floating dissatisfaction, irrational behaviour pattern, etc - in short, a situation of frustration and unhappiness which is not recognised for what it is.<sup>54</sup>

Now without for the moment getting into a debate as to whether this kind of mass delusion actually exists or indeed is even possible, it ought to be clear that without a response to the state of affairs described by Geuss, the rationale of the Frankfurt critique is brought into question. To put the matter as concretely possible: if the audience to whom critical theory is addressed refuse or are unable for whatever reason to recognise that their lives are dominated by oppression and exploitation, then there seems little point in continuing with a theoretical practice whose very purpose is to transform that situation. Indeed in Hegelian terms, one might say that the transformation of society advocated by Marx and his followers is in the condition of late capitalism no longer a real historical possibility, for the subjective conditions of this event have effectively been abolished.

---

<sup>54</sup> *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, p.81.

Obviously this is a substantial and complex question which cannot be fully addressed here. Some points, however, can be made in outline. First of all it might be said that the simple fact that the frustration generated by social conditions is currently an unconscious frustration need not entail that this situation is irrevocable. Thus it may be possible to regard critical theory as performing a role akin to that of psychoanalysis insofar as it is an attempt to persuade the subject to acknowledge the existence of an unconscious complex of beliefs and desires. The problem with this analogy is that, to date, we have no idea of the kind of socio-political practice which might produce this result. Indeed, there seems very little in the Frankfurt School's own analysis of the various systems of manipulation which might point to the possibility of the subject ever recovering the requisite kind of emancipatory self-knowledge. Nevertheless, the failure to construct a practical theory of economic and political emancipation does not necessarily constitute an objection to the Frankfurt project, but rather indicates an omission, or deficit, which it may be possible to make good. After all, there is plenty of evidence to suggest that late capitalist society is marked by a high degree of what Geuss calls "free floating dissatisfaction", and that if this dissatisfaction is indeed the result of unconscious yearning for an end to exploitation and oppression then there is at least some hope that this frustration could be brought to consciousness. To assume otherwise is to abandon the very possibility of a sphere of rational political discourse and discovery, through which subjects may come to a greater self-understanding of their life situation.

---

What has been said so far has been premised upon the thought that although individuals do not consciously experience their situation as one of un-freedom and inequality, nevertheless at some level this reality finds expression in their psychic structure. But what if this is not true? According to Geuss, the Frankfurt School was haunted by this very possibility, by the “spectre of a society where social control is so total and effective that members can be prevented from even forming desires which cannot be easily satisfied, a society of happy slaves, genuinely content with their chain.”<sup>55</sup> In this situation there would be appear to be little or no potential for the realisation of critical theory, for the happy slaves are fully satisfied with the lives that they lead. Consequently, a theory that speaks of exploitation and oppression, however convincing it might be for the few who care to ponder such questions, will find it impossible under these circumstances to secure a mass audience. Now if this is the case then the situation of critical theory is bleak indeed: by its own analysis it is impotent to transform that which the theory denounces. It is this impasse which has led many a critic of the Frankfurt School to dismiss the project as an essentially Romantic, often backward-looking critique of the contemporary world which is incapable of serving as the theoretical basis for any kind of practical radicalism.<sup>56</sup>

For a number of reasons, however, this dismissal is premature. In the first place, none of the Frankfurt theorists actually held to the view that society had in fact become consistently “one-dimensional”, that the condition of total administration had been

---

<sup>55</sup> Op.cit. p.84.

<sup>56</sup> See, for instance, Kolakowski’s discussion of the Frankfurt School in *Main Currents of Marxism: 3. The Breakdown*, pp.340-395. For a Marxist variant of this same charge see Goran Therborn’s critique in his article ‘The Frankfurt School’, *New Left Review*, No.63, Sept-Oct 1970.

achieved. Certainly the various members of the School were to the fore in discovering the extent, as well as the means, by which the universe of discourse in late capitalist society has been systematically narrowed. Nevertheless, all of them at various times cast doubt on whether this form of reflective closure could ever be *complete* or *permanent*. Their argument against completeness involved an appeal to the continuing existence of certain forms of Spirit, namely Art, Philosophy and Religion, which whilst inevitably tending to be the preserve of a cultural elite also retain a degree of centrality for the life of society as a whole.<sup>57</sup> These forms of consciousness, so they argue, serve to express in a variety of ways the vision of the good life, of a mode of being in the world that is qualitatively different from that which we currently experience. Thus with reference to the realm of the aesthetic, Marcuse writes:

... art creates the realm in which the subversion of experience proper to art becomes possible: the world formed by art is recognised as a reality which is suppressed and distorted in the given reality. This experience culminates in extreme situations (of love and death, guilt and failure, but also joy, happiness and fulfillment) which explode the given reality in the name of a truth normally denied or even unheard. The inner logic of the work of art terminates in the emergence of another reason, another sensibility, which defy the rationality and

---

<sup>57</sup> For an interesting account of Adorno and Horkheimer's attitude towards religion see Rudolf.J.Siebert's 'Adorno's Theory of Religion' in *Telos*, Winter, 1983-84, pp.108-114. Siebert argues that critical theory by presenting the world as it is - as a fleeting historical moment - rather than from the standpoint of the Absolute, expresses "what God is not." In doing this Adorno and Horkheimer, according to Siebert, stand in the "great tradition of Western negative theology." On the relation between Art and Philosophy in Adorno's thought see Andrew Edgar's 'Introduction to Adorno's Aesthetics', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 30, No. 1, Jan 1990.

sensibility incorporated in the dominant social institutions.<sup>58</sup>

At first glance, this might seem like a wildly romantic and wholly unrealistic celebration of the subversive potentiality of the work of art. However, I wish to argue that what Marcuse is saying here is not altogether unreasonable. In the first place, works of art are clearly motivated by the desire to escape the constraints of commodity production: what the artist produces is something that is radically unique, that resists every effort to construe it as an instance of a type, and demands that its very particularity be respected not only in the process of its production but also its consumption. Commenting upon this potential, Jay Bernstein writes:

There is (re)-enchantment in them in the sense that they remain obstinately particulars that are not subsumable under any universal. They demonstrate that sensuous particulars can mean, can be hypnotic objects of attention, apart from and in defiance of any form of identifying mechanism other than the one their sheer presence insinuates.<sup>59</sup>

Now in this sense every genuine artistic product constitutes itself as a protest against the instrumentalist logic of contemporary society and the sensibility which reduces each concrete object to a lifeless abstraction. Hence we can say, as Geuss does, that works of art embody a utopian standard for they offer an alternative conception of how subjects might relate to objects, a conception which invokes the promise of

---

<sup>58</sup> *The Aesthetic Dimension*, p.7.

<sup>59</sup> 'The Death of Sensuous Particulars: Adorno and Abstract Expressionism' in *Radical Philosophy*, 76, March-April, 1996, p.11.



human happiness. If this argument is correct, then the closure of the universe of discourse in advanced capitalist societies is not yet complete. For insofar as a cultural space still exists for genuinely autonomous works of art, these artefacts stand as a rebuke to a social order in which all production is controlled and regulated by the logic of the commodity form.

Nevertheless even Marcuse, whilst celebrating the emancipatory promise of the aesthetic, cautions us to remember the limitations of this particular sphere of activity. As he observes: “Art cannot change the world, but it can contribute to changing the consciousness and drives of the men and women who could change the world.”<sup>60</sup> The problem, here, of course is that the tradition of high culture that Marcuse and his colleagues favour is, in present circumstances, the preserve of a relatively small cultural elite, most of whom show little or no sign of advancing from a refined aesthetic sensibility towards a desire to change the world. Indeed, as one commentator has pointed out there is a clear circular element to this argument:

By intervening in consciousness, authentic artworks bring back into society their corrective alienation of alienation. In order for artworks to intervene, however, there must be a consciousness that is sufficiently alienated from society to receive their intervention. Hence art’s political impact depends upon a circular process: autonomous art becomes politically effectual by calling for a consciousness that can let art have a political effect.<sup>61</sup>

---

<sup>60</sup> *The Aesthetic Dimension*, pp.32-33.

<sup>61</sup> Zuidervaart, L., *Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of an Illusion*,

This suggests that although the administered society has as yet failed to silence or compromise every voice of protest, it has nonetheless managed to marginalize the few remaining forms of critical consciousness which have persisted to this day. But if this is true then the present universe of discourse, although not wholly closed, remains largely and effectively a discourse of manipulation and delusion. In consequence the question as to the *permanence* of this state of affairs becomes ever more pressing.

Here it must be said that the message of the Frankfurt School is ambiguous and sometimes even confused. Thus one way of interpreting the thesis of a society of total administration is to take this as an account of the powerful but not necessarily omnipotent forces of social integration which characterise the contemporary world. This, it should be said, is perfectly consistent with classical Marxist thought: it is simply an updating to the era of film, radio, television and computer communication of Marx's claim that the ruling ideas of the age are the ideas of the ruling class. On this reading, Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of the culture industry can be taken as a fairly straightforward materialist account of this particular social formation, for their analysis of the culture industry claims to reveal the way in which apparently "harmless entertainment" serves to maintain and even reinforce the domination of capital over society as a whole. They speak, for example, of the "triumph of invested capital, whose title as absolute master is etched deep into the hearts of the dispossessed of the unemployment line; it is the meaningful content of every film, whatever plot the

production team may have selected.”<sup>62</sup> Here the film industry as a form of “mass culture” is directly identified as an agent of ideological control; the consumers of its product are seen as succumbing to the complex of conservative ideas which the very organisation of the industry does so much to promote. However, from the point of view of classical Marxism this need not be regarded as particularly startling; after all, it might be argued that in an era of high technology the means of social integration will themselves be the product of that technology. On this account the Hollywood dream factory is simply a replacement, and from the perspective of capital a more efficient as well as a more profitable replacement, for the opium of religion. In this sense, therefore, the Frankfurt School’s analysis of manipulation can be seen as essentially complementary to the classic Marxist account of ideology.

However, as I have already suggested, it is possible to construct a more radically pessimistic reading of the Frankfurt School’s analysis of late capitalist society. According to this interpretation, a range of technological developments, both quantitative and qualitative, has led to a *qualitative* change in the means of ideological control: in place of systems of belief such as religion, liberalism, nationalism and social democracy, which are at least capable of being challenged by reasoned argument, late capitalism controls its subject population through a regime of manufactured needs and socially organised pleasures. Thus the culture industry, considered as a means of social control, represents a transition from strategies of domination, oriented around the manipulation of a public sphere of discursive rationality, to a program of mass “entertainment” designed to obstruct and eventually extinguish the possibility of any

---

<sup>62</sup> *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.124.

form of radical consciousness.<sup>63</sup> Commenting upon the capacity of pleasure to induce a generalised quiescence, Adorno and Horkheimer observe that:

Pleasure always means not to think about anything, to forget suffering even where it is shown. Basically it is helplessness. It is flight; not, as is asserted, flight from a wretched reality, but from the last remaining thought of resistance. The liberation which amusement promises is freedom from thought and negation.<sup>64</sup>

Now if this situation has indeed become the norm, if it is in fact the case that the great mass of the population have become completely absorbed in the quest for socially approved pleasure, then it would be true to say that the possibility of mounting an effective challenge to the contemporary social order has all but disappeared. It should be frankly admitted that this line of argument is not consistent with classical Marxism, for it takes the viewpoint that the developmental logic of capitalism, in particular the development of a sphere of mass consumption, leads to the permanent foreclosing of

---

<sup>63</sup> This extremely negative assessment of mass culture has been contested by a large number of critics. Thus J.B. Thompson argues that the Adorno-Horkheimer “argument exaggerates the passivity of individuals and takes far too much for granted concerning the process of reception. Assumptions of this kind have to be replaced by a more contextualised and hermeneutically sensitive account of the ways in which individuals receive media products, use them and incorporate them into their lives.” (*The Media and Modernity*, pp.74-75). An important source for this kind of argument is Umberto Eco’s article ‘Apocalyptic and Integrated Intellectuals’ in *Apocalypse Postponed*. See also, Albrecht Wellmer’s defence of the emancipatory potential of certain forms of popular culture in ‘Truth, Semblance and Reconciliation: Adorno’s Aesthetic Redemption of Modernity’, *Telos*, 62, Winter, 1984-85, pp.89-115. For a sympathetic re-assessment of Adorno’s analysis in the light of this kind of criticism see John Caughie’s ‘Adorno’s reproach: repetition, difference and television genre’ in *Screen*, 32:2, Summer 1991.

<sup>64</sup> *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p.144.

the possibility of a genuine class consciousness. However, this pessimistic interpretation of Frankfurt Marxism relies heavily upon a strategy of “selective quotation”, ignoring passages in the work of both Adorno and Marcuse which point to other, and conflicting tendencies in contemporary society. For example, in an interesting comment on *resistance* to the influence of the culture industry and consumerism in general, Adorno writes:

The two-faced irony in the relationship of servile individuals to the culture industry is not restricted to them alone. It may also be supposed that the consciousness of consumers themselves is split between the prescribed fun such as is supplied to them by the culture industry and a particularly not well hidden doubt about its blessings. The phrase ‘the world wants to be deceived’ becomes truer than it had ever been intended. People are not only, as the saying goes, falling for the swindle; if it guarantees them even the most fleeting gratification, they desire a deception which is nonetheless transparent to them.<sup>65</sup>

Here Adorno, far from supposing that individuals are simply passive consumers of whatever the culture industry cares to offer them, is arguing that the process of consumption is marked by a kind of bad faith. In effect, he is describing a state in which individuals believe and disbelieve the very same propositions: they believe because they want to believe and they disbelieve because they are at least implicitly

---

<sup>65</sup> ‘The Culture Industry Reconsidered’ in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, p.279.

aware of what it is that they are doing. This leads to a peculiarly fragile form of social consensus which holds only for so long as individuals choose not to think systematically about the potentiality for transforming their life situation.

This threat to the established order is further reinforced by the very real potential for an significant improvement in human well-being. Thus according to Adorno, the advanced technology and productive capacity of late capitalism makes it possible for human needs to be satisfied to a degree that is historically unprecedented. He therefore goes on to argue that this disparity between how things are and how they might be is now so great that it increasingly threatens the ability of the power elite to coherently justify its rule. As he observes:

It cannot be denied in this context that in the increasing satisfaction of material needs, in spite of their deformation by the social apparatus, the possibility of a life without indigence is incomparably more concretely possible than before. Even in the poorest lands, no-one would need to go hungry any more. The fact that the veil over our consciousness of the possible has become thin is demonstrated by the panic aroused by all forms of social enlightenment that do not fall within the official system of communications. That which Marx and Engels - who wanted society organised in a way consonant with human dignity - attacked as an utopia which would only sabotage this sort of social organisation, has now become a palpable possibility.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>66</sup> 'Is Marx Obsolete?', *Diogenes*, 64, Winter 1968, p.8.

What Adorno is getting at here is the idea that the discourses of legitimation characteristic of contemporary capitalism have become increasingly divorced from reality, and that this is sensed, however dimly, by the population at large.<sup>67</sup> Of course this is not to suggest that such an awareness is the immediate precursor of an imminent mass radicalism; on the contrary, the most likely outcome is an increasing detachment on the part of large sections of the population from the entire political process. However, despite the obvious dangers involved in such a widespread degree of political anomie, and in particular the opportunity it provides for reactionary and neo-fascist movements to gain a popular following, it needs to be recognised as an important and potentially beneficial development. For it signals that the traditional forms of political control in advanced capitalist society are beginning to break down and that this may once again offer the possibility of creating a mass movement centred around the social emancipation of producers.

Similar doubts concerning the permanence of the social integration characteristic of the advanced economies of the world can be found in the work of Marcuse. Thus even in his apparently most pessimistic text, *One Dimensional Man*, he discovers that:

... underneath the conservative popular base is the substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colours, the unemployed and the unemployable. They exist outside the democratic process; their life is the most immediate and the most real need for ending

---

<sup>67</sup> The notion that advanced capitalist societies are increasingly prone to a crisis of legitimation is, of course, a prominent theme in the work of Habermas. There is more than an echo of this argument in Charles Taylor's *Hegel*. See, in particular, Chapter XX.

intolerable conditions and institutions. Thus their opposition is revolutionary even if their consciousness is not.<sup>68</sup>

Furthermore, as Hegel long ago recognised, the existence of this pauperised “rabble” or *lumpenproletariat*, far from being a historical contingency, results from the inherent logic of the process of capitalist accumulation. And in this respect he is undoubtedly correct: such a population has been created and recreated by capitalism innumerable times in the course of its development. Thus in the United States, at present, the marginalised and excluded number tens of millions, forming a population that has to be contained through a system of bureaucratic welfare, and a prison system of gulag proportions. However, despite these mechanisms of containment, this so-called “under-class” remains a restless and potentially destabilising element within American society. Now whilst Marcuse did not believe that these highly disparate groups could of themselves constitute an effective threat to the established order he did regard this layer of the population as a potential base for the reconstruction of a realistic challenge to the administered society. By autonomously raising demands, challenging the established universe of political discourse as well as resisting the inevitably ensuing oppression, Marcuse hoped that the activity of these groups might ignite an escalating series of emancipatory demands on behalf of the working class itself. That so far this challenge has not materialised cannot be taken as an indicator that it never will; to make that supposition is to align oneself with a tradition of

---

<sup>68</sup> *One Dimensional Man*, pp.256-257. For a summary of Marcuse’s position concerning the potential for revolutionary change in the advanced capitalist sector see ‘Re-examination of the Concept of Revolution’ in *Diogenes*, 64, Winter 1968. For a criticism of Marcuse’s arguments see G.Cohen’s ‘Critical Theory: The Philosophy of Marcuse’, *New Left Review*, 57, Sept-Oct 1969.



thought marked out by complacency and indeed arrogant contempt for the victims of the historical process. Critical theory stands in opposition to this attitude, remaining committed to the hope that: as Marcuse put it, “the historical extremes may meet again: the most advanced consciousness of humanity and its most exploited force.”<sup>69</sup> This work is dedicated to the realisation of that possibility.

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

## Bibliography

- Adorno, T.W., 'The Actuality of Philosophy' in *Telos* 32, Spring 1977.
- Adorno, T.W., 'Aspects of Hegel's Philosophy' in *Hegel Three Studies*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 1994.
- Adorno, T.W., Benjamin, W., *The Complete Correspondence 1928-40*, trans. N.Walker, Cambridge : Polity Press, 1999.
- Adorno, T.W., 'Cultural Criticism and Society' in *Prisms*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 1997
- Adorno, T.W., 'The Culture Industry Reconsidered' in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J.M.Bernstein, London: Routledge 1991.
- Adorno, T.W., 'Freudian Theory and Patterns of Fascist Propaganda' in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, New York: Continuum 1993.
- Adorno, T.W., 'Husserl and the Problem of Idealism', *Journal of Philosophy*, Vol XXXVII, 1, January, 1940.
- Adorno, T.W., Introduction to *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, trans. Glyn Adey and David Frisby, London: Heinemann 1976
- Adorno, T.W., 'Is Marx Obsolete?' in *Diogenes* 64, Winter, 1968.
- Adorno, T.W., *Minima Moralia*, London: Verso 1978.
- Adorno, T.W., *Negative Dialectics*, London: Routledge 1990.
- Adorno, T.W., 'On the Logic of the Social Sciences' in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, trans. Glyn Adey and David Frisby, London: Heinemann 1976

- Adorno, T.W., Horkheimer, M., *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, London: NLB 1979.
- Adorno, T.W., *Philosophy of Modern Music*, New York: Seabury Press 1973.
- Adorno, T.W., 'Sociology and Empirical Research' in *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, trans. Glyn Adey and David Frisby, London: Heinemann 1976
- Adorno, T.W., 'Sociology and Psychology' in *New Left Review*, 46, Winter 1967.
- Adorno, T.W., 'Subject and Object' in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, New York: Continuum 1993.
- Adorno, T.W., Frenkel-Brunswick, E., Levinson, D., Nevitt Stanford, R., *The Authoritarian Personality*, (abridged edition): New York: W.W.Norton & Co., 1993.
- Anderson, P., *Considerations on Western Marxism*, London: NLB, 1976.
- Avineri, S., *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1972.
- Avineri, S., *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1970.
- Ayer, A., *Language Truth and Logic*, London: Victor Gollancz Ltd 1960.
- Benjamin, W., 'Theses on the Philosophy of History' in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, London: Fontanna 1992.
- Bernstein, J., 'The Death of Sensuous Particulars: Adorno and Abstract Expressionism', *Radical Philosophy*, 76, March/April 1996.
- Bernstein, R., *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory*, Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press 1976.
- Blackburn, R. (ed.), *Ideology in Social Science*, Glasgow: Fontana/Collins 1972.
- Bottomore, T.B., *The Frankfurt School*, Chichester: Horwood 1984.
- Breuer, S., 'Adorno's Anthropology', *Telos*, 64, Summer 1985.

- Horkheimer, M, 'Materialism and Morality' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 1993.
- Horkheimer, M., 'Notes on Science and the Crisis' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, New York: Continuum 1995.
- Horkheimer, M., 'On the Problem of Truth' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 1993.
- Horkheimer, M., 'The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of the Institute for Social Research' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 1993.
- Horkheimer, M, 'The Rationalism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 1993.
- Horkheimer, M, 'Remarks on Philosophical Anthropology' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 1993.
- Horkheimer, M., 'The Social Function of Philosophy' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, New York: Continuum 1995.
- Horkheimer, M., 'Traditional and Critical Theory' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, New York: Continuum 1995.
- Husserl, E., *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, trans. David Carr, Evanston: North Western University Press 1970.
- Husserl, E., 'Philosophy as Rigorous Science' in *Phenomenology and the Crisis of Philosophy*, trans. Quentin Lauer, New York: Harper Row 1965.
- Jay, M., *Adorno*, London: Fontana 1984.
- Jay, M., *The Dialectical Imagination*, London: Heinemann 1973.
- Jay, M., *Marxism and Totality*, Cambridge: Polity Press 1984.

- Harvey, D., *The Limits to Capital*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982.
- Held, D., *Introduction to Critical Theory: Horkheimer to Habermas*, Oxford: Polity Press 1990.
- Hegel, G.W., *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B.Nisbett, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- Hegel, G.W., *Hegel's Science of Logic*, trans. A.V. Miller, Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1989.
- Hegel, G.W., *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- Hegel, G.W., *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind*, trans. A.V. Miller, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1971.
- Hilferding, R., *Finance Capital*, London: Routledge & Keagan Paul 1981.
- Hobbes, T., *Leviathan*, ed. C.B. MacPherson, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1968.
- Horkheimer, M., 'Authority and the Family' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, New York: Continuum 1995.
- Horkheimer, M., 'The Authoritarian State' in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, New York: Continuum 1993.
- Horkheimer, M., 'The Concept of Man' in *Critique of Instrumental Reason*, trans., M.J. O'Connell *et al*, New York, Continuum, 1994.
- Horkheimer, M., *Eclipse of Reason*, New York: Continuum 1974.
- Horkheimer, M., 'History and Psychology' in *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 1993.
- Horkheimer, M., 'Materialism and Metaphysics' in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, New York: Continuum 1995.

- Engels, F., 'Feuerbach and the End of Classical German Philosophy' in *Marx and Engels: Selected Works*, London: Lawrence and Wishart 1968.
- Feenberg, A., *Lukács, Marx and the Sources of Critical Theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1986.
- Freud, S., *Introductory Lectures to Psychoanalysis*, trans. James Strachey, London: George Allen and Unwin 1971.
- Fromm, E., 'The Method and Function of an Analytic Social Psychology' in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato and Eike Gebhardt, New York: Continuum 1993.
- Geras, N., *The Contract of Mutual Indifference*, London: Verso 1998.
- Geuss, R., *The Idea of a Critical Theory*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Giddens, A., *Sociology: A Brief But Critical Introduction*, London: Macmillan Press 1986.
- Giddens, A., *A Contemporary Critique of Historical Materialism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition, London: Macmillan Press 1995.
- Goldmann, L., *Lukacs and Heidegger*, London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1977.
- Habermas, J., *Knowledge and Human Interests*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro, London: Heinemann 1971.
- Habermas, J., *Theory and Practice*, abridged edition of 4<sup>th</sup> German edition of *Theorie und Praxis*, trans. John Viertel, London: Heinemann 1974.
- Habermas, J., 'Remarks on the Development of Horkheimer's Work' in *On Max Horkheimer: New Perspectives*, ed. S. Benhabib, J. McCole, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 1993.

- Brunkhorst, H. 'Dialectical Positivism of Happiness' in *On Max Horkheimer: New Perspectives*, ed. S. Benhabib, J. McCole, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 1993.
- Buck-Morrs, S., *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, Hassocks, Sussex: Harvester 1977.
- Caughie, J., 'Adorno's reproach: repetition, difference, and television genre' in *Screen*, 32:2, Summer 1991.
- Cohen, G.A., *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1978.
- Cohen, G., 'Critical Theory: The Philosophy of Marcuse', *New Left Review*, 57, Sept-Oct 1969.
- Descartes, R., 'Discourse on Method' in *Descartes Philosophical Writings*, trans. Elizabeth Anscombe and Peter Geach, London: Nelson and Sons Ltd. 1970.
- Dubiel, H., *Theory and Politics*, trans. Benjamin Gregg, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 1985.
- Eagleton, T., *Ideology*, London: Verso 1991.
- Eagleton, T., *Ideology of the Aesthetic*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1990.
- Eagleton, T., *Marxism and Literary Criticism*, London: Methuen & Co. 1976.
- Edel, A., *Aristotle and his Philosophy*, New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers 1996.
- Edgar, A., 'Introduction to Adorno's Aesthetics', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, Vol. 30, No. 1, Jan 1990.
- Elliott, A., *Social Theory and Psychoanalysis in Transition*, (2<sup>nd</sup> Edition), London: Free Association Books Ltd 1999.
- Elster, J., *An Introduction to Marx*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1986.
- Engels, F., *Anti-Duhring*, London: Lawrence and Wishart 1955.

- Jarvis, S., *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*, Cambridge: Polity Press 1998.
- Lichtheim, G., *From Hegel to Marx*, London: Orbach and Chambers 1971.
- Jameson, F., *Late Marxism*, London: Verso, 1996.
- Kant, I., *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp-Smith, Hong Kong: Macmillan 1993.
- Keat, R., 'The Human Body in Social Theory', *Radical Philosophy*, 42, Spring 1986.
- Kellner, D. *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism*, Berkeley: University of California Press 1984.
- Kellner, D., *Critical Theory, Marxism and Modernity*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press 1989.
- Kojeve, A., *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel*, trans. James Nichols, Ithaca: Cornell University Press 1969.
- Kolakowski, L., *Main Currents of Marxism: Volume 2. The Golden Age*, trans. P.S.Falla, Oxford: OUP 1978.
- Kolakowski, L., *Main Currents of Marxism: Volume 3. The Breakdown*, trans. P.S.Falla, Oxford: OUP 1978.
- Korsch, K., *Karl Korsch: Three Essays on Marxism*, London: Pluto Press 1971.
- Korsch, K., *Marxism and Philosophy*, trans. Fred Halliday, London: NLB 1970.
- Lenin, V.I., *Collected Works: Volume 14*, Moscow: Progress Publishers 1972.
- Lichtheim, G., *From Marx to Hegel*, London: Orbach and Chambers 1971.
- Locke, J., *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, London: J.M.Dent & Sons Ltd 1961.
- Lukács, G., *The Ontology of Social Being: Volume 2 Marx*, London: Merlin 1978.
- Lukács, G., 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' in *History and Class*



*Consciousness*, London: Merlin 1971.

Lukács, G., 'What is Orthodox Marxism?' in *History and Class Consciousness*, London: Merlin 1971.

Lukes, S., 'Methodological Individualism Reconsidered' in *The Philosophy of Social Explanation*, ed. Alan Ryan, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1973.

MacIntyre, A., *Marcuse*, London: Wm. Collins & Co, 1970.

McLellan, D., *The Thought of Karl Marx*, London: PaperMac, 1995.

Maker, W., 'Critical Theory and Its Discontents', *Journal of Idealistic Studies*, Vol.26, 1, Winter/Spring, 1996.

Marcuse, H., *The Aesthetic Dimension*, London: MacMillan Press 1979

Marcuse, H., *An Essay on Liberation*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1972

Marcuse, H., *Eros and Civilisation* London: Routledge & Keagan Paul 1956.

Marcuse, H., 'The Foundations of Historical Materialism' in *Studies in Critical Philosophy* London: New Left Books 1972.

Marcuse, H., 'The Obsolescence of the Freudian Concept of Man' in *Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics and Utopia*, trans. Jeremy Shapiro, Boston: Beacon Press 1970.

Marcuse, H., 'Philosophy and Critical Theory' in *Negations*, Boston: Beacon Press 1968.

Marcuse, H., *One Dimensional Man*, London: Routledge and Keagan Paul 1964.

Marcuse, H., *Reason and Revolution*, London: Routledge and Keagan Paul 1963.

Marcuse, H., 'Re-examination of the Concept of Revolution' in *Diogenes*, 64, Winter 1968.

Marcuse, H., *Studies in Critical Philosophy*, London: New Left Books 1972.

- Marcuse, H., *Soviet Marxism: A Critical Analysis*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1971.
- Marx, K., *A Contribution Towards the Critique of Political Economy*, ed. Maurice Dobb, Moscow: Progress Publishers 1970.
- Marx, K., *Capital: Volume I*, trans. Samuel Moore and Edward Aveling, London: Lawrence and Wishart 1974.
- Marx, K., *Early Writings*, trans. R. Livingstone, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1975.
- Marx, K., *Grundrisse*, trans. Martin Nicolaus, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1973.
- Marx, K., Engels, F., 'Communist Manifesto' in *Marx and Engels: Selected Works*, London: Lawrence and Wishart 1968.
- Marx, K., Engels, F., *The German Ideology*, Moscow: Progress Publishers 1976.
- Mehring, F., *On Historical Materialism*, London: New Park Publications 1975.
- Meikle, S., *Essentialism in the Thought of Karl Marx*, London: Duckworth 1985.
- Mellor, D., 'The Reduction of Society', *Philosophy*, 57, 1982.
- Milliband, R., *The State In Capitalist Society*, London: Quartet Books 1973.
- Mure, G.R., *The Philosophy of Hegel*, Bristol: Thoemmes Press 1993.
- Neumann, F., *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism*, London: Victor Gollancz Ltd 1942.
- Nielsen, K., 'The Very Idea of a Critical Theory', *Ratio (New Series)* IV 2, December 1991.
- Norman, R., *Hegel's Phenomenology: A Philosophical Introduction*, London: Sussex University Press 1976.
- Plekhanov, G., *Selected Philosophical Works: Vol III*, Moscow: Progress Publishers

1976.

Popper, K., *Conjectures and Refutations*, London: Routledge and Keagan Paul 1963.

Popper, K., *The Poverty of Historicism*, London: Routledge and Keagan Paul 1961.

Putnam, H., 'Why there isn't a ready made world', *Synthese*, 51, 1982.

Robinson, J., *Economic Philosophy*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books 1964.

Rosen, M., *Hegel's Dialectic and its Criticism*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1982.

Siebert, R.J., 'Adorno's Theory of Religion', *Telos*, Winter 1983.

Slater, P., *Origin and Significance of the Frankfurt School*, London: Routledge and Keagan Paul, 1977.

Smith, A., *The Wealth of Nations: Volume 1*, London: J.M.Dent & Sons 1957.

Solomon, R., *In the Spirit of Hegel*, Oxford: Oxford University Press 1983.

Strawson, P., *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*, London: Methuen 1959.

Sweezy, P., *The Theory of Capitalist Development*, New York: Monthly Review Press 1956.

Taylor, C., *Hegel*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1975.

Taylor, R., *Aesthetics and Politics*, London: New Left Books 1977.

Tertulian, N., 'Lukacs, Adorno and German Classical Philosophy' in *Telos*, 64, Summer 1985.

Therborn, G., 'The Frankfurt School' in *New Left Review*, No. 63, Sept-Oct 1970.

Thompson, E.P., *The Poverty of Theory*, London: Merlin, 1978.

Timpanaro, S., 'Marxism and Idealism' in *New Left Review*, 85, May-June 1974.

Weber, M., *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. T.Parsons,

London: George Allen and Unwin 1976.

Wellmer, A., 'Truth, Semblance and Reconciliation: Adorno's Aesthetic Redemption of Modernity', *Telos*, Winter 1984.

Williams, R., *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, London: Verso 1980.

Winch, P., *The Idea of a Social Science*, London: Routledge and Keagan Paul Ltd 1958.

Wittgenstein, L., *Philosophical Investigations*, Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1972.

Wittgenstein, L., *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* London: Routledge Keagan & Paul 1961.

Zuidervaart, L., *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of an Illusion*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press 1991.