

The Metacritique of Philosophy: Marx, Lukács & Adorno

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Introduction

Is there such a thing as a Marxist philosophy or is the very idea of a Marxist philosophy an oxymoron? Should we think of materialism as a philosophy in its own right with its own distinctive positions on ethical, epistemological, ontological and aesthetic matters or is it premised on an insight into the essential limitation of philosophy and the forms of enquiry that characterise it? Does materialism represent the extension and essential continuation of forms of critique inaugurated in the Enlightenment or does it stand in a similar relation to philosophy as philosophy stood to theology in this period? This question – the question of the relationship between Marxism and philosophy – is anything but original. But I would argue it goes to the heart of the interpretation of Marx's writings and to the Marxist tradition.

There is ample evidence for both views in Marx's own writings. In *The German Ideology* he describes philosophy as losing its "medium of existence" on reality being depicted correctly.¹ Further on he calls on his reader to leave philosophy aside; "one has to leap out of it and devote oneself like an ordinary man to the study of actuality." Philosophy he states is to the study of the actual world what masturbation is to sexual love.² At the same time Marx's methodological preoccupations in the economic writings evidence a life-long engagement with Hegelian philosophy. The idea, once prevalent, that the philosophical concerns of the young Marx were merely preparatory

¹ Marx & Engels *The German Ideology* edited and introduced by C.J.Arthur (London, Lawrence & Wishart:1977) p.48.

² Ibid. p.103

exercises that cleared the way for the mature 'economic' writings have been widely questioned.

The term 'metacritique' is often used to designate the kind of critique of philosophy developed by Marx. Originating in the linguistic critiques of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* developed by Herder and Hamann, metacritique came *after* the critique of reason inaugurated by Kant. Significantly for the way that the term has come to be applied to Marxist critique, it also involved a reference beyond the domain of philosophy, to the 'givens' of language and culture that in some sense *condition* the project of a critique of reason. As far as I am aware neither Marx nor Engels referred to the materialist critique of philosophy as 'metacritical'. Insofar as it has come to be applied to the form of critique they developed it carried both the sense of coming *after* Kantian critique, thereby challenging its self-sufficing character, and of philosophical enquiry being *conditioned*. Philosophical criticism was insufficient in itself and had to be supplemented by a more thorough-going criticism. This more radical criticism, however, could not be undertaken from within philosophy but from a stand point *without*, from the standpoint of the social. This entailed treating philosophy as *one* form of social production among others and understanding its real (demystified) meaning in terms of its role in the class struggle. The key to reading philosophy was to decipher the class-related meaning of philosophical concepts and to understand their role in producing and reproducing existing relations of production and social relations generally.

The form of critique innovated by Marx has served as a model for other forms of metacritique drawing on other extra-philosophical frames of reference (e.g. feminism, psycho-analysis, post-colonialism etc.) The question that immediately arises, however, for Marxism and other metacritical approaches, is the *reflexive* problem of how these theories account for their own self-possibility? How, in other words, do they know what they claim to know? Why *these* values and not others? The problem faced by metacritical approaches is that the insight into the conditioned character of philosophical critique is itself philosophically question-begging. In taking up a standpoint *outside* philosophy the issue of the normative assumptions underpinning this standpoint immediately arises.

This calls into question the extra-philosophical as such. If every attempt to critique forms of philosophical criticism and assign limits to philosophy end up being re-interpolated in philosophy, then the very possibility of metacritique is called into question and the distinction between critique and metacritique collapses. The central tenet of idealism that reason or spirit (and therefore philosophy) represents an autonomous sphere of enquiry becomes all but unchallengeable. For every attempt to think its conditioned character ends up returning critique to questions of self-possibility.

In what follows I'm going to argue that Marx, Lukács and Adorno were each keenly aware of the reflexive problems encountered in metacritical attempts to establish the *conditioned* character of philosophical enquiry. I'm going to distinguish between three conceptions of metacritique; the first deriving from *The German Ideology* (1845); the second from Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* (1923); and the last from Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* (1966). I will suggest that the development of the concept of metacritique from Marx to Adorno indicates a shift from external, and potentially reductive, forms of criticism to more immanent forms of critique – to the point where, in Adorno's work, the outside of philosophy – the extra-conceptual - is indicated in the non-identity of concept and object. I shall argue that whilst Marx and Lukács were aware of the reflexive problem, each in their different way left materialist critique open to appropriation: Marx, through the under-elaborated concept of materialist theory, inadvertently sided with the positivist liquidation of philosophy. Lukács, in the face of this liquidation (Second International Marxism), attempts to elaborate a critical and philosophically mediated account of materialism but ends up re-stating idealist claims to autonomy rather than disabling them. Only Adorno's conception, I will suggest, resists the positivist dissolution of philosophy without re-instating it in its autonomous self-legislating sphere.

Marx: metacritique as ideology-critique

In a famous and often cited passage from *The German Ideology* Marx & Engels distinguish between idealist and materialist approaches. Whereas, they state, idealism descends from heaven to earth materialism ascends from earth to heaven:

“...we do not set out from what men say, imagine, conceive, nor from men narrated, thought of, imagined, conceived, in order to arrive at men in the flesh. We set out from real, active men, and on the basis of their real life-process we demonstrate the development of the ideological reflexes and echoes of this life-process. The phantoms formed in the human brain are also, necessarily, sublimates of their material life-process, which is empirically verifiable and bound to material premises. Morality, religion, metaphysics, all the rest of ideology and their corresponding forms of consciousness, thus no longer retain the semblance of independence. They have no history, no development; but men developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their real existence, their thinking and the products of their thinking. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life.”³

The “real life process” refers to the production of the material conditions of life which forms the natural basis of all societies. The fact that all societies have this natural basis does not mean, however, that they are all the same. This natural basis of society, whilst conditioning the production of the material conditions of life, can itself, in the view of Marx and Engels, be *modified* in history through the actions of individuals. This allows us to distinguish (historically and ethnographically) between different *modes* of production such that the production of the material conditions of life is never simply this: it is also “a definite form of activity of these individuals, a definite form of expressing their life, a definite mode of life on their part.”⁴ Each mode of production is characterised by definite relations between individuals: these relations, in turn, are determined by the development of productive forces within society and the extent to which the division of labour is carried through.⁵

On this basis Marx and Engels distinguish between different modes of production; tribal, ancient, feudal and capitalist each of which are characterised by definite social and political relations. Thus forms of ownership and political organisation relate back

³ Ibid. p.47

⁴ Ibid. p.42

⁵ Ibid. p.43

to production. It is not just forms of political organisation and law that are related in the concept of a mode of production but also the production of ideas, conceptions and consciousness that are “directly interwoven” with the material activity and material relations of individual. This cultural production is to be understood by reference to the material production and material intercourse of individuals.⁶ This makes possible the materialist inversion of idealism: life (i.e. the real life process) determines consciousness not the reverse. Whereas idealism took cultural production – the forms of absolute spirit - to be the principle driver of history, materialism views this as the ideological reflex and echo of the real life process - the reproduction of the material conditions of existence and the different forms this takes.

From this the central characteristics of Marx’s metacritique can be discerned. Rather than viewing forms of cultural production – morality, religion, metaphysics etc – as autonomous disciplines that stand above the real life process they are to be viewed as ‘sublimates’ of this process tied to material premises which are empirically verifiable.⁷ The metacritique of philosophy takes the form of an ideology-critique in which empirical observation establishes the connection between forms of consciousness and the real life process without mystification or speculation.⁸ An example of this can be found in part two of the work where Marx and Engels relate Kantian ethics to the particular situation of the German burghers. Kant’s insistence that the good will alone establishes the worth of an action, independently of what it accomplishes, is an ideological reflex of the peculiar impotence of the bourgeois in Germany in the late 18th century due to their relative backwardness as a class vis-à-vis their French and British counterparts.

This form of metacritique in which forms of cultural production are more or less precisely related to the material basis of society and the relative state of the class struggle - has come to be most closely identified with the Marxist approach. It is one in which ideology-critique takes the form of an exact science, following from empirically verifiable premises, in which the ideological forms are ‘read-off’ from the

⁶ Ibid. p.47

⁷ Ibid. p.42

⁸ Ibid. p.46

material basis of society. The concerns of philosophy are viewed as pure mystification ripe for replacement by a scientific materialism.

However, whilst there are many positivist moments in Marx it is more than clear that this is not the position being advanced in *The German Ideology*. Marx is more than aware of what I am calling the reflexive problem of metacritique, that is to say, the question of the status of materialist theory itself and he takes pains to distinguish his own approach from an empiricism that views history as a “collection of dead facts”.⁹ It is abundantly clear also that it is not philosophy itself that ceases to exist when reality is depicted but philosophy as an “independent branch of knowledge.”¹⁰ Philosophy as a *dependent* branch of knowledge – i.e. a philosophy that recognises its essential mediation by society – is unproblematic and presumably integral to a critical materialism that is *neither* idealist *nor* empiricist. The trouble is that the concept of a critical materialism is nowhere elaborated by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*. Nor - arguably – is it developed anywhere else in their work.

This led to the accentuation of the positivist moments of their thought at the expense of the critical/dialectical moments with two important consequences for the way the relation between materialism and philosophy was thought. First the critique of the *form* of idealist philosophy – its semblance of independence – came to be identified with the critique of philosophy itself. Philosophy, like religion, was just *pure* mystification and, as such, had to be subjected to rigorous critique from the scientific standpoint of materialism. Thus the problem of ideology as posed by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* – the problem of the apparent independence of forms of consciousness – deteriorates into the critique of forms of false consciousness from the standpoint of a dogmatically asserted scientific consciousness.

Secondly, the relation between idealist philosophy and scientific Marxism came to be understood in positivistic terms as the progressive historical replacement of metaphysical forms of knowledge by scientific forms. This meant that Marxism became implicated in the progressive division of intellectual labour and the irrevocable split between philosophy and the specialised sciences since idealism. This

⁹ Ibid. p.48

¹⁰ Ibid. p.48

led to the increasing formalisation of the special sciences, increasingly cut off from their material substratum and an ever more formalistic philosophy that eschews metaphysical questions and restricts itself to supplying formal definitions for the special sciences.¹¹ Where Marx and Engels had envisaged a transformed, heteronomous philosophy aware of its social mediation – what Lukács’s would later refer to as an “inwardly synthesising philosophical method” (109) – there came to stand a dogmatic scientific theory that was exempted from accounting for its own theoretical self-possibility.¹²

Lukács: the metacritique of idealism¹³

The question of the semblance of independence of ideological forms is taken up by Georg Lukács in a lecture from 1919 entitled *The Changing Function of Historical Materialism*. In this lecture capitalist modernity is characterised as the becoming-autonomous of different aspects of the social structure beginning with the economic.¹⁴ Whereas, in traditional societies, the economic aspects of social existence cannot be separated from the non-economic aspects (e.g. the confluence of religious and economic factors in the concept of usury in medieval society), in modern capitalist societies the economic appears as a discrete realm of social existence governed by its own immanent laws. Whilst the genesis of capitalist societies is characterised by the prevalent use of extra-economic force a developed capitalist society is characterised by the dull compulsion and smooth functioning of ‘quasi-natural’ economic laws. This implies that the economic sphere of existence first appears as distinct from other aspects of social existence and that it becomes an objective sphere with its own autonomous laws that are systematically investigated by the emerging science of political economy. Lukács calls the structure of modern societies ‘economic’ because it is the becoming-autonomous of the economic realm that begins the process of social

¹¹ G. Lukács *History & Class Consciousness* (HCC) trans. Rodney Livingstone (London, Merlin: 1990) p.104

¹² Ibid. p.109

¹³ My reading of Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness* is indebted to Andrew Feenberg’s *Lukács, Marx and the Sources of Critical Theory* (Totowa: New Jersey, 1981) and Jay Bernstein’s *Philosophy of the Novel: Lukács Marxism & the Dialectics of Form* (Brighton: Harvester Press, 1984)

¹⁴ HCC p.229-230

disintegration and leads to the emergence of society as a set of discrete ‘objects’ governed by their own autonomous laws.

The emergence of the specialised sciences (political economy, politics jurisprudence) is implicated in this process of social fragmentation; the separate aspects of the social structure must first appear as a discrete objective realm before its autonomous laws can be investigated; the systematic investigation of these laws reinforces their objective independence. Lukács’s goes on to characterise the materialist method as epoch-making, “precisely because it was able to see that these apparently quite independent, hermetic and autonomous systems were really aspects of a comprehensive whole and that their apparent independence could be transcended.”¹⁵ In short, Lukács opposes to the concept of society as an aggregate of sub-systems, the concept of social totality whose parts reciprocally determine each other.¹⁶

Like Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, Lukács views the materialist approach as challenging (i.e. negating and transcending) the ‘semblance of independence’ of the capitalist social structure and its correlate forms of consciousness. Society *appears* to be comprised of discrete objects operating in accordance with their own autonomous laws but the reality is the reciprocal determination of the parts in the whole. Similarly, he views this appearance-form as necessary - the “conceptual expression of the objective social structure of capitalist society.”¹⁷ The full development of this theory of social illusion, however, and the precise role of philosophy in its overcoming, is set out in the central theoretical essay in *History and Class Consciousness* – ‘Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat.’ In this essay, Lukács both elaborates a theory of social illusion on the basis of Marx and Engels’ critique of the apparent independence of the forms of consciousness and develops a critical materialism via a metacritique of philosophy. In doing this his intention is to counter the positivist and reductive moments of Marx and Engels’ thought that had become dominant in the period of the Second International.

¹⁵ Ibid. p.230

¹⁶ Ibid. p.12-13

¹⁷ Ibid. p.230

In the Reification essay the ‘economic structure’ of society is *represented* in a more mediated form as the ubiquity of the problem of the commodity form. Lukács explicates the problem as follows:

“Its basis is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a ‘phantom objectivity’, an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all- embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people.”¹⁸

Marx’s analysis of the commodity form in *Capital* saw it as a form of illusion specific to economic life in capitalist society, a situation in which ‘objective’ economic laws of supply and demand are the consequence of the uncomprehended *social* activity of individual producers. In Marx’s view classical political economy takes this illusory realm as its object, exploring its immanent laws and regularities. It stands in *contemplative* relation to its object because as an objective realm of law, it lies beyond human intervention and control. Lukács’ innovation in the Reification essay is to see in this analysis a model for a *general* theory of social illusion for modern capitalist societies. He does this by relating the suppression of use-value in value-in-exchange in capitalist economies to the formalism and content-indifference of rational systems of administration and law and, ultimately, to the formalistic character of the social sciences and philosophy.¹⁹ An analysis of the commodity structure is, in Lukács’s words, “made to yield a model of all the objective forms of bourgeois society together with all the subjective forms corresponding to them”²⁰ *because* the suppression qualitative content in the productive, administrative and legal process is fundamentally the same and because the contemplative character of the social sciences and philosophy make them fundamentally complicit with this suppression. The commodity-form thus becomes the key to understanding bourgeois society in its entirety because, as the central form of social illusion, as the way capitalist society necessarily appears to individuals, it veils the process by which social relations are produced and reproduced as a consequence of unconscious (i.e. class-related) social activity.

¹⁸ Ibid. p.83

¹⁹ Ibid. p.83-110

²⁰ Ibid. p.83

Lukács goes on to accord the proletariat a privileged insight into the total social process on the basis that their *position* in the capitalist productive process. As both subject and object of this process they are (potentially least) self-conscious commodities capable of seeing through the illusion of the commodity form.²¹ This makes possible the substitution of genuine praxis for the pseudo-praxis of bourgeois society in which existing social relations are produced and reproduced by unconscious social activity. The philosophical mediations of Lukács's theory of proletarian praxis are, however, clear to see from the metacritique of idealist philosophy that immediate precedes its elaboration in the Reification essay.

As noted for Lukács philosophy and social sciences are implicated in the process of social fragmentation and rationalisation that characterises capitalist modernity. A materialism, understood as praxis, must orientate itself – i.e. relate and distinguish itself – towards idealist philosophy which partly shares its diagnosis of modernity as dichotomous and antinomical and, in its systematic intent, precedes the irrevocable parting of the ways of philosophy and the sciences that occurs from the mid 19th century onwards. A critical materialism needs to reach back behind the progressive specialisation of science and philosophy to the 'heroic' bourgeois era of the idealist system. It is driven to do this in order to account for its own theoretical self-possibility. It also finds in idealism an initial statement of the problem of social illusion and the clues to its transcendence albeit in mystified form.

The importance of Kantian and Post-Kantian idealism both for the understanding social illusion and for the project of elaborating a critical materialism lies in its discovery and attempt to transcend the problem of the thing-in-itself. This is the problem of the material substratum and ultimate objects of reference of thought - in Kant's thought, the noumenal *cause* of appearances and the inevitable incompleteness of our conceptual representations. Unlike positivistic science and philosophy that turns its back on this problem as unscientific and fruitless, for the idealists it was a problem that refused to be suppressed and called for a solution.

²¹ Ibid. p171-2

In the metacritical section of the Reification essay, Lukács makes the possibility of critical materialism *turn on* the dissolution of the problem of the thing-in-itself. In this way I think he ends up backsliding into idealism rather than ultimately distinguishing a materialist approach from it. However, what is significant is that Lukács aligns materialism *with* idealism and its metaphysical preoccupations *against* the positivist liquidation of such concerns as pseudo-problems. For Lukács the Kantian problem of the thing-in-itself represented an authentic rupture in the illusory logic of the commodity form and was therefore a crucial resource for a critical materialism. The task was to think through the Kantian aporia and its attempted resolution in German Idealism rather than accept its deletion by positivism. This is exactly what the metacritical section in the reification essay sets out to do; to trace the attempts to resolve the aporia in German Idealism - in Kant's practical philosophy, Schiller's account of aesthetic subjectivity and Hegel's philosophy of history - garnering insights into a materialist theory of praxis on route (the primacy of practical reason drawn from Kant's practical philosophy; a non-subsumptive conception of form drawn from Romantic aesthetics and a historically adequate subject drawn from Hegel's Philosophy of History.)²² The metacritique of philosophy for Lukács therefore accomplishes what Marx and Engels neglected to do; that is, to elaborate the philosophical mediations of materialist theory and critically account for its own self-possibility.

This is not to say that Lukács' theory of praxis is without historical and experiential basis. The peculiar tragedy of German idealism, for Lukács was that it was destined to 'break its head' on problems that it could not possibly solve.²³ This was because the standpoint from which they could be transcended had not yet historically emerged. This is especially clear in Lukács' critique of Hegel's philosophy of history where the discovery of the praxical standpoint is impeded by the fundamentally mystified concepts that Hegel has to hand. The question of the historical resolution of the problem of the thing-in-itself could not but be posed in alienated form - as the dialectical interplay of 'world spirit' and 'spirit of the people' – because the

²² Ibid. p.110-149

²³ Ibid. p.121

proletariat as a class had not yet emerged on the historical scene. As Merleau-Ponty has put it, history must first *suggest* the meaning that is to be *imposed* on it.²⁴

For Lukács, materialism is the self-knowledge of capitalist society and capitalism comes to know itself through the figure of the proletariat and their coming to self-consciousness.²⁵ In this task of self-understanding it receives considerable assistance from German idealism that sought in vain to resolve, in the realm of pure thought, contradictions and paradoxes that would only admit of practical-historical resolution. Speculative attempts to resolve the problem of the thing-in-itself, whilst fruitless in their own terms, were, in Lukács's view, tremendously fruitful for the proletariat engaged in the task of collective self-interpretation.

The question that arises, however, is whether the praxical resolution of the problem of the thing-in-itself moves beyond idealism or simply repeats it. Are the concepts garnered from idealism – totality, mediation, subject-object identity, praxis etc. – adequate for the task of critiquing the social domination intrinsic to modern capitalist societies or are they in some sense complicit with it? Has Lukács ultimately been critical enough in his appropriation of these categories for materialist thought? Much depends, I would suggest, on how we interpret his understanding of the limits of idealism. Like Marx and Engels, he views idealism as committed to the project of autonomous self-grounding and therefore, ultimately, trapped in the illusory logic of the commodity. Like Marx and Engels he thinks idealism 'trades on' the suppression of the fact of its conditioning by society and that it engages with this conditioning only in its alienated (metaphysical) form. His account of Marxist theory as a *praxis* is - in contradistinction to idealism – a self-consciously *heteronomous* philosophy one that recognises its extra-philosophical mediation. Where he differs from Marx and Engels is in the importance he assigns to this task, in accounting for the self-possibility of Marxism and guarding against any positivistic misinterpretation. He is also able to bring together the concept of ideology developed by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* with Marx's concept of commodity fetishism outlined in *Capital* in a general theory of social illusion in bourgeois society.

²⁴ Maurice Merleau-Ponty *Phenomenology of Perception* trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge:1992) p.450

²⁵ HCC p.229

But is a materialism that insists on the identity of the proletariat as both subject and object of the historical process heteronomous enough? Lukács was the first Marxist to take account of the rationalisation of the sciences and the nominalistic tendencies in philosophy. As we have seen, this mediates his metacritique of idealism. But are Idealist categories themselves entirely free of the reifying tendencies found in late capitalist culture?

Adorno: metacritique as negative dialectics

Like Lukács, Adorno views philosophy as subject to the same reifying tendencies that are evidenced throughout society. No theory escapes the market place he writes. (4) No theory is free of the illusory logic of the commodity. Philosophy, as a form of cultural production that is *implicated* in the objective social tendencies of disintegration, repudiates its own status as a commodity at the cost of deteriorating into self-advertising. At one level Adorno's remark can be read as a jaundiced and world-weary take on the proliferation of theories in contemporary culture. At a deeper level, however, Adorno is restating the view first set out by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology* that society *conditions* philosophy and that any philosophy that refuses to acknowledge this or views this fact as something to be overcome is ultimately ideological. To call a theory 'ideological' – at least in the sense that Lukács develops this term – is to say nothing more than that theory *fails* to come to terms with, and ultimately extricate itself from, the illusory logic of the commodity; that it fails to call into question the ontological basis of its object or its contemplative attitude towards it; that it fails to acknowledge its fundamental *heteronomy* and *dependence*. For Adorno the central question will be whether a theory *can* acknowledge its heteronomy whilst at the same time claiming to be entirely free of the illusory logic of the commodity; or whether a standpoint wholly free of illusion loses its immanence and ceases to be critical.

The basic difference between Lukács and Adorno, I would suggest, is that the former fundamentally *underestimates* this task of elaborating a critical materialism. For Lukács, theory extricates itself from the illusory logic of the commodity by grounding itself in the experience of the proletariat and appropriating the central categories of

idealism. For Adorno the absence in *late* capitalist societies of immanent standpoints from which to transcend their antagonistic form signals the impossibility of grounding materialism in the experience of the proletariat. Further he maintains that the fundamental concepts that Lukács appropriates from idealism are not themselves free from the logic of illusion. To understand both of these claims and how it alters his basic conception of metacritique one needs to understand why Adorno thinks the basic categories of idealist logic are infected by principle of exchange.

The basic outline of Adorno's concept of Negative Dialectic is set out in the opening sections of the work:

“The name of dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy. Contradiction is not what Hegel's absolute idealism was bound to transfigure it into: it is not of the essence in a Heraclitean sense. It indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived.”²⁶

The traditional norm of adequacy to which Adorno refers is the concept of truth: that concept is *adequate* to object. That the concept picks out features of the object that wholly determine it or exhaust it. That the object is nothing other than what the concept picks out. Dialectics is first and foremost the recognition of a moment of irreducible non-identity; that the concept does not exhaust the object.

On its own, however, the simple recognition of non-identity is insufficient. German Idealism, specifically Kant's critical philosophy and Hegel's concept of dialectic, is premised on just such a recognition. For Kant the problem of the thing-in-itself is precisely such a moment - that aspect of the object other than how it must necessarily appear to us. For Hegel on the other hand the non-identical as negation of the abstract concept becomes a moment of identity. The failure of the concept to determine an object, for Hegel, is the occasion of the emergence of a new object for consciousness and a higher order identity. For Adorno the key is to free non-identity from its

²⁶ Theodor W. Adorno *Negative Dialectics* (ND) trans. E.B.Ashton (London, Routledge:1990) p.5

subordination to the principle of identity: the non-identical is the untruth of identity not an essential moment of identity. To do this, however, one cannot simply side with the non-identical over the identical. To think *is* to identify and as such it is something we can hardly avoid. Adorno is not advocating that we should - or even could - dispense with concepts and rationality generally. Rather he is calling for a form of immanent thinking that does not allow the non-identical to be absorbed by the principle of identity. Aware that the conceptual totality is mere appearance – that the act of thinking tends to screen off what thinking seeks to comprehend all that is left is to try to “break immanently.....through the appearance of non-identity.”²⁷ The metacritical sections in part three of *Negative Dialectics* are largely an attempt to delineate such a form of thought.

Such a thinking (negative dialectics) clearly is not to be found in either Kant’s concept of reason or Hegel’s concept of dialectic. In the dialectic of reason in the first critique Kant ensures that principle of identity trumps non-identity. Reason in its speculative function has only the formal logical principle of non-identity to orientate it and it is to this principle that Kant appeals to dispel dialectical illusion. The principle is also in evidence in practical reason in the form of the categorical imperative, the supreme principle of Kant’s ethical thought, which establishes that the will is not in contradiction with itself. As noted Hegel views non-identity as the essential mediation between abstract and concrete universal. For Adorno, however, non-identity can *only* indicate the untruth of identity – that *this* concept fails to determine an object. It can never serve as a pretext for identity without doing violence to it.

Adorno’s critique of the idealism as a form of identificatory thinking problematises Lukács’ appropriation of idealist concepts for a critical materialism. If the concepts harvested from idealism for the task of collective self-interpretation are themselves identificatory then the latter can only succeed in enmeshing itself further in the logic of illusion. By implication the principle of identity is closely related to the illusory logic of the commodity for Adorno. Indeed Adorno refers to the principle of exchange as the social model of the principle of identity:

²⁷ Ibid. p.5

“The exchange principle, the reduction of human of human labour to the abstract universal concept of average working hours, is fundamentally akin to the principle of identification. Exchange is the social model of the principle, and without the principle there would be no exchange; it is through exchange that non-identical individuals and performances become commensurable and identical. The spread of the principle imposes on the whole world an obligation to become identical, to become total.”²⁸

Identificatory thinking is a form of thinking that is unable to extricate itself from the illusory logic of the commodity; it is the fetishism of thought itself. In Adorno’s view Lukács *underestimates* the extent to which our thinking is trapped within the logic of illusion. He also sees in the call to transcend this illusion in praxis the possibility of a regress to pre-modern forms of barbarism. An illustration of this can be found in their respective treatments of the principle of exchange.²⁹

Whereas Lukács’ critique of the principle of exchange drives towards the recognition of the irreducibly *qualitative* social relations – a concept of use-value not dominated by exchange - Adorno see this as dangerous longing for pre-modern society with its more characteristically direct forms of exploitation. For Adorno it is not *comparability* as such that is the problem. A society free from domination would not be one *without* any measure of equivalence. It is the fact that unequal things are rendered equal by the principle. This fact does not preclude the possibility of a fair exchange in which “no man had part of his labour withheld from him anymore.”³⁰ The problem with Lukács’ critique of the commodity form is that it sides with the non-identical *against* the identical. It abstractly negates the principle and in so doing misses the opportunity of mounting an immanent critique of the principle by confronting it with its non-identity:

“If comparability as a category of measure were simply annulled, the rationality which is inherent in the exchange principle – as ideology, of course,

²⁸ Ibid. p.146

²⁹ See Simon Jarvis’ perspicuous commentary on this passage. Simon Jarvis *Adorno* (Cambridge, Polity:1998) p.167

³⁰ ND p.147

but also as promise – would give way to direct appropriation, to force, and nowadays to the naked privilege of monopolies and cliques.”³¹

The ideological element of the principle of exchange - its alleged universality – is also the ideal element of the principle – its promise – which enables what is comprehended under the concept to be criticised. Unfair exchange – the extraction of surplus value – is critiqued by reference to the ideal universality inherent in the principle of exchange itself. Said differently negative dialectics is a form of immanent critique; unfair exchange is critiqued by the promise of fair exchange implicit in the concept of exchange itself. It is precisely the possibility of fair exchange, drawn from the insight into the untruth of identity in the exchange-principle, that is precluded in Lukács’ approach.

With this call to realise the rationality inherent in the principle of exchange our basic understanding of what it means to extricate ourselves from the logic of illusion undergoes a transformation. The universality of the concept is *both* ‘ideological pretext’ and ‘promise’ serving at one and the same time to conceal non-identity and reveal or point towards rational identity. A critical theory that understands itself as *pure* critique or *pure* demystification runs the risk of throwing out the baby with the bath water. For the relentless critique of the false universality of the concept as *ideological pretext* leads to the deletion of the universal as *promise*. Lukács’ concept of a critical materialism is just such a conception. In seeking to resolve all forms of illusory social objectivity into social process, Lukács sides with the non-identical against identity and inadvertently deletes the rationality or promise inherent in the reified social object. Rather than confront the identical with non-identity it abstractly negates the former and undertakes a critique of society from the mythic standpoint of a non-reified society. Such a theory is neither critical enough nor does it sufficiently acknowledge its dependence.

³¹ Ibid. p146-7

Conclusion

The metacritique of philosophy as ideology-critique, as practiced by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, rather than bid an irrevocable farewell to philosophy, actually refers materialism *back* to philosophy. This is because the very notion of ideology-critique begs the question of the adequate cognition from which the forms of false consciousness can be criticised. This is not to say that the task of elucidating the ideological significance of a cognitive or moral theory is not a pressing and vital one for Marxists; it is just that this does not settle the question of the cognitive and practical status of Marxist theory itself. Ideology critique needs to be supplemented with an immanent critique of philosophical concepts. Or said differently, the metacritique of philosophy as the elucidation of the ideological significance of a philosophical theory needs to be supplemented with a metacritique of philosophy in which the theoretical and practical basis of Marxism is staked. Without this supplement it is one-sided and question-begging.

This is the concept of metacritique that, I suggested, Marx and Engels recognised the need for but did not develop themselves. It is a conception, however, elaborated by Lukács. Kant's concept of practical reason certainly was a way of theorising the impotence of the German burghers but it also has certain similarities with Marxism. Like Kant's practical philosophy, social critique understood as practical-critical activity or praxis *also* asserts the primacy of practical reason. The critical task for a non-dogmatic Marxism is to take up the burden of showing how praxis meaningfully *differs* from Kant's concept of practical reason and other idealist concepts. This is what Lukács sets out to do the middle (metacritical) section of the Reification essay.

Lukács attempt to elaborate a critical materialism as inextricably bound up with a theory of social illusion. Drawing on Marx and Engels critique of the semblance of independence of ideological forms in *The German Ideology* and Marx's analysis of commodity fetishism in *Capital* he outlines a theory of how society in all its aspects must necessarily appear. Science and philosophy, along with other forms of cultural production, are themselves subject to this illusion. For Lukács a critical materialism is able to get behind its appearance by acknowledging its experiential basis in the

experience of proletariat and appropriating concepts from idealism to make sense of this experience.

Adorno's critique of identificatory thinking, however, problematises this conception of metacritique. If the basic concepts that Lukács' adapts from idealism – concepts such as totality, mediation, non-subsumptive form, the primacy of the practical – are themselves examples of identificatory thinking then the concept of metacritique must undergo a further transformation. Adorno's concept of negative dialectic thinks with and against idealist thought: unable to presuppose a standpoint – potential or actual – outside the totality of appearances from which a critique could be mounted, it attempts to break through it immanently - by judging these appearances in accordance with their own measure. This implies that ideology or semblance is not simply that which a critical theory should seek to extricate itself from but also, in some sense, to *realise*. For Adorno, materialism is premised, explicitly, on the recognition that it *cannot* ultimately extricate itself from the illusory logic of the commodity and that it should not seek to do so. For in doing this it inadvertently deletes the *promise* of identity and fair exchange implicit in the non-identity of concept and world. For Adorno then the fact that a critical materialism is 'locked into' social illusion without hope of extricating itself is also the basis of a new form of hope: that the lack of identity between concept and world is also a reminder of the possibility that the world could be otherwise.