

Mediations:

Critical Theories of Consciousness and Praxis  
in Lukacs, Horkheimer, and Habermas

by  
Frederick D. Weil

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This electronic version was produced by a computer scan and optical character recognition of a paper typescript. Although it was proofread, some errors undoubtedly remain. (For instance, lots of quotation marks were scanned wrong. I'm not sure I caught all of them.)

The revolutionary period following the first World War marks a watershed in world Marxism--both in theory and practice, In a stroke, the “natural laws” of social evolution of the Social Democrats were bypassed, and organizations committed to socialism seized power in several countries, and tried but failed in several others. Confronted for the first time with real examples of socialist revolution, Marxist theorists took up the task of explaining the reasons for the successes and failures.

Particularly difficult for them to understand were the reasons why a revolution in Russia, with a small proletariat and a mass of peasants, succeeded, while the revolution in Germany, with a large proletariat in an advanced industrial system, failed. It was immediately apparent even at the time that a great deal had to do with organization of the struggle, but in a sense this answer merely deferred the more basic theoretical question: it restated it.

The standard Marxist wisdom at the time of these revolutions among the Social Democrats and many Communists was that a transition to socialism could not occur until all the “material conditions” for it had “matured in the womb of the old society.”<sup>1</sup> The Russian, in particular, were attempting to “skip” stages of development by committing the revolution before conditions were “ready.” The Russian Bolsheviks were certainly good organizers, but how had they convinced the masses to follow their lead? Marx had said that men’s “social being (the mode of production of material life) determines their consciousness,”<sup>2</sup> but the Bolsheviks had apparently instilled revolutionary consciousness in the Russian workers and peasants.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Selected Works* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), p. 183.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

A good deal of theory had been developed about the progressive stages of the forces and relations of production in society, but little about the formation of class consciousness or the will to revolt among the proletariat. With the challenge of explaining actual developments theoretical interest in “automatic Marxism” waned, and renewed attention was directed toward the philosophical bases of Marx’s thought in an attempt to fill in the now gaping holes which could not account (apparently) for the new developments.

Georg Lukacs was as much a watershed theorist as the revolutions were a watershed in world history. In the line of theorists, of whom I take Max Horkheimer and Juergen Habermas to be outstanding examples, Lukacs was the first to investigate in a concrete fashion the problem of class consciousness as mediation between a given social situation and a revolution leading to a socialist society. Conversely, he was among the last to hold to such notions as “natural laws” of social development, a transcendental historical subject, or the possibility of knowing with sufficient certainty to necessarily guide one’s actions the totality of existence in its historical “essence.”

More unifies the theories of Lukacs, Horkheimer, and Habermas than separates them, although naturally once their similarities are apparent, distinguishing characteristics become more interesting. Common among them is a renascent interest in classical German philosophy, particularly the epistemology of Kant, Fichte, and Hegel. Marx was highly influenced by this tradition, also, and by Hegel most of all. Therefore, in order to develop a theory of class consciousness capable of sustaining revolutionary praxis, Lukacs goes back to Hegel and the German philosophical tradition.

In his search for the causes of such a class consciousness, Lukacs sets the problem in the following way, to which the other two theorists largely adhered: There exists an epistemological problem of correctly perceiving the world, particularly the world of social relations based on the forces and relations of production. Men are not automatically conscious of their position within a world thus constituted, and there are several “levels” at which they perceive it. Whether they perceive the world in its “essence,” as it really is in its totality, including its history, or whether they merely perceive it in its immediate “appearances” or “illusions” had great bearing on their political beliefs and their willingness to engage in various forms of praxis. Moreover, the very conditions which prevent them materially from achieving their full human capacities also have the tendency to inhibit their ability to recognize these conditions. Therefore, it is of crucial importance for a theory which seeks to promote emancipation of and by the oppressed to find ways of instilling or encouraging an awareness of the conditions of oppression and means by which to overcome them. In fact, failure to achieve this liberatory consciousness means not only continuing oppression, but also the very real possibility of deepening oppression. For Lukacs asserts that without this critical awareness, there is no way that the oppressed can accidentally end their oppression: Knowledge is one of the conditions of emancipation.

Before going on to examine the theories of consciousness and praxis in greater detail, I would like to make a few comments about my general procedure. I have given these theorists a “generous” but critical reading, trying to look not at their more minor inconsistencies in, say, usage of terminology (although this can constitute a serious error), but rather assuming that they are seriously looking for ways of solving real

problems. Thus, I will try to draw out the major implications of their theories, both logically and practically, to show what makes them differ, and to say a little about the historical context in which they arose. I believe that they would desire this sort of examination, and I think that their theories warrant it. Because this is a very large project compressed into a small space, I will have to sacrifice some detail for the sake of demonstrating the broader aspect.

Finally, before proceeding, I would like to clarify a few key terms in brief which are likely to remain otherwise ambiguous even in context:

Mediation is defined by Hegel as “nothing but self-identity working itself out through an active self-directed process; or, in other words, it is reflection into self...the process of bare and simple becoming.”<sup>3</sup> I will also use the term more generally to mean the facilitation (by consciousness, mainly) of a passage from one state or moment to another: the process through or by which the change occurs.

Alienation is a fairly specific concept introduced by Marx in his 1844 manuscripts, which refers in the capitalist economy, to the separation from the worker in the labor process of the product of his labor, his labor itself; and his consequent estrangement from himself and from other workers likewise situated.

Reification, literally “thing-ification,” was also introduced by Marx and “refers to the phenomenon (and resulting phenomena) of a ‘definite social relation between men’ appearing in the form of a ‘relation between things.’”<sup>4</sup> Lukacs further points out that this leads to the formation of (actually fictitious, but operative so long as the fiction is

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<sup>3</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, transl. by J.B. Baillie (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967), p. 82.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Arato, “Lukacs’ Theory of Reification,” *Telos* 11, p. 25, quoting *Capital*.

accepted) “natural law of society” to which all men--who are also transformed into “things”--are subjected. (HCC, 87)<sup>5</sup>

Objectification is the treatment of anything outside the subject, including nature or another person, as an object. (Thus, alienation, reification, and objectification go from a specific to a general indication of a similar phenomenon.)

Rationality has two principle usages, introduced by Horkheimer, which should be made clear. A ‘lower-level’ or ‘first-order’ rationality refers to logical or efficient decision-making processes, given certain values or goals: this often is technical activity. ‘Higher-level’ or ‘second-order’ rationality refers, in addition, to the (social) formation of these values or goals: this may be democratic decision-making.

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<sup>5</sup> I will use the following abbreviations in the text of this paper for page references from primary sources: Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*: HCC. Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory*: CT; *Dialectic of Enlightenment*: DE; *Eclipse of Reason*: ER; “Authoritarian State”: AS. Jürgen Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society*: TRS; *Knowledge and Human Interests*: KHI; *Theory and Practice*: TP; “Toward a Theory of Communicative Competence.” TCC.

## Lukacs

The determining basis of Lukacs' theory is his notion of "totality." It is the core of his theory of knowledge, and hence, of his theory of class consciousness. It is impossible to understand social "facts" he says, unless they are seen in the context in which they exist, in their historical totality. (HCC, 5-8) "Facts" as they appear immediately are illusory. "We must detach the phenomena from the form in which they are immediately given and discover the intervening links which connect them to their core, their essence Only in this context which sees the isolated facts of social life as aspects of the historical process and integrates them in a totality, can knowledge of the facts hope to become knowledge of reality." (HCC, 8)

Thus, questions of knowledge and perception become questions of point of view. However, it is important to recognize that for Lukacs objective reality is not relative to the individual subject. "It is only meaningful to speak of relativism where an 'absolute' is in some sense assumed." (HCC, 187) Thus, men exist and may perceive their existence relative to the totality; and only if they take this point of view will their perception be correct.

What, then, is this "core" or "essence" of social reality to which men are connected which is "assumed?" Simply, it is the class structure, the relations of production. For men do not relate to each other directly in society (economically, at base), but rather through the institutional framework in which they live. Thus Lukacs cites Marx's argument that without these socioeconomic relations, "you abolish the whole of society." (HOO, 50) In this way, Lukacs turns these institutions (most

importantly, social classes), not men, into the transcendental subjects of history.

“...History is precisely the history of these institutions, of the changes they undergo as institutions which bring men together in societies.” (HOO, 48) Thus, society “progresses” from one stage to the next according to the “interests” of these institutions. Individual men must act to accomplish these historical changes, to be sure, or they may abort; but the driving motor of history remains<sup>6</sup> transcendental.

Having set up classes as the “prime movers” of society, Lukacs proceeds to assign them “imputed” consciousness, to which men ought to adhere. “By relating consciousness to the whole of society it becomes possible to infer the thoughts and feelings which men would have in a particular situation if they were able to assess both it and the interests arising from it in their impact on immediate action and on the whole structure of society. That is to say, it would be possible to infer the thoughts and feelings appropriate to their objective situation.” (HOO, 51) True class consciousness, the aligning of men’s felt interests with their imputed class interests, is prerequisite for the seizure of power by a class which is “objectively” and historically ready for hegemony. For Lukacs, given the “goals of history,” proletarian class consciousness in capitalist society is revolutionary consciousness.

Lukacs’ central article of *History and Class Consciousness*, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat,” builds on this basis. However, while he continues his project of searching for conditions which mediate the emergence of class consciousness, Lukacs now sophisticates his analysis. Rather than talking about an imputed class consciousness, which had led him in the essay “Class Consciousness” to

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<sup>6</sup> To be fair to Lukacs, it should be mentioned that he later recanted his belief that classes per se were the driving force of history, and came into accord with Marx in citing needs based on production and labor. However, he remained convinced that history moves with necessary certainty toward certain goals.



a mechanistic view of history combined with a voluntaristic theory of praxis, he now looks for the “objective possibility” of the emergence (spontaneously or with help) of consciousness from the actual life conditions of the proletariat.<sup>7</sup> As we shall see, Lukacs wants to show how the conditions in a capitalist society under which the proletariat lives and works--that is, the reified relations of production which extend also to all other social relations--also contain within them the potential for mediating the consciousness of the proletariat and of individual workers to true (revolutionary) class consciousness.

Let us begin, with Lukacs, with an examination of the phenomenon of reification. Reification, which is based on Marx’s concept of the commodity-structure, is a “relation between people (that) takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a ‘phantom objectivity,’ and autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people.” (HCC, 83) Lukacs specifies that the phenomenon is a product of capitalist society, although in a later essay he indicates that it can live on during or after the revolution as a residue of the old society. (e.g. HCC, 335) Reification has both an objective and a subjective aspect. Objectively, the relations of the market--commodities and their movements--and the relations of production become things; and “laws” governing their movement grow up around them, which can be understood but not overcome by individuals. Subjectively, the worker’s creative activity (remember: for Marx this is man’s human essence, that which separates him from animals<sup>8</sup>) is estranged from him and takes the form of a commodity, subject like other commodities to the laws of the market. Thus,

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<sup>7</sup> cf. Arato, pp. 57-8, 62-3.

<sup>8</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital I* (New York: International Publishers, 1967), pp. 177-8; *Early Writings*, transl. and ed. by T.B. Bottomore (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1964), p. 127.

there is a transition from quality to quantity, since reification promotes the exchange of unequals and measures (by time) the unmeasurable (creative work). (HCC, 87) Quantified work becomes divisible; thus the worker is divided and his personality fragmented. (HCC, 89) In its developed form, reification extends to the whole of society. "Reification requires that a society should learn to satisfy all its needs in terms of commodity exchange." (HCC, 91)

The conditions of reification are thus the immediacy in which the proletariat (as well as other classes of society) finds itself: It must find a way to mediate these circumstances. One of the implications of the Hegelian term "mediation," in which the "ego is for itself, objective to itself,"<sup>9</sup> is the passage from object to subject, or the formation of the identical subject-object of history. In this sense the proletariat, which is reified (here Lukacs tends to use "reified" as "objectified") in the work process, must become the subject of history by recognizing its role as producer, attaining class consciousness, and making the revolution.

The German philosophical tradition deals with the problem of an identical subject-object, and Marx himself indicated in several places that a solution might be found there.<sup>10</sup> The issue is too complex to examine closely here but we might simply observe the following sequence: The problem of knowledge was formulated by Kant as an antinomy between the subject and the object, in which the subject could not know with certainty the object "in itself." Fichte proposed overcoming this antinomy by turning contemplation into action, and by the subject positing himself as an object who "knows" himself, thus forming an identical subject-object and opening the way for the active

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<sup>9</sup> Hegel, p. 82.

<sup>10</sup> *Early Writings*, p. 59; *The German Ideology*, ed. by C.J. Arthur (New York: International Publishers, 1970), p. 121; also cf. Arato, pp. 43-51.

perception of the rest of the objective world. Hegel collectivized and historicized the concept and turned it into the Absolute Spirit (basically equivalent to God, or History personified); and Marx “materialized” Hegel’s concept in the form of the proletariat. However, Marx did not develop a detailed theory of class consciousness in his treatment of the proletariat as the identical subject-object of history. Lukacs makes this his own project.

Citing Marx’s position on this issue, Lukacs suggests that liberation is related to the proletariat’s coming-to-consciousness of its own position in society. “The self-understanding of the proletariat is therefore simultaneously the objective understanding of the nature of society. When the proletariat furthers its own class-aims it simultaneously achieves the conscious realization of the--objective--aims of society, aims which would inevitably remain abstract possibilities and objective frontiers but for this conscious intervention.” (HCC, 149) It is worth noting here that although Lukacs has considerably sophisticated his view of class consciousness, he retains the theory that history has objective “aims” or laws of development, and that it is up to individuals and classes to come into accord with them.

As we have seen, the “objective reality” of social relations reified into apparent things are, in their immediacy, the same for all classes. However, the “categories of mediation” by which the classes become conscious of social phenomena are dependent on their social position within the forces and relations of production. In fact, it is meaningless to speak of immediate phenomena as anything but relative to a larger totality. “Thus the category of mediation is a lever with which to overcome the mere immediacy of the empirical world and as such it is not something (subjective) foisted on

to the objects from outside, it is no value-judgment or 'ought' opposed to their 'is.' It is rather the manifestation of their authentic objective structure." (HCC, 162)

What then are the possible or necessary conditions by which the proletariat can mediate its reified consciousness? The individual worker is, in the first place, necessarily aware of his reification because he is in principle incapable (subjectively) of viewing himself as an object, as a commodity. He cannot quantify his time and labor power (that is, his essence), for they are the qualitative conditions of his life. The subsequent categories or moments of mediation do not occur in a necessary sense, as this one does; rather, they are possible; but this first mediation is the driving wedge of the "becoming," of the rising self-consciousness of the proletariat. The subjective awareness by the worker of his reification in relation to capital "brings about an objective structural change in the object of knowledge." (HCC, 169) That is, this realization tends to undermine the false and reified "laws" of the market and of the commodity-structure; and these in turn now dissolve, for the worker, into the processes which they really are.

This is only the beginning of the "complex process of mediations whose goal is the knowledge of society as a historical totality." (HCC, 169) The mediations which follow possibly from this are as follows: The recognition by individual workers of their relations to capital (that is, their reification as commodities) implies the possibility of their recognition of reified relation of their class to capital. Thus the proletariat as a class becomes conscious of itself as the object of the market commodity-structure. Now, having penetrated the essence of commodities to find reified labor, the proletariat is in a position to see itself as the subject of the economic process and, hence, of history. In its consciousness of labor as the source of all value in society, the proletariat can see

itself simultaneously as the object of the capitalist economy and as the subject of the production process (which is eternal: only its form changes). “By becoming aware of the commodity relationship the proletariat can only become conscious of itself as the object of the economic process. But if the reification of capital is dissolved into an unbroken process of its production and reproduction, it is possible for the proletariat to discover that it is itself the subject of this process.” (HCC, 180-1)

We have viewed the mediations of the consciousness of the proletariat so far from only one side of a dialectical process. We recall that Lukacs follows Marx in insisting that the coming to consciousness is an active process, and that it necessarily involves praxis. Several steps or moments may be distinguished in the process of mediation within a continuum of consciousness, praxis, and revolution. For Lukacs, the main problem is how the immediate facts are related to the essential totality. The reason for his concern is that if a successful program of praxis is to be carried out, it must take into account--by as good an analysis of the concrete situation as possible--what its effects will be. Happily, the problem is itself mediated somewhat by the fact that actions directed at an object transform the object in such a way that more of the totality is revealed. (Recall that the objects of action are in reality reified social relations.)

Now the real purpose of both consciousness and praxis (insofar as they are dialectically related) is not merely to recognize the essential conditions of reification but to overcome them concretely. First, praxis must be directed at the immediate forms in which reification appears, since the human relations which actually make up these forms can only emerge when the forms are abolished. Second, since these forms in

which reification appears are not merely modes of thought but are actually the immediacy of objective, material relations, they cannot be abolished merely by pure knowledge or perception. Third, the praxis which abolishes these reified forms must be based on knowledge (class conscious analyses) and is inseparably linked to it. (HCC, 177)

Lukacs bases his theory of the dialectical connection of theory and praxis on Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, in which Marx says, "The question whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove the truth, i.e. the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question."<sup>11</sup> Lukacs assumes that Marx is here talking about the proletariat as a whole (or the Party, which interprets the class's thoughts); and because he takes this statement as the fulfillment of the program of classical German philosophy, he infers that the proletariat is the identical subject-object of history, and that in it, knowledge and praxis are one. He also assumes that history may be said objectively to be moving toward certain goals; that contradictions in capital will necessarily bring on crises. It is up to the proletariat to consciously act to resolve the crises in its favor in accord with the dialectic of history: to bring about socialism. Only when the consciousness of the proletariat is able to point out the road along which the dialectics of history is objectively impelled, but which it cannot travel unaided, will the consciousness of the proletariat awaken to a consciousness of the process, and only then will the proletariat become the identical subject- object of history whose praxis will change reality.(HCC, 197)

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<sup>11</sup> *German Ideology*, p. 121.

Lukacs now outlines four points concerning the dialectic of consciousness and praxis in the making of a revolution. (cf. HCC, 197-9) These points can probably be best understood as implicit recommendations to party leaders. (1) The structure of reified relations (i.e. capitalism) can only be disrupted if the immanent contradictions of the process are made conscious. The making of a revolution is a long series of such disruptions; and if they are not successful in overthrowing capitalism, its contradictions will only be reproduced at a higher level in altered form and with increased intensity. (2) In directing these disruptions, the relation of praxis to the totality need not be entirely explicit, although there should be an aspiration to the totality. This is so both because active praxis tends to have a wider effect on totality than may have been foreseen in directing actions against apparently trivial matters; and also, because the results of praxis tend to reveal additional aspects of the totality. In any case, (3) the effects of actions made without total knowledge may be judged as right or wrong (successful or not) by noting whether the consciousness of the proletariat has advanced and whether progress has been made toward resolving the contradictions of capitalism in practice. These latter two factors are dialectically related, as indicated by Marx in his *Theses on Feuerbach* (quoted above); thus the progress of the proletariat in attaining class consciousness may be taken as an indicator of the progress toward the goals of history (socialism). Finally, (4) Lukacs reaffirms the dialectical connection of consciousness, praxis, and revolutionary success. "The eminently practical nature of this consciousness is to be seen in that an adequate, correct consciousness means a change in its own objects, and in the first instance, in itself." (HCC, 199) Thus, Lukacs concludes, in the historical process of mediation, that is, in the process of Becoming, (1)

the nature of the object is revealed (the proletariat comes into class consciousness through praxis: both its own nature and that of capitalist society are thus revealed), and (2) as reified forms become processes, the past becomes the future: the transition to socialism is forced. (HCC, 203) “Thus proletarian thought is in the first place merely a theory of praxis which only gradually (and indeed often spasmodically) transforms itself into a practical theory that overturns the real world.” (HCC, 205)

We now need only make a few observations about Lukacs’ theory of the Party in order to draw some conclusions about his theory generally. In the gulf which still exists between a theory of praxis and the revolution which will change the world, “organization is the form of mediation between theory and practice.” (HCC, 299) And the Communist Party is the organized form of revolutionary class consciousness--not the consciousness of the average proletarian, but the most advanced form of consciousness possible under the historical conditions. (HCC, 314, 322f) However, for the Communist Party to be effective in its role of mediating the present and the future, in leading the revolution, it must have tactical autonomy. “But,” says Lukacs, “the indispensable prerequisite for this is to have correct theoretical insight, “that is, insight into the truth of the social and historical totality and how best to exploit it. (HCC, 327)

I now feel in a position to make a few concluding remarks. Lukacs’ basic error lies in his conception of the historical totality and the epistemological problems in knowing it. His formulation of a proletariat as a collective and identical subject-object of history is a fiction. For, as Lukacs himself points out in his 1967 preface (HCC, xvii ff), a class can have neither interests nor consciousness. Only individuals have these, and collectively they form a class. Therefore, since the class cannot have consciousness of



itself (or of anything else), Lukacs is left with no epistemological certainty for anyone of the “objective goals of history”--which, with no transcendent subject also become myths. Only people can have goals, not “history.” The collectivity of workers who form the proletariat may possibly reach the same consciousness (say, that which Lukacs imputes to the class), but there is no necessity that they will. Furthermore, any Party which constitutes itself as the “essence” of “proletarian consciousness” (now revealed as nonexistent), and for that reason demands and gets tactical autonomy (Realpolitik) from the collectivity of individuals in the class, becomes, not a “progressive” vanguard, the “essence” of the class, but an arbitrary dictator, the essence of oppression. In fact, the Anarchist contemporaries of Marx pointed out precisely this danger.

A further general criticism can be made of Lukacs’ work and of all Leninist theory (Lukacs consistently considered himself a Leninist). If the object of struggle is to attain a “realm of freedom,” it becomes imperative to know in what this consists. Particularly, it is important to distinguish it as a goal per se or as a desired process. If the “end of struggle,” if emancipation, is an end point, then the dialectics of history come to a halt when it is reached, and the “end of prehistory” is also the end of history. As will become clear in investigating Horkheimer and Habermas, there is a contradiction between vanguard leadership and true emancipation, when the latter is taken to mean the extension of democratic decision-making power.

## Horkheimer

In its effect, Horkheimer's work is both a continuation of Lukacs and an implicit critique. Partly by choice, partly by circumstance, however, Horkheimer focuses on somewhat different topics. Most noticeable is his increased emphasis on a critique of positivism and his lack of organizational theory, or even a well developed theory of praxis. The reasons for this shift in emphasis may be partly explained by the fact that whereas Lukacs was an active politician during the years in which he wrote *History and Class Consciousness*, Horkheimer was a politically unaffiliated academic professor. In addition, while the seeds are already apparent in 1923 of Lukacs' choice to remain in the Communist Party in order to fight fascism during the Stalinist period, Horkheimer, as a Jew and as a socialist, had to flee Germany. To have written theory about Party organization at a time when his would-be allies were scattered or in flight must have seemed difficult at best. However, it is clear that Horkheimer chose not to write about praxis, for reasons which will emerge. "The modern propensity to translate every idea into action, or into active abstinence from action, is one of the symptoms of the present cultural crisis: action for action's sake is in no way superior to thought for thought's sake, and is perhaps even inferior to it." (ER, vi)

The epistemological premises of Horkheimer's theory distinguish it from Lukacs' and from Marx's. Horkheimer, unlike the other two, does not view nature as an objective "other" to be worked on and exploited, but rather as the counterpart to man's "spirit." That is, the two are dialectically related, they are simultaneously identical and different. It can neither be said that man "posits" nature and invents everything around

him, nor that man is, as Darwinism holds, merely a material product of nature, developing out of her: Both are in some senses true. Man's spirit, his mind, does grow out of nature, but it also becomes semi-autonomous and sets itself against nature; while, at the same time, part of nature has been left within man, his "human nature." (ER, 170-3) Throughout Horkheimer's later writing it is difficult to be certain whether this "human nature" constitutes a philosophical anthropology, a Freudian psychology, or something more exotic.

The dialectical relation between spirit and nature is related to Horkheimer's distinction between objective and subjective reason. The problem arises for Horkheimer in his attempt to establish a non-dogmatic but persuasive system of values. He explicitly rejects any form of ontology as an a priori, but at the same time he tries to establish historical and natural bases for value.

Subjective reason, says Horkheimer, "is that attitude of consciousness that adjusts itself without reservation to the alienation between subject and object, the social process of reification, out of fear that it may otherwise fall into irresponsibility, arbitrariness, and become a mere game of ideas." (ER, 173) The historical cause of this point of view was a reaction against the old systems of religion and metaphysics; and at the time of its origin, subjective reason was a progressive, emancipatory force. Now, however, it tends toward vulgar materialism and positivism, while the residues of objective reason tend toward romanticism and ideology. The distinctions among the various forms of subjective reason in Horkheimer's writing tend to blur, since he has similar critiques of them, under the names of "traditional theory," "positivism," "pragmatism," "empiricism." Their basic problem, he contends, is that while they are

able to develop rational procedures for solving problems given certain goals, they are incapable of making rational value judgments. They are processes of means, not ends. They have come to claim for themselves a value-free status; yet in them lies the implicit and unacknowledged assumption that social problems can be solved as technical problems. This position is “objectively” conservative or even reactionary because (1) in their view the only rational way to make value-judgments is according to one’s personal taste, or in accord with one’s self-interest (which may be economic interest); (2) this “liberal” tolerance makes them uncritical of people’s stated beliefs and unlikely to examine how the beliefs were formed; and (3) the combination of the first two points leads, on the one hand to the equation of “reasonableness” with conformity, and on the other hand, to an inability to provide “rational” reasons for society to oppose obvious barbarism (e.g. fascism). However, there is a perceptible problem with Horkheimer’s line of reasoning, since he seems unable to discern the practical differences between liberalism (particularly the Anglo-American variety) and fascism. Simply put, the fallacy is that tolerance does not necessarily lead to barbarism--especially since the “tolerance” is (as Horkheimer himself observes) hypocritical: it actually does hold certain values, among them the exclusion of fascism. The phenomenon of conformity is more of a problem because of the uncritical attitude it entails.

Horkheimer wants to build a philosophical method of critique based both on subjective and objective reason. “Objective” values may be erected on the recognition that the best way of insuring self-preservation (a subjective value) is through social solidarity. (ER, 175-6) Philosophy ought to affirm social values, while (1) denying that they have “ultimate and infinite truth,” and (2) maintaining that their “truth” derives from

and can be criticized in relation to their social and historical background. (ER, 182-3)  
This provides the main basis of Horkheimer's concept of a "critical theory of society."<sup>12</sup>

In his essay, "Traditional and Critical Theory," Horkheimer outlines the relation of critical theory and the critical theorist to society. Critical theory's main concern is adherence to the truth, defined neither in absolute nor subjective terms, but rather in a historical context. This methodology of finding the truth does not change, but the content of the truth does, since the material conditions of society on which it is based change. Moreover, the project of critical theory is not merely to observe society, but to aid in the process of emancipation. Thus there exists a state of tension between the theorist and society which he serves, due to the fact that he neither adheres to the common wisdom, which may be wrong, nor does he allow his ideas to be used in the service of some particular program of action as ideology or propaganda. No purpose is served in creating more lies, no matter for what apparent strategic reasons.

Horkheimer's notion of critical theory's strategic relation to society does, in fact, change from the 1930's to the 1940's. In the earlier period, the critical theorist interacts dialectically with the forces in society who are actively working for change. He does not automatically gravitate toward an alliance with the proletariat, however, since even their situation in this society is no guarantee of correct knowledge: their consciousness may be warped by ideology. (CT, 213) This much is very like Lukacs, but unlike him, and because of his stand against an ontological worldview, Horkheimer does not believe that the totality is necessarily knowable. In the later period Horkheimer's claims for critical theory's function are more modest. He no longer stresses its dialectical relation

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<sup>12</sup> Although Horkheimer writes this formulation of Critical Theory well after his initial essay, "Traditional and Critical Theory," and although he comes to different conclusions at different periods, I think this representation of critical theory as a methodology remains fairly consistently the same throughout.

with active forces, but rather says that, “today, progress toward utopia is blocked primarily by the complete disproportion between the overwhelming machinery of social power and that of the atomized masses. If philosophy succeeds in helping people to recognize these factors, it will have rendered a great service to humanity.” (ER, 186-7)

This change in Horkheimer’s conception of critical theory’s role in the process of emancipation--a seeming change toward conservatism--is paralleled by a change in his conception of the possibilities and requirements of emancipation--a change which, as we shall see, appears to become more radically utopian. This increased radicalism is due to an increased stress on the dialectic of spirit and nature, and the rise of a theory of “objectification,” a concept similar to Lukacs’ “reification.”

We have seen that in the 1937 essay, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” Horkheimer’s view of the consciousness of the proletariat is similar to Lukacs’ view in 1923. Horkheimer also gives a brief account of the structural changes in the capitalist economy. The true power and control over capital now is passing from the former legal owners (the capitalists) to managers and bureaucrats; and with it, power and control over society. Here he mentions the authoritarian state for the first time as the new locus of domination. (CT, 236) With this, Horkheimer subtly begins to transform his theory from a near-Marxist critique of capitalism toward a critique of domination.

This critique of domination is given fuller treatment in Horkheimer’s 1940 essay, “The Authoritarian State.” This essay is an extended materialist-utopian polemic against nearly all forms of organization, including organizations on the left from Social Democratic bureaucracies to Leninist vanguard parties. As noted above, Horkheimer considers compromise with truth for tactical or organizational purposes incompatible

with emancipation. “Whatever seeks to extend itself under domination runs the risk of reproducing itself.” (AS, 5) Furthermore, it is a mistake to believe that history obeys any laws which determine when conditions are “ripe” for revolution. “Present talk of inadequate conditions is a cover for the tolerance of oppression. For the revolutionary, conditions have always been ripe.” (AS, 11) Horkheimer recommends the establishment of workers’ councils both as the agent of revolution, and as the aim of revolution. Emancipation is that state of affairs in which men control their own destiny, and there is no point before which this is impossible. The conscious transformation of society to a new order is itself the new order.

The key of “The Authoritarian State is its opposition to the exploitation of the worker, and an emerging opposition to the notion of progress which involves the exploitation of nature. (AS, 12) For Horkheimer is not only concerned with the reification of the worker, but with his objectification. In a socialist state, the worker may be technically freed of alienation and reification according to Marx or Lukacs,<sup>13</sup> but Horkheimer says that whenever a worker does not derive the full value of his labor, his labor and his nature are no longer his own. “Even though the surplus is no longer absorbed as profit, it is still the focal point.” (AS, 8) This is, on this level, a very radical position: the center of the critique is labor (man’s essence), and, though not quite visible yet, nature (man’s dialectical counterpart). It is worth noting that Horkheimer’s position in this article is in many ways that of an “ultra-leftist”: a classical anarchist stance which

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<sup>13</sup> To be sure, there is a contradiction in Lukacs’ 1923 work since, while he claims that reification will not survive indefinitely under socialism, his definition of the concept means that whenever surplus value is extracted from the worker, his labor (essence) is not his own and he is reified. In his 1967 preface, he repudiates this view and restricts the locus of reification--or alienation, in this case--to capitalist society. (HCC, xxiv).

opposes all state and vanguard control, supports workers' council democracy, and is politically and practically somewhat naive.

Horkheimer's fully developed argument against the domination and objectification of man and nature is contained in epitome in the "Revolt of Nature" chapter of his *Eclipse of Reason*. The human being, in the process of his emancipation, shares the fate of the rest of his world. Domination of nature involves domination of man. Each subject not only has to take part in the subjugation of external nature, human and nonhuman, but in order to do so must subjugate nature in himself. Domination becomes 'internalized' for domination's sake. Self-renunciation of the individual in industrialist society has no goal transcending industrialist society. Such abnegation brings about rationality with reference to means and irrationality with reference to human existence. Society and its institutions bear the mark of this discrepancy. Since the subjugation of nature, in and outside of man, goes on without a meaningful motive, nature is not really transcended or reconciled but merely repressed. (ER, 93-4) We have seen that Horkheimer believes that spirit and nature are dialectically interconnected. The important thing to notice here is that Horkheimer is developing a cogent critique of objectification in any form through the dialectic of spirit and nature. "Domination of nature involves domination of man."

In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer, with Adorno, develops this idea further and sets it in an "anthropological time" perspective. Primitive man lived in an animated world in which his own nature was not yet fully separated or distinguished from the nature around him. With the coming of civilization and enlightenment, however, this animism was driven from nature, and man became separated from his



essence: he became objectified. This is so not merely because civilization de-animated nature, but because it tried to dominate nature. For man--now alienated from his nature, his spirit dominated, controlled by reified commodities set up over him, his historical "objective" values and beliefs discredited by positivism--the only thing left is mere self-preservation, the "successful or unsuccessful approximation to the objectivity of his function and the models established for it." (DE, 28)

In the modern "enlightened" society, the primeval power of myth and ritual are transformed into the instruments of domination. Culture, which originated in rites and symbols and myths, and which was the property of a priestly hierarchy, became an expression of domination, an expression which exists today in language. The modern equivalents of myth and ritual are ideology and the fixed order of things. The division of labor leads, not to social solidarity as Durkheim said, but to "the inscrutable unity of society and domination." (DE, 21) Clearly, Horkheimer has the Nazis in mind, with their elaborate system of artificial myths and rituals, their false social solidarity attained by an unnatural division of labor (built on Durkheim's model?), and their harnessing of the repressed nature in man for the ends of oppression. (cf. ER, 121-3)

The result of domination, expressed in modern ritual and the division of labor, is the stopping of the flow of time. Primitive man had experienced domination in endless, ritual repetition; and the whip and cudgel took on the symbolic function of a fetish. "The dread objectified as a fixed image becomes the sign of the established domination of the privileged." (DE, 21) Likewise, the modern worker (also oppressed by objects and by objectification) experiences domination in repetitive work and in the class structure, both of which freeze time for him. More than this, with the sacrifice of freedom to

“necessity” in the form of greater productivity (which continues now with technology), the historical time flow stops at the stage of domination. As Horkheimer points out allegorically in his reformulation of the myth of Odysseus, the cost to society of practical “progress” is the loss of truth and human culture. “For with the technical easing of life the persistence of domination brings about a fixation of the instincts by means of heavier repression. Imagination atrophies.” (DE, 35) Socialism, too, which once appeared to be the agent of emancipation, has now relinquished this goal for the guarantee of greater material progress. “By elevating necessity to the status of the basis for all time to come, and by idealistically degrading the spirit forever to the very apex, socialism held on all too surely to the legacy of bourgeois philosophy.” (DE, 41)

Horkheimer’s critique of modern society ends on this note, and reveals both his strengths and failings. Like the old testament prophet he affirms his belief in truth as the only path to emancipation; and like the prophet, he refuses to profane the shape of the future by naming it with ideological misrepresentations. Thus, he adheres to no party or “belief,” but rather invokes the power of critique.. He is, in short, an absolutist. There exist no mediations between the present and emancipation but true knowledge and the willingness to shape one’s own future. However, the combination of his pessimism in the face of fascism and his “impractical,” unyielding view of the truth led him to a political incapacity to act or suggest action.

Horkheimer straddles the space between the Lukacs of the revolutionary period following the first World War and the Habermas of the present: despite his “impracticality,” his strict adherence to critical anti-dogmatism makes him a methodologist for the pursuit of the truth.

## Habermas

Habermas stands in the Marxist tradition continued by Lukacs and the Frankfurt Institute theorists, of whom he is in the second generation. As a Marxist and a Critical Theorist, Habermas not only continues the development of social philosophy, but also bases his theory on a contemporary historical analysis. Here we shall be more interested in his social philosophy, but let us look briefly at his analysis of the current social situation.

Capitalism, with a class system built on the division of labor in the production process, continues to exist in Western Europe, the United States, and other areas.<sup>14</sup> However, the system is no longer structurally the same as it was in the mid-nineteenth century. Largely because of crises caused by the market economy, the state has taken an increasingly large role in regulating and stabilizing the economy; and as science and technology have grown more and more sophisticated and efficient, both production processes and societal decision-making have come increasingly to rely on them. Parallel to and largely because of these developments have been ideological problems for “late capitalism” in providing legitimation for itself. Market capitalism was based on an ideology of efficient production capable of insuring social welfare, equality of economic opportunity, equal protection under the law, and democratic control of the political system. With the movement of capitalism away from its market bases, these legitimating ideologies (with the possible exception of equal protection under law) proved false; and the new form of capitalism, based on the state and science and technology, now must try to legitimate itself by a combination of a motivating work-ethic

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<sup>14</sup> The following sketch derives from his TRS and “Legitimation Problems in Late Capitalism.”

and the administrative guarantee of welfare and stability. However, this shift of the base of the economy has been accompanied by the depoliticization of the public by the abrogation of their ability to make important electoral decisions, thus insuring that the mass of the people continue to be prevented from exercising democratic control over the true sources of power in society.

Habermas has for the most part adopted the methodological approach of Horkheimer's critical theory. Horkheimer, as we have seen, re-stresses Marx's opposition to viewing the world in its immediacy--seeking rather to find those essential aspects which connect phenomena to the total structure--but Horkheimer rejects any form of a priori ontology or notion that history objectively or with "necessity" passes through a particular set of stages; and finally, he rejects Lukacs' theory of a transcendental subject of history. Habermas follows this form of anti-dogmatic Marxism, and as we shall see, develops some new points, particularly in the theory of organization of praxis.

Habermas' main intention is to develop an epistemological – or failing that, an appropriate methodological – approach to the problem of cognition and value, especially as it applies to the rational decision-making requirements of democratic processes. In this, he is again taking up Lukacs' failed efforts to find a convincing system of mediations from the reified experience of individuals to consciousness of the totality, and from there to some kind of effective praxis leading to a state of emancipation.

His first important step in this effort is his 1965 inaugural address at Frankfurt, "Knowledge and Human Interests."<sup>15</sup> Habermas here introduces a concept of self-reflection which derives from Husserl's phenomenology, but which is different in

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<sup>15</sup> This is the appendix to his book of the same title.

important respects. He reviews Husserl's theory as follows: (1) Scientific "objectivism" as it now exists cannot be valid, since science's knowledge of apparently objective facts has its "transcendental basis in the prescientific world," that is, in a subjectivism which colors its observations. (2) This "productive subjectivity" remains in scientific "objectivity" because science has not radically freed itself of it by phenomenological self-reflection. (3) Transcendental self-reflection, or phenomenology, liberates science from its hidden subjectivity, basically by making it aware that it exists. (KHI, 304-5)

Habermas agrees with Husserl that the sciences have not freed themselves of their subjectivity, have not become "value-free," but he denies that this "ontological illusion of pure theory" is actually possible. (KHI, 307) Rather, he asserts, because cognition cannot in principle free itself of subjectivistic interests, the best we can do is to become aware of them. Self-reflection can be used for this purpose. "The mind can always reflect back upon the interest structure that joins subject and object a priori: this is reserved to self-reflection. If the latter cannot cancel out interests, it can to a certain extent make up for it. Self-reflection possesses theoretical certainty." (KHI, 313-4)

Thus, self-reflection makes us conscious of the ideological results of our learning processes which affect our conception of the world and our praxis. (cf. TP, 22)

Habermas now makes an analytical distinction among three types of inquiry and attempts to ground them in a notion of human activity which raises several problems which we shall examine shortly. He claims that the distinctions among the types of inquiry are based on both methodological considerations (which are neither "right" or "wrong" but appropriate or not) and on cognitive interests (which can be discovered by self-reflection). The three sciences (types of inquiry) are: (1) the empirical-analytic

sciences, which are based on a cognitive interest in technical control over “objectified processes;” (2) the historical-hermeneutic sciences, which are based on a practical cognitive interest in understanding meaning and intersubjective communication; (3) the critical social sciences, which are based on a cognitive interest in emancipation by means of critique of ideology and/or psychoanalysis. This analytical distinction is based largely on Horkheimer’s dialectical relationship between spirit and nature and his stress on a rationality composed of a related dialectic: that between subjective and objective reason. That is, “technical interest” corresponds to an interest (necessary for sustaining life) in dominating or using nature; “practical interest” corresponds to an interest in human interaction free from this domination or objectification (to mediate the consequences to man’s nature inherent in dominating external nature); and “emancipatory interest” corresponds to Horkheimer’s notion of an interest in higher-level rationality (democratic decision-making based on critically examined historical values). These three cognitive interests are linked to definite forms of social organization: work, language, and power. (This contrasts with Marx’s conception of labor as the sole basis of any social order.)

Having made this analytical distinction, Habermas suggests that the cognitive interests (we could now include among them “values”) have their roots in man’s natural history and his cultural break with it. In this way, self-reflection is precisely an attempt to reconstruct the formation of values. The above-mentioned problem is now this: There is an implicit confusion between a view of man as a historically formed creature, and a philosophical-anthropological view of man with a definite “human nature.” Habermas compounds this problem by asserting that the “human interest in autonomy and

responsibility” (which he equates with emancipatory interest) can be apprehended a priori by examining the structure of language. “What raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we can know: language. Through its structure, autonomy and responsibility are posited for us. Our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus.” (KHI, 314) This may be true (I am not competent in language philosophy), but there are wide-ranging implications for this theory, depending on whether language reflects a historical process of value-formation or whether it reflects “human nature.” For on this distinction rests the distinction of whether self-reflection reveals merely cultural history--which can be criticized--or whether it reveals an immutable human nature--which cannot. This raises a possible question of dogmatism. “In the power of self-reflection, knowledge and interest are one.” (KHI, 314)

There is another problem with this method. Habermas compares self-reflection to psychoanalysis, saying that the former is similar to the latter except that it occurs within the mind of the subject. He claims that it possesses “theoretical certainty, presumably that if one is honest with himself and tries hard enough, he can avoid lying to himself and discover his true values or beliefs (in cognitive interests). The truth of this claim is by no means obvious to me, since I am not convinced that it is necessarily possible to “know one’s own mind” with certainty, or that, having convinced oneself that he does know what he believes, to be certain how the ideas got there (nature or nurture). The mere existence of “irrationality,” emotions, or a Freudian “subconscious” ought to make us wary of theories like this one. I am not denying that this form of self-reflection produces insights, but only questioning its “certainty.”

Let us reserve our doubts for the present and examine Habermas' theory of praxis based on "revealed" cognitive interests. This theory is introduced with the concept of "discourse," which is the method by which we validate and communicate our values and normative beliefs to each other in an effort to reach a consensus and make rational (democratic) decisions. The conditions of this "consensus theory of truth" include "bracketing" epistemological problems of knowing facts and norms; suspending all praxis while engaged in discourse in order to insure a "cooperative readiness to arrive at an understanding;" and the presupposition of an "ideal situation of discourse." (TP, 18-9) The latter condition consists of a state of complete equality among speakers with respect to political and economic power, and presumes that, given "universal understanding" and "universalized norms," it will be possible to find a strategy for reaching an "unconstrained" consensus, even if there is slight disagreement. (TCC, 143-6) Habermas calls this form of communication "peculiarly unreal." (TP, 19)

Habermas stresses that this procedure is not suited necessarily for making decisions on a national or societal level, but rather, was formulated for use by particular types of political organizations like the Communist Party. "Therapeutic discourse' (in which some participants are trying to "enlighten" others), especially, is not suited for relations between oppressors and oppressed. However, the technique ought to be applied in particular ways at particular times: it is not generalizable and should be used with judgment.

The mediation of theory and praxis within the Party occurs in three steps or moments: (1) "the formations of critical theorems which can stand up to scientific discourse" (the aim here is true statements); (2) "the organization of processes of



enlightenment, in which such theorems are applied and can be tested in a unique manner by the initiation of processes of reflection carried on within certain groups toward which these processes have been directed (the aim is authentic insights); and (3) “the selection of appropriate strategies, the solution of tactical questions, and the conduct of the political struggle” (the aim is prudent decisions). (TP, 32) The purpose of this type of mediation process is to assure that strategies and tactics are soundly conceived, and that those who take risks understand and agree with what is proposed. It is possible to detect Horkheimer’s influence here, too, because it is rationality itself which is at stake. That is, Habermas is trying to establish a methodology for forming organizations which satisfy two criteria: they are internally democratic (rational in decision-making, without relying on ontological assumptions of truth), but at the same time effective in action, once the goals have been established (by the former criterion). However, this is clearly a compromise position. It has neither the radical anarchic equality of Horkheimer, nor the deadly centralized “efficiency” of a Leninist Party.

This fact becomes clearer in Habermas’ recommended procedures for implementing these mediations toward praxis. The three functions cannot all be fulfilled according to the same principle, nor by the same segment of the organization. Those in scientific work must have freedom of discourse in the formation of theory; those in the process of enlightenment must adhere strictly to the principles of “therapeutic discourse” to insure the proper scope of communications and to avoid exploitation and deception; and a political struggle can only be legitimately conducted under the precondition that all important decisions will have been reached by a process of discourse in which it is assumed that no one has a monopoly of the “truth.” (TP, 33-4) These recommendations

are largely based on scientific procedural methodology; and Habermas considers political praxis as a series of “experiments” or tests of the viability of utopian ideals, in the light of practical limitations to change of “human nature” and “historically variable structures of motivation” – this, in addition to the desire of the people involved for change. In other words, Habermas’ procedural reason for separating the functions of praxis from those of decision-making is that “if in testing ‘practical hypotheses’ of this kind, we, the subjects involved, are ourselves included in the design of the experiment, then no barrier between experimenter and subjects can be erected.” (TP, 37) There is also a practical or logical reason for this separation. Discourse, which is the central process of this form of decision-making, is based on self-reflection; and the latter has the effect of clarifying one’s insight into the past. Strategic action, in contrast, is oriented toward the future, and is presumably already based on discursively generated decisions.

Habermas carries the metaphor of the experiment further still. Theories initially have the status of hypotheses, and must be corroborated in scientific discourse (by qualified discussants), and if they fail at this stage, they are rejected. The next step of testing takes place in the stage of “enlightenment,” at which time “those concerned” must freely approve the theories in discursive examination. Only if theories pass these testing stages can they be put into practice. (TP, 37-8) “Therefore the demand to act dialectically with insight is senseless. It is based on a category mistake. We only act within an interrelationship of systematically distorted communication as long as this interrelation perpetuates itself because it has not been understood in its falseness by us

or anyone else. Therefore theory cannot have the same function for the organization of action, of the political struggle, as it has for the organization of enlightenment.” (TP, 39)

Habermas criticizes Leninist party structure for combining all these functions into one, which the central organization alone directs. In particular, he says that Lukacs’ “Toward a Methodology for the Problem of Organization” subsumes both theory formulation and the enlightenment of the proletariat under the discretion of the Party central committee which, as we have seen, is primarily concerned with formulating strategies and tactics compatible with its “superior” view of the totality. Because Lukacs has withdrawn (or kept) decision-making ability from the masses in the light of these tactical requirements, Habermas accuses him of dogmatism. “Organizational questions are not primary things. Between them and an objective philosophy of history Lukacs has established a direct relationship.”(TP, 36)

Habermas is trying to establish a sufficient basis of certainty, without dogmatism, for political praxis. However, he himself risks falling into dogmatism on one hand, and elitism on the other. We have already seen the problems raised by Habermas’ ambiguity in his formulation of values and interests discovered by self-reflection. Had he more clearly adhered to Horkheimer’s methodological theory of the non-ontological, historical, and critical genesis of values, he would have avoided this problem and still retained a firm basis on which to build his further steps of mediation. For, although it is a moot question whether epistemological certainty--including the identical subject-object--can ever be reached (I personally doubt it), sound methodological procedures probably provide an adequate basis for the discovery of values capable of shaping action.

Habermas' other danger, that of elitism, seems to stem from a very basic mistrust of non-scientists and non-intellectuals. His very rigid organizational structure is certainly constructed in this way in order to prevent tyranny by party bosses. He is even willing to have near-paralysis of praxis in order to be scrupulously fair to the subjects of an "experiment" who are taking the risks (risks which, it is my impression, the intellectual theorists are not to share, in order to maintain proper experimental and procedural methodology). However, his disclaimer that "there is no privileged access to truth" (TP, 34) cannot be taken seriously, given the general thrust of his argument. In fact, he closes the essay by saying, "the vindicating superiority of those who do the enlightening over those who are to be enlightened is theoretically unavoidable, but at the same time it is fictive and requires self-correction: in a process of enlightenment there can only be participants." (TP, 40) In practical terms, this can mean nothing but the establishment of scientists and intellectuals as the new party bosses in the place of the old. Even worse, it directly counters any efforts to demystify technical and practical problems. It is already sufficiently difficult to formulate democratic procedures for reaching decisions involving these problems, without compounding the difficulty by accelerating the merger of technology and politics.

## In Place of a Conclusion

Throughout this paper I have tried to provide a running analysis and criticism of Lukacs, Horkheimer, and Habermas. Because I think that the disposition of my arguments is by now reasonably clear, I would like to replace the customary summary and conclusion with some systematic reflections on the formation of a somewhat different theory of consciousness and praxis and their mediating elements. I suspect, in any case, that further criticism of the three theorists will emerge implicitly in the course of my discussion. Let me stress, however, that what I set down here will be in a very preliminary stage, especially since I still lack many of the philosophical, theoretical, and practical tools which I undoubtedly need. Let us begin, as do the Critical Theorists, with the problem of the formation and discovery of values. We should understand that this is to be construed only as a methodological beginning (which constitutes an arbitrary but arguably appropriate choice), since the whole process under consideration is united, in our understanding, at least, in a continuous or dialectical way.

Because, like Habermas in his critique of Husserl, I do not think that we can free our perception of all “cognitive interests” to reach an understanding of an “objective ontology,” I will follow Habermas in “bracketing” the problem of epistemological certainty. However, I would take this procedure one step further. Habermas, we recall, says that self-reflection combined with an analysis of language reveals certain cognitive interests, or inherent value systems. I pointed out, in turn, that acceptance of this theory puts on in jeopardy of falling into dogmatism because it makes the “revealed” values very hard to criticize. On the one hand, an eternal “human nature” or

philosophical anthropology allows others to claim that they know what you “really” believe; and on the other hand, a strictly behaviorist approach (which Habermas explicitly rejects: TP, 10-1) allows others to “program” you so that then you presumably will believe. It is clear that we simply do not know enough about our own mental makeup to be certain about our thoughts, in any case. A false clarity is by no means superior to an honest sense of doubt. Therefore, I would also “bracket” and certainty about our cognitive interests.

However, this is far from suggesting that we do not have cognitive interests. On the contrary, I am merely recommending a more modest approach. Let us assume that, on the one hand, there exists a dialectical relation between spirit and nature. Just as spirit grew out of nature and retains some of it still, there has been a cultural break of spirit from nature; and much of culture constitutes the “objectification” of nature or other people (it is partially because I personally like our culture that I oppose an effort to absolutely overcome objectification). Therefore, epistemological problems are at once made easier (we recognize ourselves in objectivity) and more difficult (we cannot overcome our subjectivity): the ambiguity is difficult to overcome. On the other hand, let us assume a dialectical relation between “anthropology” and cultural history. If we are to be truthful, and to avoid dogmatism, we must admit that we cannot truly distinguish between “nature and nurture” nor between structuralism and historicism. Certainly, there are structures of the mind, of perception, of behavior and belief; equally, these human qualities do not arise anew each generation, but rather there is a tradition or continuity which both allows us to act and believe, and gives meaning to our actions and beliefs.

Therefore, I would propose a more modest method of analyzing and clarifying perception. This method would have to be less certain than the “intentionality” of the phenomenologists, which tries to correlate every cognition with an ontological “structure of being,”<sup>16</sup> and also less certain than Habermas’ concept of “self-reflection,” which seeks to relate all cognition to innate and identifiable “human interests.” ‘Perhaps we could conceive of a “contextuality,” which attempts to comprehend, without absolute certainty, the formation of values and beliefs based on the unclarified (and in principle unclarifiable) dialectic of nature and spirit, and the dialectic of anthropology and cultural history. Thus, through the power of a modestly transcendental process of self-reflection (!), we can arrive at an understanding of the contexts in which our values and beliefs arose. In this way, value systems remain open to criticism (as is desirable); are based on--at the least--cultural tradition; and thereby attain a certain quality of “legitimacy,” which at this juncture I shall take to be roughly equivalent to “faith.” (I will have more to say about legitimacy shortly.)

Let us now move from the problems of epistemology and the true genesis of human interests to the problems of methodology and the proper “handling” of these newly “legitimated” interests.

Because we believe that immediately given facts are somehow related to a structure of reality, but because we do not believe that this structure has an objective ontology which we are necessarily capable of perceiving, we seek to relate or mediate facts with a “possible essence,” their relation to reality as we can conceive it. We note, among other things, that the totality is dialectical, that its various parts interact and

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<sup>16</sup> cf. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, transl. by Colin Smith (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962) pp. xvii-xix.

influence each other, and that some seem to be more determining of others than others of them: in this way we attempt to explain the present from the past, and project possible “history” into the near future. The “actions” of the structural parts of the totality--and in the first moment, these “parts” are people--are instrumental activity (work, the use of things or people; maintains and reproduces life) and interaction (inter-subjective communication; leads to culture and meaning). Institutions grow up around these functions, and it is in this sense that Lukacs quotes Marx as saying that if you abolish socioeconomic relations, you abolish the whole of society. Lukacs was wrong, however, in thinking that institutions have lives of their own. That is, history is made by people and is mediated through institutions: Institutions (e.g. classes) have no needs, they have no interests, and they have no consciousness; but people, likewise situated, do. Therefore, there is no “end” or “goal” of history outside of the collective desires of people (mediated and given force through institutions), and hence no real problem of determinism cum voluntarism. In fact, any theory which ascribes an “objective goal” to history qua history is pure ideology and also empties the future of its historical content: “We know that the Jews were prohibited from investigating the future. The Torah and the Prayers instruct them in remembrance, however. This stripped the future of its magic, to which all those succumb who turn to the soothsayers for enlightenment. This does not imply, however, that for the Jews the future turned into homogeneous, empty time. For every second of time was the strait gate through which the Messiah might enter.”<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” in *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), p. 264.



What, then, is the mechanism or the process by which history moves? It is individual interests, mediated through institutions (and by this given material force: this is not an idealist theory), and expressed in a dialectic of tradition and critique. Tradition and critique, as we have seen, are expressions of deeply felt interests which gain legitimacy, in the first moment, by faith. We may now observe that in action, they gain legitimacy by authority, because they are precisely the collective interests people mediated through institutions. Their authorities are those of the values of history on one hand, and on the other, the critiques of contemporary values based on the values of the past, that is, on the desires for “the redemption of the hopes of the past.” (DE, xv) However, their authority is not the authority of force and compulsion--or only then in the last instance--but rather that of acceptance through mutual trust. Now, tradition has a “positive” legitimacy; that is, one of stasis or of organic change, which lacks intentional action (action driven by a conscious desire for change), and is therefore conservative. Critique, on the contrary, has “negative” legitimacy; in other words, based on (perhaps revived) historical and/or anthropological values, it is an agent of change through intentional action: critique is radical. Both tradition and critique are given force through the “truth” of their assertions (which they seek to demonstrate by its relation to a posited totality), and by the power of their organizations (which also gain legitimacy through their adherence to this “truth”).

Thus, the dialectic of tradition and critique (which are not material forces, but reasons for the movements of material forces) allows for non-dogmatic social change, from reform to revolution. Furthermore, the organizational impetus for change can potentially come from anywhere, in theory, and still retain legitimacy. All that is required

is adherence to the “truth.” (This includes revolutionary change: It is entirely possible that the revolutionary forces, not the ruling institutions, will have legitimacy and “truth” on their side.) This concept of legitimacy is very important, and it can only survive in “truth:” ideology exposed immediately loses its legitimacy. The reason, as we have seen, is mutual trust and (real) social solidarity. This also provides an explanation to Horkheimer’s puzzlement over the resistance of liberal Britain and America to internal fascism. The very tolerance (subjective reason) of these societies provided their legitimacy (which is not to indicate whether tolerance was truth or ideology--perceived as truth it gave legitimacy); a legitimacy which fascism, with its lack of tolerance, could not provide. In fact, we might argue that fascism always is the product of a disruption of legitimate social solidarity and the erection by force – and a false “legitimizing” ideology – of a hierarchical social structure and the rise of domination; whereas socialism arises out of legitimacy, as an accusation in the form of critique (by material forces) aimed at the status of the legitimacy of ruling institutions. This might, perhaps, be a definitional test which we could apply to “socialist” nation-states.

We might now say that “legitimacy” is the immediate *raison d’être* for the existence of a social order free of domination. If this gives the impression of being a “consensus theory of truth,” it is not accidental. Legitimacy, as real social solidarity and mutual trust, and based on a conception of non-ontological “truth” (i.e. universal subjective doubt), is possible only by means of democratic processes. However, this much alone is not sufficient, for if legitimacy is based on a predicated consensus which is, in turn, predicated on “truth” without certainty, then there must be some form of social “justice” for the minorities in a democratic process. For it is not enough for the majority

to “convince” the minority (by whatever means “necessary”) that they are “wrong” or “deluded.” However, I must admit a present incapacity to properly merge a theory of justice with the theory of democratic decision-making which I have thus far supported. (I think perhaps that if I reread some of the liberal theories of justice and social contract--say, Kant, Locke, Rousseau, Mill, Rawls--I might get some ideas. At any rate, I would like to develop something more compelling than that “justice” has long been a value in civilization; and that if it is not contained in tradition, then criticism might raise it as an issue.)

Perhaps one way to deal with this problem is to begin with Horkheimer’s formulation of a higher rationality as a methodology for reaching social values. This theory, it will be remembered, insists on the one hand that an absolute ontology, an “objective” totality is never possible to perceive, but on the other hand, that there are values which are discernable in the historical tradition which may also be criticized on the basis of ideals or “hopes of the past.” We may add to this the notion of “contextuality” which provides a basis from which values may be discovered and also criticized. Thus we reach, we recall, a definition of emancipation (our closest approximation to a goal of history) as that state of affairs in which we have democratic decision-making, based on the above rationalistic methodology for finding the “truth.” We must also keep in mind that democratic decision-making is inconceivable without a prior “totalistic” social analysis (not the same thing as totalitarian pseudo-certainty), which should reveal constraints (mainly economic and political) on the strategic ability of individuals and groups to participate: the anti-democratic constraints of real (materialistic) power. On this basis, I think we can see three possible reasons why a

state of emancipation (democracy) should coexist with some sort of value called “justice” (which might include rights of minorities, civil rights and freedoms, and rights to dissent): (1) a logical coincidence or inference, (2) an empirical argument, and (3) a practical or methodological argument.

(1) It follows logically from our conception of the “contextuality” of the truth that there can be no such thing as a “certain” totalistic analysis. Therefore, we are bound to tolerate (not repress) minority views of the “truth.” At the same time, our notion of “legitimacy” of truth, as expressed in tradition or in critique and from which we justify our support of one or another social order, implies a societal willingness to abide by the “rules” or methodology of democratic rationality; which as we have defined it, includes the “contextuality” of truth. This “coincidence,” that tolerance and legitimacy are both based on the same conception of the truth, leads us to suspect a social value in justice.

(2) By definition, we may distinguish between socialism and fascism in terms of their democratic rationality. On another scale, however, we may distinguish empirically and intuitively between systems which are corporatist (defined as an “omniscient” and “omnipotent” totalitarian central power structure which organizes and directs the rest of society, often under the false guise of democracy) from those which are truly democratic (decision-making power actually resides in the people and their chosen organizations). Thus, we can see that a “totalitarian socialism” is a contradiction in terms, and we know empirically that it is a contradiction in practice. Therefore, since totalitarian corporatism is the opposite of a tolerant system, we are again led to suspect that socialism must go hand in hand with tolerance and justice.

(3) Finally, it may be objected, there seems to be a contradiction between “correctness” of analysis and tolerance, between “truth” and freedom to deviate. I do not, for reasons which I have indicated concerning the “contextual” nature of truth, believe that this is a valid objection. That is, the methodology, the practice, of determining the “truth” requires freedom of inquiry, which is the definition of tolerance and is a condition of justice.

Having clarified these points to some extent, let us move on to the problem of organization and praxis. We recall that all “action” in society is a result of the felt needs of individuals mediated through institutions, which derive from “contextual” interests. This implies that needs will change as the social order changes: In this way increased freedom and democratic rationality increase felt needs. It also implies that no one is better situated to discover his own needs than the person himself who feels them. However, if he can be convinced or made to see a different relation of facts around him to a total (historical) structure, then his felt needs will likely also change. However, people are not as stupid as Lukacs seems to think they are. Most people already have a “Marxist” analysis of power relations around them (economy, government, etc.). They may be stopped from taking action, however, because they do not see a good alternative to their present situation. Since socialism and socialist organization historically have often tended to be totalitarian and dogmatic, workers and people in other classes may see no possibility in socialism of a change for the better, but rather the real possibility (whether the revolution succeeds or fails) of a change for the worse. They may also be afraid to take risks.

The mediation between consciousness and praxis, then, can never be more than a possible one. Social change never occurs “with necessity.” The decision to engage in political praxis involves interests, cognition and analysis of the social structure, the estimated risks and possibilities of success, and an idea of what is desired (in this case, a process of democratic rationality, not an end social structure).

Although there is no causal necessity between consciousness and praxis, we must still specify mediations between the two in the form of an organizational theory. At first, individuals should organize around institutions to which they feel they belong. Class does not always have primary salience in politics (although it is almost always among the most important factors), for domination does not always occur along class divisions. For instance, there may be racial, ethnic, or sexual discrimination. Thus, organization should occur in whatever ways are perceived best to fight oppression or prevent it. In this way, people may organize around their political interests, their workplace or class, racial, ethnic, or religious groups, their neighborhoods, their sex, or whatever is salient. These primary level groups will now--according to their totalistic analysis of social problems--either cooperate in fighting a common threat or else come into conflict with each other. It is presumed that good strategy dictates that when a larger threat is perceived, primary level groups will overlook differences among themselves and form a practical alliance. This is not always easy in practice, but with skillful political praxis, it will be no more difficult than forming a heterogeneous mass party held together by no internal interests. It may also be reasonably assumed that, in a society in which the root cause of oppression is capitalism, groups should cohere to

fight against capitalism; but it may be only a small advance from a victory over capitalism to a repressive totalitarian “socialist” nation-state.

This formulation is explicitly counterposed to a totalitarian party structure, for several reasons. The greatest danger to an individual comes when he is an “atom” vis a vis some larger, monolithic organization. He is then open to raw oppression, alienation, anomie, discrimination, and a host of other social, economic, political, and cultural problems. However, if he is mediated by a group or organization which gives him strength in those things he feels are most important, he will be in a much better position to face the “totality” of society. However, this must in no way be construed to mean that individuals ought to be organized by their “ascribed” or “imputed” interests, for this leads directly to corporatism of either the fascist or the Leninist variety. Needs must be genuinely felt, and no one can tell an individual what he “should feel,” or “does feel without knowing it.” (This is also not the same thing as saying that needs may arise in discussion, praxis, or social change.) This is also a way to give organizational strength to claims for social justice by individuals or minorities, who may otherwise be overlooked by the majority.

The key concept is revealed again to be “legitimacy,” which we may now see as tied strongly to both democratic rationality and a sense of justice. That is, individuals ought to align themselves with organizations which they feel are legitimate. Thus, not only primary level organizations, but also the central or national organization (Party, government, etc.) are evaluated in terms of legitimacy. If they are genuinely responsive to their constituent individuals or groups; if they pay heed not only to the strength of individuals or groups, but also to the “truth” of their claims; if they do not, in other words,

merely try to affect a compromise “balance of power,” but rather aim toward something like fairness, then organizations may be judged as legitimate. In this, the dialectic of tradition and critique operates to determine stasis or change, adjustment or revolt. Mao’s “On the Correct Handling of Contradictions Among the People,” for example, is an attempt to provide legitimacy through “justice” of a non-democratic totalitarian state; just as the legal system in the United States is an attempt to provide legitimation through “justice” of an unequal and only formally democratic state (largely because of corporate interests and government corruption). We may develop a sense of the truth of a system’s legitimacy by examining empirically where power lies: in elites or with the people? Or, put another way, is the system corporatist (totalitarian, with only token democracy if any) or genuinely democratic? Does true power in society rest with individuals mediated through their chosen organizations; and does society therefore causally reflect their felt needs, balanced in a just manner?

Let us now examine the actual moments of mediation between consciousness (felt interests) and praxis through organization. The mediation should occur, in the first instance, through discussion, in which individuals reveal their interests (those which they seek to implement through praxis) and determine, by mutual interests, what the goals of their group are to be. The exposure and revelation (often in the dialectical process of group discussion) of interests is not so insurmountable as Habermas seems to believe. People, by and large, know at any given time--at least negatively (what they do not want)--what they need to gain power over their own lives. Furthermore, the struggle to attain this power increasingly reveals to them what really stands in their way, as their opposition increasingly reveals itself and the nature of its power.



Now, these organizations, which at first are composed of individuals likewise situated in society, tend to gain legitimacy in the eyes of their members and in the eyes of the rest of society by their internal democracy and fairness. Thus, a system of Party bosses will undermine the legitimacy of the Party, whereas internal democracy will increase the Party's legitimacy, and for that reason make it both more attractive to its members and potential members, and also more powerful in a rationally democratic society. This phenomenon is demonstrated, I think, in the example of the United Mine Workers of America, in its transition from "illegitimacy" and weakness under the presidency of Tony Boyle to "legitimacy" and increasing strength with the democratic rise of Arnold Miller. Thus, the greater the legitimacy as judged internally, the greater will be the strength through solidarity; and the greater the legitimacy as judged externally, the greater will be the organization's effectiveness and credibility in making claims. In this way, leaders may emerge for tactical purposes, but will only retain their power so long as they are viewed as legitimate representatives.

It may be objected that there is no "certainty" or necessary "progress" in this. I quite agree. There exist no guarantees or insurance in this world against the rise of Machiavellian "pragmatism" but the constant organized struggle for democracy and justice: we only know "with certainty" that these cannot be won with undemocratic and unjust means--although it must be admitted that "pragmatic" means may make democratic rationality strategically more accessible. However, any "tactical" move must actually bring society closer to this process, or it is no "progress" at all. In other words, the rational democratic process, as a "goal," can only be attained by attaining it: by adopting rationally democratic means. Thus, there is no end to struggle. Saul Alinsky

helped to organize the “Back-of-the-Yards” neighborhood in Chicago in the 1930’s to fight the packing-houses and create a community. (This is the neighborhood described in Upton Sinclair’s *The Jungle*.) Thirty years, later, he helped organize against the Back-of-the-Yards Council which he had helped establish, in order to provide continuing community control by the residents (there had been a change of ethnic and racial composition, and a concomitant rise of domination).

It may be further objected that radically democratic theory is “naive.” This may be true if it does not account for the social, economic, political, and cultural causes of domination, and provide (democratic) organizational and tactical means for fighting them where they are found. Democratic Theory nearly always seems “naive” next to “pragmatism,” but it loses its “naiveté” when put into practice if its practitioners are skillful and tough-minded. We should also keep in mind that just as no social institution ever possessed interests or a consciousness, no social institution ever suffered: it has always been real, living individuals. Thus, if we are not honest with ourselves about the nature of compromise in theory, we will be in no position to judge compromise in practice. For the relation of theory to praxis is quite delicate and easily abused. If we are not quite strict in theory in what we allow to pass for truth, then we will almost certainly be unable to prevent the barbarism which arises when men put lies, distortions, and ideologies into practice.

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