

Book Review: Karl Korsch. *Marxism and Philosophy*. Edited and Translated by Fred Halliday. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008.

Chris Cutrone

[Marx wrote,] “ [Humanity] always sets itself only such problems as it can solve; since, looking at the matter more closely it will always be found that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or are at least understood to be in the process of emergence.”¹ This dictum is not affected by the fact that a problem which supersedes present relations may have been formulated in an anterior epoch.

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

— Karl Korsch, “Marxism and Philosophy” (1923)

KARL KORSCH’S SEMINAL ESSAY, “Marxism and Philosophy” (1923), was first published in English, translated by Fred Halliday, in 1970 by Monthly Review Press. In 2008, they reprinted the volume, which also contains some important shorter essays, as part of their new “Classics” series.

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

Independently of one another, both Korsch’s and Lukács’s 1923 works shared an interest in recovering the Hegelian or “idealist” dimension of Marx’s thought and politics. Both were motivated to establish the coherence of the Marxist revolutionaries Lenin and Luxemburg, and these Second International-era radicals’ shared grounding in what Korsch called “Marx’s Marxism.” Their accomplishment of this is all the more impressive when it is recognized that it was made without benefit of either of the two most important texts in which Marx explicitly addressed the relation of his own thought to Hegel’s, the 1844 *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* (first published in 1932) or the notes for *Capital* posthumously published as the *Grundrisse* (1939), and also without access to Lenin’s 1914 notebooks on Hegel’s *Science of Logic* (1929). Due to a perceived shortcoming in the expounding of revolutionary Marxism, the problem for Korsch and Lukács was interpreting Marxism as both theory and practice, or how the politics of Lenin and Luxemburg (rightly) considered itself “dialectical.” Both Lukács and Korsch explicitly sought to provide this missing exposition and elaboration.

Lukács and Korsch were later denounced as “professors” in the Communist International, a controversy that erupted after the deaths of Luxemburg and Lenin. (Another important text of this moment was Lukács’s 1924 monograph in eulogy, *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of his Thought*.) In the face of this party criticism, Lukács acquiesced and made his peace with Stalinized “orthodoxy.” Eventually disavowing *History and Class Consciousness* as a misguided attempt to “out-Hegel Hegel,” Lukács even attempted to destroy all the existing copies of the unpublished “Tailism and the Dialectic,” his brilliant 1925 defense of *HCC*. (Apparently he failed, since a copy was eventually found in Soviet archives. This remarkable document was translated and published in 2000 as *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness*.)

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

The complementary, if divergent, trajectories of Korsch and Lukács are indicative of the historical disintegration of the perspective both shared in their writings of 1923. Both had understood the “subjective” aspect of Marxism to have been clarified by Lenin’s role in the October Revolution. The figure of Lenin was irreducible, and brought out dimensions of the Marxian project that otherwise lay unacknowledged. As Theodor W. Adorno put it in private discussion with Max Horkheimer in 1956,

I always wanted to produce a theory that would be faithful to Marx, Engels and Lenin.... Marx was too harmless; he probably imagined quite naïvely that human beings are basically the same in all essentials and will remain so. It would be a good idea, therefore, to deprive them of their second nature. He was not concerned with their subjectivity; he probably didn’t look into that too closely. The idea that human beings are the products of society down to their innermost core is an idea that he would have rejected as milieu theory. Lenin was the first person to assert this.²

In this discussion, Adorno also proposed to Horkheimer that they “should produce a reworked [version of the] *Communist Manifesto* that would be ‘strictly Leninist.’ ”³

No less than Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness*, Korsch’s “Marxism and Philosophy” inspired the work of the Marxist critical theorists associated with the Frankfurt School: Horkheimer, Marcuse, Benjamin, and Adorno. But the reputation of Korsch’s work has been eclipsed by that of Lukács. What the usual interpretive emphasis on Lukács occludes is that the Frankfurt School writers grappled not only with the problem of Stalinism but “anti-Stalinism” as well. Both Lukács’s and Korsch’s post-1923 trajectories were critiqued by the Frankfurt School writers.⁴ As Adorno put it in *Negative Dialectics* (1966),

First Karl Korsch, later the functionaries of Diamat [Dialectical Materialism] have objected, that the turn to nonidentity would be, due to its immanent-critical and theoretical character, an insignificant nuance of neo-Hegelianism or of the historically obsolete Hegelian Left; as if the Marxist critique of philosophy had dispensed with this, while simultaneously the East cannot do without a statutory Marxist philosophy. The demand for the unity of theory and praxis has irresistibly debased the former to a mere underling; removing from it what it was supposed to have achieved in that unity. The practical visa-stamp demanded from all theory became the censor’s stamp. In the famed unity of theory-praxis, the former was vanquished and the latter became non-conceptual, a piece of the politics which it was supposed to lead beyond; delivered over to power. The liquidation of theory by dogmatization and the ban on thinking contributed to bad praxis; that theory wins back its independence, is the interest of praxis itself. The relationship of both moments to each other is not settled for once and for all, but changes historically. Today, since the hegemonic bustle cripples and denigrates theory, theory testifies in all its powerlessness against the former by its mere existence.⁵

In this passage Adorno was addressing, not the Korsch of the 1923 “Marxism and Philosophy,” but rather the later Korsch of the 1930 “Anti-Critique,” distanced from the problem Adorno sought to address, of the constitutive non-identity of theory and practice. Adorno thought, like Korsch and Lukács in the early 1920s, that Lenin and Luxemburg’s theoretical self-understanding, together with their revolutionary political practice, comprised the most advanced attempt yet to work through precisely this non-identity.

In Adorno’s terms, both the later Korsch and official “Diamat” (including Lukács) assumed “identity thinking,” an identity of effective theory and practice, rather than their articulated non-identity, to which Korsch had drawn attention earlier in “Marxism and Philosophy.” Such constitutive non-identity was, according to Korsch’s earlier essay, expressed symptomatically, in the subsistence of “philosophy” as a distinct activity in the historical epoch of Marxism. This was because it expressed a genuine historical need. The continued practice of philosophy was symptomatic expression of the need to transcend and supersede philosophy. Instead of this recognition of the actuality of the symptom of philosophical thinking, of the mutually constitutive separation of theory and practice, Korsch, by embracing council communism and shunning Marxian theory in the years after writing his famously condemned work, succumbed to what Adorno termed “identity thinking.” By assuming the identity of theory and practice, or of social being and consciousness in the workers’ movement, Korsch sought their “reconciliation,” instead of discerning and critically grasping their persistent antagonism, as would necessarily be articulated in any purported politics of emancipation.

Just as Adorno tried to hold fast to the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness* in the face of Lukács’s own subsequent disavowals, the first sentence of Adorno’s *Negative Dialectics* reiterated Korsch’s statement in “Marxism and Philosophy” that, “Philosophy cannot be abolished without being realized” (97):

Philosophy, which once seemed outmoded, remains alive because the moment of its realization was missed. The summary judgment that it had merely interpreted the world is itself crippled by resignation before reality, and becomes a defeatism of reason after the transformation of the world failed.⁶

Philosophy’s end was its *self*-abolition. What Korsch prefaced to his statement helps to illuminate what Adorno meant. Korsch specified precisely what “the realization of philosophy” involves:

Just as political action is not rendered unnecessary by the economic action of a revolutionary class, so intellectual action is not rendered unnecessary by either political or economic action. On the contrary it must be carried through to the end in theory and practice, as revolutionary scientific criticism and agitational work before the seizure of state power by the working class, and as scientific organization and ideological dictatorship after the seizure of state power. If this is valid for intellectual action against the forms of consciousness which define bourgeois society in general, it is especially true of philosophical action. Bourgeois consciousness necessarily sees itself as apart from the world and independent of it, as pure critical philosophy and impartial science, just as the bourgeois State and bourgeois Law appear to be above society. This consciousness must be philosophically fought by the revolutionary materialistic dialectic, which is the philosophy of the working class. This struggle will only end when the whole of existing society and its economic basis have been totally overthrown in practice, and this consciousness has been totally surpassed and abolished in theory. (97)

This was the original Marxist “defense” of philosophy that Adorno reiterated in *Negative Dialectics*. Over four decades previously, in 1923, Korsch had explicitly tied it to Lenin’s treatment of the problem of the state in *The State and Revolution* (1917). Just as, with the overcoming of capitalism, the necessity of the state would “wither,” and not be done away with at one stroke, so too the necessity of “philosophical” thinking as it appeared in the epoch of capital would dissolve. This side of emancipation, “theoretical” self-reflection, thought’s reflecting on its own conditions of possibility, remains necessary, precisely because it expresses an unresolved social-historical problem.

In “Marxism and Philosophy,” Korsch analyzed Marxism as emergent from and historically continuous with the “revolt of the Third Estate,” of the “bourgeois”

liberal-democratic revolutionary epoch that preceded it. Korsch was concerned with Marx’s continuity with Kant and Hegel. A problem that occurred to them, namely, of theory and practice, repeated itself, if in a more acute way, for Marx. It is a problem of the philosophy of revolution, or of the “theory of social revolution.” This problem presents itself only insofar as it is conceived of as part and parcel of the social-historical process of transformation and not as contemplation from without. As it was for Hegel, Marx’s fundamental “philosophical” issue is this: How is it possible, if however problematic, to be a self-conscious agent of change, if what is being transformed includes oneself, or, more precisely, an agency that transforms conditions both for one’s practical grounding and for one’s theoretical self-understanding in the process of acting?

Korsch addressed the question of revolution as a problem indicated by the liquidation and reconstitution of “philosophy” itself after the crisis and “decay of Hegelianism” (“Marxism and Philosophy,” 29). Why did philosophical development take a hiatus by 1848 and only appear to resume afterwards? What changed about “philosophy” in the interim? For Korsch recognized there was a curious blank spot or gap in the history of philosophy from the 1840s–60s, the period of Marxism’s emergence. Korsch divided the relation of Marx’s thought to philosophy roughly into three periods: pre-1848, circa 1848, and post-1848. These periods were distinguished by the different ways they related theory and practice: the first period was the critique of philosophy calling for its simultaneous realization and self-abolition; the second, the sublimation of philosophy in revolution; and the third, the recrudescence of the problem of relating theory and practice.

Korsch’s third period in the history of Marxism extended into what he termed the “crisis of Marxism” beginning in the 1890s with the reformist “revisionist” dispute of Eduard Bernstein et al. against the “orthodox Marxism” of the Second International—when the “revolutionary Marxism” of Luxemburg and Lenin originated—and continuing into the acutely revolutionary period of 1917–19, from the Russian Revolution of 1917 through the German Revolution and civil war of 1918–19, to the Hungarian Soviet Republic (in which Lukács participated) and the workers’ council movement in Italy (in which Antonio Gramsci participated) in 1919.

It was in this revolutionary period of the early 20th century that “Marx’s Marxism” circa 1848 regained its saliency, but in ways that Korsch thought remained not entirely resolved as a matter of relating theory to practice. In “Marxism and Philosophy,” Korsch found that while Lenin and Luxemburg had tried to better relate Marxian theory and practice than Second International Marxism had done, they had recognized this as an on-going task and aspiration and not already achieved in some finished sense. In the words of the epigraph from Lenin that introduces Korsch’s 1923 essay, “We must organize a systematic study of the Hegelian dialectic from a materialist standpoint” (“On the Significance of Militant Materialism,” 1922). If Marxism continued to be subject to a “Hegelian dialectic,” thus requiring the “historical materialist” analysis and explanation that Korsch sought to provide of it, this was because it was not itself the reconciled unity of theory and practice but remained, as theory, the critical reflection on the *problem* of relating theory and practice—which in turn prompted further theoretical development as well as practical political advances. As Adorno put it to Walter Benjamin in a letter of August 2, 1935,

The fetish character of the commodity is not a fact of consciousness; rather it is dialectical, in the eminent sense that it produces consciousness.... [P]erfection of the commodity character in a Hegelian self-consciousness inaugurates the explosion of its phantasmagoria.⁷

Marxism was caught in the “phantasmagoria” of capital, while “exploding” it from within.

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

This transformation and development of Marxist theory has been effected under the peculiar ideological guise of a return to the pure teaching of original or true Marxism. Yet it is easy to understand both the reasons for this guise and the real character of the process which is concealed by it. What theoreticians like Rosa Luxemburg in Germany and Lenin in Russia have done, and are doing, in the field of Marxist theory is to liberate it from the inhibiting traditions of [Social Democracy]. They thereby answer the practical needs of the new revolutionary stage of proletarian class struggle, for these traditions weighed “like a nightmare” on the brain of the working masses whose objectively revolutionary socioeconomic position no longer corresponded to these [earlier] evolutionary doctrines. The apparent revival of original Marxist theory in the Third International is simply a result of the fact that in a new revolutionary period not only the workers’ movement itself, but the theoretical conceptions of communists which express it, must assume an explicitly revolutionary form. This is why large sections of the Marxist system, which seemed virtually forgotten in the final decades of the nineteenth century, have now come to life again. It also explains why the leader of the Russian Revolution [Lenin] could write a book a few months before October [*The State and Revolution*, 1917] in which he stated that his aim was “in the first place to *restore* the correct Marxist theory of the State”.... When Lenin placed the same question theoretically on the agenda at a decisive moment, this was an early indication that the internal connection of theory and practice within revolutionary Marxism had been consciously re-established. (67–68)

Korsch thus established the importance for what Adorno called the “historically changing” relation of theory and practice, making sense of their vicissitudes in the history of the politics of revolutionary Marxism. Furthermore, by establishing the character of the crisis of Marxism as a matter of theoretical reflection, Korsch re-established the role of consciousness in a Marxian conception of social revolution, why the abandonment or distancing of the practical perspective of revolution necessitates a degradation of theory.

Departing sharply from this perspective, in his 1930 “Anti-Critique,” Korsch wrote,

When the SPD became a “Marxist” party [a process completed with the Erfurt Programme written by Kautsky and Bernstein in 1891] a gap developed between its highly articulated revolutionary “Marxist” theory and a practice that was far behind this revolutionary theory; in some respects it directly contradicted it. This gap was in fact obvious, and it later came to be felt more and more acutely by all the vital

forces in the Party (whether on the Left or Right) and its existence was denied only by the orthodox Marxists of the Centre. This gap can easily be explained by the fact that in this historical phase “Marxism,” while formally accepted by the workers’ movement, was from the start not a true *theory*, in the sense of being “nothing other than a general expression of the real historical movement” (Marx). On the contrary it was always an *ideology* that had been adopted “from outside” in a pre-established form. In this situation such “orthodox Marxists” as Kautsky and Lenin made a permanent virtue out of a temporary necessity. They energetically defended the idea that socialism can only be brought to the workers “from outside,” by bourgeois intellectuals who are allied to the workers’ movement. This was also true of Left radicals like Rosa Luxemburg. (113–115)

According to Korsch, the Revolution of 1848 and the role of the workers’ movement in it had provided “a rational solution for all the mysteries” of the contradiction between theory and practice that later Second International Marxists tried to sidestep by simply adopting Marxism as an ideology. Korsch commented that,

[A]lthough [Second International Marxism’s] effective practice was now on a *broader basis* than before, it had in no way reached the *heights* of general and theoretical achievement earlier attained by the revolutionary movement and proletarian class struggle on a *narrower basis*. This height was attained during the final phase of the first major capitalist cycle that came to an end towards 1850. (116)

Since the mid-19th century, Marxism, according to the Korsch of the “Anti-Critique,” had grown ideological. Even Marx’s *Capital* expressed a certain degeneration:

[T]he *theory* of Marx and Engels was progressing towards an ever higher level of theoretical perfection although it was no longer directly related to the *practice* of the worker’s movement. (117)

In other words, the mature theory of Marx (and its development by Engels and their epigones) was itself “anachronistic” and thus unassimilable by the resurgent workers’ movement of the last third of the 19th century.

Korsch abandoned his 1923 conception of Lenin and Luxemburg’s rearticulation of 1848 in the theory and practice of 1917–19, the “transformation and development of Marxist theory... effected under the peculiar ideological guise of a return to the pure teaching of original or true Marxism.” Marx’s Marxism, especially in his mature writings, could only be the elaboration of 1848, in isolation from the workers’ subsequent actual political practice, to which it became ideologically blind and blinding. No adequate “theory,” that is, no “general expression of the real historical movement,” had emerged since. This non-identity and divergence of theory and practice that began in the period of Marx’s maturity and continued into the 20th century meant, for the Korsch of the 1930s, that Marxism, even in its most revolutionary forms, as with Lenin and Luxemburg, had developed, not to express, but rather to constrain the workers’ movement. Marxism had become an ideology whose value could only be relative, not qualitatively superior to others.⁸ When he died in 1961, Korsch was working on a study of Marx’s rival in the First International Workingmen’s Association, the anarchist Mikhail Bakunin.⁹ **IP**

1. Karl Marx’s Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859).

2. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, “Diskussion über Theorie und Praxis” (1956), quoted in Detlev Clausen, *Theodor W. Adorno: One Last Genius* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008), 233.

3. *Ibid.*, 233. Furthermore, while “Marx wrote his critique of the [SPD, German Social-Democratic Party’s] Gotha Programme in 1875[,] Adorno had for some time planned to write a critique of the Godesberg Programme [in which the SPD formally renounced Marxism in 1959]” [Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 598].

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

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

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

5. Translated by Dennis Redmond, 2001, <en.org/~dredmond/ndtrans.html>. The first sentence of this passage, mentioning Korsch, is inexplicably missing from the 1973 Continuum edition of *Negative Dialectics* translated by E. B. Ashton [see “Relation to Left-Wing Hegelianism,” 143].

6. Translated by Redmond, <en.org/~dredmond/ndtrans.html>.

7. Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, Vol. 3 (1935–38), [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002], 54–56; Theodor Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics* (London: Verso, 1980), 111–113.

8. Such eclecticism on the Left has only deepened and become more compounded since Korsch’s time, especially since the 1960s. However Marx may come up for periodic reconsideration, certain questions central to the Marxian problematic remain obscured. As Fredric Jameson has written,

A Marx revival seems to be under way, predating the current [2007–09] disarray on Wall Street, even though no clear-cut political options yet seem to propose themselves... The big ideological issues—anarchism, the party, economic planning, social classes—are still mainly avoided, on the grounds that they remind too many people of Communist propaganda. Such a reminder is unwanted, not so much because it is accompanied by the memory of deaths and violence... as simply and less dramatically because such topics now appear boring. [“Sandblasting Marx,” *New Left Review* 55 [Jan.–Feb. 2009]:134].

For further discussion of the fluctuating currency and fortunes of Marxian approaches as a feature of modern history, see my “Symptomology: Historical Transformations in Social-Political Context,” *The Platypus Review* 12 [May 2009].

9. A. R. Giles-Peter, “Karl Korsch: A Marxist Friend of Anarchism,” *Red & Black* [Australia] 5 [April 1973]. Available online at <geocities.com/capitolHill/Lobby/2379/korsch.htm>. According to Giles-Peter, Korsch came to believe that the “basis of the revolutionary attitude in the modern bourgeois epoch would be an ethic Marx would have rejected as ‘anarchist.’ ” and thus “explicitly rejected the elements of Marxism which separate it from anarchism.” As Korsch himself put it in, “Ten Theses on Marxism Today” [1950], translated by Giles-Peter in *Telos* 26 [Winter 1975–76] and available online at <libcom.org/library/ten-theses-korsch>.

Marx is today only one among the numerous precursors, founders and developers of the socialist movement of the working class. No less important are the so-called Utopian Socialists from Thomas More to the present. No less important are the great rivals of Marx, such as Blanqui, and his sworn enemies, such as Proudhon and Bakunin. No less important, in the final result, are the more recent developments such as German revisionism, French syndicalism, and Russian Bolshevism.