

## **Adorno's Marxism**

University of Chicago Doctoral Dissertation

**Christopher Cutrone**, Committee on the History of Culture

Theodor W. Adorno's writings comprise an attempted recovery of Marx for a dialectic of 20th Century social and cultural forms. Through immanent critique of modern aesthetic, philosophical, political and psychological forms of social subjectivity and its antinomies, contradictions and discontents, including those of ostensible Marxism, the thought figures of Adorno's essays are modeled after and attempt to elaborate Marx's self-reflexive critique of the subjectivity of the commodity form. Adorno's critical theory considers modern aesthetic form as social form. Following Marx, Adorno's critique of modern social forms is concerned with their potential for emancipation as well as domination: the term "culture industry," for instance, is meant to grasp comprehensively the context for the critical social object and form of aesthetic subjectivity in common for practices of both "hermetic" art and "popular" culture, and is meant to characterize the condition and possibility for critical subjectivity itself, including Adorno's own. In Adorno's essays, objects of cultural criticism become "prismatic," illuminating the formation of subjectivity and providing moments for critical reflection and recognition. However, Adorno's works faced and sought to provoke recognition of the possibility and reality of social regression as well as regression in thinking. Coming after the collapse of 2nd International Social Democracy in 1914 and the failure of world revolution 1917-19, and inspired by Georg Lukács and Karl Korsch's thought from this period, Adorno developed a critique of 20th Century society that sustained awareness of the problematic of Lenin, Luxemburg and Trotsky's Marxism. The coincidence of the later reception of Adorno's works with the emergence of social discontents, oppositions and transformations of the 1960s New Left and its aftermath, however, obscured Adorno's thought during two decades of "postmodernism," whose exhaustion opens possibilities for reconstruction of and development upon the coherence of Adorno's dialectic, as expression of the extended tasks and project of Marxism bequeathed by history to the present.

Committee: **Kenneth W. Warren**, chair (English, African-American Studies)

**Moishe Postone**, co-chair (History)

**James F. Lastra** (Cinema and Media Studies)

*Tasks and project*

Theodor W. Adorno to Walter Benjamin:

“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.” (August 2, 1935)

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“The proletariat . . . is itself a product of bourgeois society. . . . [T]he actual consciousness of actual workers . . . [has] absolutely no advantage over the bourgeois except . . . interest in the revolution, but otherwise bear[s] all the marks of mutilation of the typical bourgeois character. . . . We maintain our solidarity with the proletariat instead of making of our own necessity a virtue of the proletariat, as we are always tempted to do — the proletariat which itself experiences the same necessity and needs us for knowledge as much as we need the proletariat to make the revolution. I am convinced that the further development of the aesthetic debate you have so magnificently inaugurated depends essentially on a true accounting of the relationship of the intellectuals to the working class.” (March 18, 1936)

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“If [Walter] Benjamin said [in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History” (1940)] that history had hitherto been written from the standpoint of the victor, and needed to be written from that of the vanquished, we might add that knowledge must indeed present the fatally rectilinear succession of victory and defeat, but should also address itself to those things that were not embraced by this dynamic. . . . It is in the nature of the defeated to appear, in their impotence, irrelevant, eccentric, derisory. What transcends the ruling society is not only the potentiality it develops but also all that did not fit properly into the laws of historical movement. . . . Benjamin’s writings are an attempt in ever new ways to make philosophically fruitful what has not yet been foreclosed by great intentions. The task he bequeathed was not to abandon such an attempt to the estranging enigmas of thought alone, but to bring the intentionless within the realm of concepts: the obligation to think at the same time dialectically and undialectically.”

— Adorno, “Bequest” (1945), *Minima Moralia*

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“The objection has been raised that, because of its immanently critical and theoretical character, the turn to [the] nonidentity [of social being and consciousness] is an insignificant nuance of Neo-Hegelianism or of the historically obsolete Hegelian Left — as if Marxian criticism of philosophy were a dispensation from it. . . . Yet whereas theory succumbed . . . practice became nonconceptual, a piece of the politics it was supposed to lead out of; it became the prey of power. . . . The liquidation of theory by dogmatization and thought taboos contributed to the bad practice. . . . The interrelation of both moments [of theory and practice] is not settled once and for all but fluctuates historically. . . . Those who chide theory [for being] anachronistic obey the *topos* of dismissing, as obsolete, what remains painful [because it was] thwarted. They thus endorse the course of the world — defying which is the idea of theory alone. . . . If [one] resists oblivion — if he resists the universally demanded sacrifice of a once-gained freedom of consciousness — he will not preach a Restoration in the field of intellectual history. The fact that history has rolled over certain positions will be respected as a verdict on their truth content only by those who agree with Schiller that ‘world history is the world tribunal’. What has been cast aside but not absorbed theoretically will often yield its truth content only later. It festers as a sore on the prevailing health; this will lead back to it in changed situations.”

— Adorno, “Relation to Left-Wing Hegelianism,” *Negative Dialectic* (1966)