

WHEN I settle down to write to you, I feel somehow “freer” than usual. The reason, I suppose, is that most of the time I am writing for people whose ambiguities and values I imagine to be rather different from mine; but with you, I feel enough in common to allow us “to get on with it” in more positive ways.

— C. Wright Mills, “Letter to the New Left” (1960)

October 19, 2006

Dear readers,

This essay on “Adorno in 1969” is a draft of the conference paper I am to present on October 26 at Rethinking Marxism 2006 in Amherst, Massachusetts. It is an edited version of a dissertation chapter on which I am presently working. As such, certain stylistic aspects should be considered conditionally. Page number and footnote citations have been suppressed in the following text, and the paper has been shaped for the brevity of a short conference presentation. — However, the paper needs to be shortened further still, to about 15 pages (at most), or about 20 minutes of reading time.

I am seeking your critical feedback on the paper’s principal argument, as well as on its structure and presentation, both towards the immediate task of reading at Rethinking Marxism, and towards the greater chapter and dissertation project. This paper is excerpted from what will become the first chapter of my dissertation on Adorno’s Marxism.

I have struggled with my dissertation project on Adorno’s Marxism on two fronts: 1.) how best to recover Adorno’s work from its misappropriation towards poststructuralist and conservative philosophical critiques of enlightened Reason (including prioritizing his writings on aesthetics); and (most importantly for the purposes of this paper) 2.) how best to ground, specify, and follow Adorno’s recovery of the critical intent of Marxian theory and politics, and thus express how Adorno’s work continues to speak to the present.

With this paper, I am trying to motivate the examination of Adorno’s writings to follow.

Thank you very much for reading, and for any productive feedback you might offer.

I would like to thank especially my fellow University of Chicago graduate students and friends, and my students from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, who have helped me to think through these issues in a sustained manner and in greater intellectual and political context.

Sincerely yours,

Chris Cutrone

## **Adorno in 1969**

### **Adorno's Marxism and the problem and legacy of the 1960s Left in theory and practice**

Christopher Cutrone, University of Chicago Committee on the History of Culture

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#### **Introduction — *Précis***

A certain legend of the 1960s New Left has it that the Marxist critical theorist Theodor [Wiesengrund] Adorno had been hostile to student radicalism. This placed Adorno's legacy for progressive politics in doubt for at least two decades after 1969. Adorno had defended junior colleague Jürgen Habermas's warning of “left fascism” among 1960s student radicals, and challenged Herbert Marcuse’s support for student radicalism, questioning its emancipatory character. Adorno’s collaborator Max Horkheimer commented about the ’60s radicalism, “But is it really so desirable, this revolution?” Infamously, Adorno called the police to clear demonstrators from the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research in 1969. Students protested that “Adorno as an institution is dead.” Some months later, while hiking on vacation, Adorno suffered a heart attack and died.

Eulogizing Adorno in 1969, Habermas raised two issues for the post-1960s reception of Adorno's work: 1.) Adorno’s work was both inspiring and frustrating for the critique of modern society; and 2.) Adorno left little to suggest directions to take beyond a “meager reprise of Marxism.” Fredric Jameson and others began revisiting Adorno’s legacy around 1989, the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, to challenge the politics of postmodernism. The controversy over Adorno since the 1960s has been over the nature and character of Adorno's Marxism, which was formulated in the 1920s-30s, and has not been given a proper account.

**Habermas, “calling into his master’s open grave”**

Soon after Adorno died in 1969, Habermas wrote a eulogy to him titled “The Primal History of Subjectivity — Self-Affirmation Gone Wild.” — The title itself says quite a bit about Habermas’s thoughts and feelings about Adorno. In this eulogy, Habermas expressed his profound ambivalence towards both Adorno as a person and the legacy of his work. Habermas took this opportunity to offer a critique, one which had been clearly long in the making. This makes Habermas’s eulogy a document articulating and expressing profound frustration with Adorno, and indicative of the problems in the reception of Adorno’s work in the 1960s. Adorno’s death seemed to allow certain things to be put more directly. It was as if Adorno had been an enigmatic character taken away too soon, before revealing the mystery, but, also, as if his character had represented something of the block with which one was always struggling but failing to overcome. In this sense, it is unclear whether Adorno’s passing was regretted or welcomed by Habermas and others among Adorno’s students.

A central motif of Habermas’s eulogy to Adorno is the moment of Hegelian dialectic in which “what is disappearing [is regarded] as essential.” (This thought-figure is more well known by Hegel’s famous phrase that “the Owl of Minerva flies at dusk.”) For Habermas, Adorno was exemplary of “the bourgeois subject, apprehended in the process of disappearance,” “which is still for itself, but no longer in itself.” Habermas introduced Adorno’s character in order to explain the possibility for his work, in terms of an openness that Habermas found to be productive of real insights but also texts beset by “enchanted analyses:”

“In psychological terms . . . the incomparably brilliant geniality of Adorno has constantly evinced as well something of the awkward and fragile position of a subject still for itself but no longer in itself. Adorno never accepted the

alternatives of remaining childlike or growing up; he wanted neither to put up with infantilism nor to pay the cost of a rigid defense against regression. . . . In him there remained vivid a stratum of earlier experiences and attitudes. This sounding board reacted hyper-sensitively to a resistant reality, revealing the harsh, cutting, wounding dimensions of reality itself. This primary complex was [. . .] consistently in free communication with his thought — opened, as it were, to his intellect.”

In this characterization, Habermas rehearses a typical motif in the reception of Adorno’s work, that Adorno, as a last “Mandarin” intellectual, was grounded in his critical theory in an earlier historical epoch, namely the liberal capitalism of the 19th Century. However, what this fails to consider is that the formative experiences for Adorno’s thought were those that defined 20th Century history: 20th Century capitalism is the central object for Adorno’s thought, and one in which he himself is implicated, and not at all out of his element, as Habermas’s characterization would suppose.

Habermas concluded his eulogy with a salute to Adorno, that his “aid [had been] indispensable” to understanding the “situation” of the present. — But this “situating” of the present is understood as a matter of history [that is] decidedly past. However, Habermas was also anxious to defend Adorno against the criticisms of some of his more “impatient” students in 1969 — for, as Habermas put it, “they do not realize all that they are incapable of knowing in the present state of affairs.” This was the basis for Habermas’s defense the “rational core” of Adorno’s critical theory, against the confusions that Habermas found to arise from his writings.

“All that they are incapable of knowing” — for Habermas, Adorno’s critical theory had failed to render the social world of 1969 critically intelligible (to his students). At best, Adorno’s

work brought to manifest and acute presentation what had yet to be understood; at worst, it contributed to false understanding — hence, Habermas’s ambivalence. Habermas was anxious to preserve something of Adorno’s critical theory, in this way defending it against itself. Reading Habermas’s eulogy today, precisely what the rational core of Adorno’s critical theory might have been to Habermas proves to be elusive — it was something that had proved elusive to Habermas as well, for he did not himself offer the answers that Adorno’s work had supposedly failed to provide. The equivocal position in which Habermas left himself in this moment of Adorno’s passing was one of sympathizing with the criticism leveled against Adorno’s work, that “the theory that apprehended the totality of society as untrue would actually be a theory of the impossibility of theory. The material content of the theory of society would then also be relatively meager, a reprise of the Marxist doctrine.” Even so, Habermas apparently knew that such an apprehension was not quite right — the summary phrase “would then” holds Habermas’s own authorial voice at a certain remove from such a conclusion.

The “meager reprise of Marxism” — this was Habermas’s way of addressing the theoretical tradition from which Adorno’s thought originated, and which was experiencing a certain (if ambiguous) renaissance during the final years of Adorno’s life: the “New” Left. For the late 1960s saw the beginning of the last important “return to Marx,” which regained the saliency of Adorno’s critical theory, even if this reconsideration of Marxian critical theory in its greater measure had to wait until Adorno had already passed from the stage. Habermas acknowledged this problematic moment of 1968-69 when Adorno’s critical theory was confronted by the demand from his students not only for social *theory* but, more emphatically, for social *transformation* and *emancipation*. Cautioning against the conclusion that Adorno’s critical theory had resigned from changing the world, Habermas wrote that “after Adorno’s

opening talk to the sixteenth German Congress of Sociology in 1968 on ‘Late Capitalism or Industrial Society’ [and translated and published in English that same year in the journal *Diogenes* under the title “Is Marx Obsolete?”], one could not maintain this [criticism of Adorno] in the same fashion.”

But Habermas added immediately that “however, the point [of this criticism] remains.” Habermas cited contemporary criticism of Adorno [and of his collaborator on *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and prior director of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, Max Horkheimer], for instance by Adorno’s student Albrecht Wellmer, of “the danger that arises when the dialectic of enlightenment is misunderstood as a generalization[,] in the field of [the] philosophy of history[,] of the critique of political economy[,] and tacitly substituted for it. Then . . . the critique of the instrumental spirit can serve as the key to a critique of ideology, to a depth hermeneutics[,] that starts from arbitrary objectifications of the damaged life [this was a reference to the subtitle of Adorno’s famous book *Minima Moralia*, “notes from damaged life”], that is self-sufficient and no longer in need of an empirical development of social theory.” — Such a misunderstanding was one into which, however, Habermas maintained, “Adorno never let himself fall.”

On the other hand, Habermas did object to the fact that it “was [seemingly] sufficient for [Adorno] to bring in a little too precipitously the analyses handed down from Marx,” adding that “Adorno was never bothered by political economy.” Habermas resolved that “the decodifying of the objective spirit by ideology critique, to which Adorno had turned all his energy in such a remarkable way, can be easily confused with a theory of late-capitalist society,” a theory to whose lack Habermas attributed the problems and the aporetic, confounding character of social discontents and rebellion in 1969 — “all that they are incapable of knowing.”

Habermas seemed to have laid at least some of the blame for the inadequate nature of such self-understanding and expressions of social discontents in the 1960s at the door of the preceding generation of critical theorists, and his eulogy expressed frustration with Adorno's work as exemplary of this failure. Habermas expressed sympathy with the gesture of Adorno's student who had "called into his master's open grave, [that] 'He practiced an irresistible critique of the bourgeois individual, and yet he was himself caught within its ruins'." While stating that this statement was "quite true," Habermas observed soberly that the demand that Adorno "strip away the last layer of his 'radicalized bourgeois character' " had been an impossible one. Still, the student's accusation struck home, for Habermas ventured "that praxis miscarries may not be attributed to the historical moment alone" — precisely what Habermas thought Adorno had attributed to his own social-historical situation as a critical theorist. Instead, Habermas considered "the imperfection of [Adorno's Marxist] theory," and wished to caution against any possible direct appropriation of Adorno's work: Habermas qualified Adorno's critical legacy with this certain reservation: against (what could only be) a "meager reprise" of Marxism.

However, the nature and character of Habermas's reservations about Adorno, as a person and as a critical theorist, the "enchanted" puzzle of Adorno's thought that Habermas sought deliberately to place to one side in moving forward from him, might have resulted from Habermas's — and others' — misapprehension of the foundation of Adorno's critical theory itself. For thought-figures seeking to elaborate Marx's critique of social modernity — capitalism — permeate literally every phrase in Adorno's corpus. To grasp this requires more direct attention to the formative moment of Adorno's thought than has been attempted.

### The Origins of Adorno's Marxism

The Bolshevik Revolution of October 1917 was the formative event of the 20th Century. The emancipatory moment of the Russian Revolution was the lodestar not only for all subsequent Marxism but specifically for the Marxian critical theory of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, including the works of Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, Herbert Marcuse, and Adorno, as it was indeed the orienting phenomenon for all thinkers on the Left — and the Right. The trajectory of the Russian Revolution and subsequent Soviet history, and the manifold phenomena of post-1917 international Communism formed the axial core for the social and political theory and practice of the 20th Century. From a decade after 1917, in Horkheimer's aphoristic writings from 1926-31 published under the title *Dämmerung* (either "Twilight" or "Dawn") in 1934, after the demise of the Weimar Republic, we read that

"The moral character of a person can be infallibly inferred from his response to certain questions. . . . In 1930 the attitude toward Russia casts light on people's thinking. It is extremely difficult to say what conditions are like there. I do not claim to know where the country is going; there is undoubtedly much misery. . . . The senseless injustice of the imperialist world can certainly not be explained by technological inadequacy. Anyone who has the eyes to see will view events in Russia as the continuing painful attempt to overcome this terrible social injustice. At the very least, he will ask with a throbbing heart whether it is still under way. If appearances were to be against it, he will cling to this hope like the cancer patient to the questionable report that a cure for his illness may have been found.

When Kant received the first news of the French Revolution [of 1789], he is said to have changed the direction of his customary stroll from then on."

In 1919 Horkheimer had been in Munich during the short-lived Munich Council/Soviet Republic that was inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution, and he had to flee from the violence of its counterrevolutionary suppression. The trajectory of revolution, counterrevolution and reaction, of world war and civil war, formed the substance of the concerns of Marxism in the 20th Century, including that of the Frankfurt School.

At the time of the October Revolution, Adorno (b. 1903) was 14 years old. At the close of the potentially revolutionary crisis in Germany that came at the end of the war, during the revolt, civil war and counterrevolutionary violence that was precipitated, Adorno was 15. He had been too young for military service and therefore did not experience directly the radicalization that the German defeat in the war brought in 1918-19, as, for instance, Horkheimer and Marcuse had. (Marcuse participated in the workers' and soldiers' councils that sprung up at the time of the Kaiser's abdication at the end of 1918, and in the Spartacist uprising of the terminal, radical phase of the crisis in early 1919, during which time the most famous radical Marxists in Germany, the leaders of the Spartacus League and founders of the German Communist Party, such as Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg and her partner Leo Jogiches, were murdered by Social-Democratic government-mandated *Freikorps* counterrevolutionary death squads.) By contrast, during this time the teenage Adorno was still living in his relatively quiescent hometown of Frankfurt, being tutored in philosophy by his family's friend Siegfried Kracauer, with whom he discussed Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

However, Adorno was the thinker in Frankfurt School Critical Theory whose work most consistently incorporates the concerns and critically reflects upon the legacy of the emancipatory potential expressed by the moment of 1917-19/21; such concerns and reflections were sustained in Adorno's work through his very last writings of 1968-69.

The writings of Adorno's last year, [1968-69,] the time of the climax and crisis of the 1960s "New" Left, help to define and evaluate the terms of the late reception of Adorno's work after his death, that was informed by the aftermath of the 1960s Left. The politics informing Adorno's work is obscured behind the 1960s, for Adorno's Marxism was formulated in the 1920s-30s, the period of social and political crisis in the wake of the revolutions of 1917-19.

The Bolshevik Revolution and the radicalism of its historical moment had prompted a "return to Marx" in the early 1920s whose most brilliant expositions were made by Georg Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) and Karl Korsch in "Marxism and Philosophy" (1923). Both these sought to recover the critical intent and purchase of Marx's theory and politics in the aftermath of the collapse of international Social Democracy and the failure of global anticapitalist revolution in 1917-19. Their work, inspired by and picking up from the radical Left of pre-war international Social Democracy that informed the Bolshevik Revolution, the politics of both the Bolsheviks and Rosa Luxemburg's Spartacists, provide the departure for subsequent, "Frankfurt School" critical theory. The ultimate failure of the anticapitalist revolution that had opened most fully in Russia, but also manifested significantly elsewhere, prompted critical reflection on the social-emancipatory content of Marxist politics, in hope of its further development. However, because of the contrast of such radically searching work with the stifling political repression of Stalinist reaction in Russia under the rubric of "orthodoxy" after 1924, this critical Marxism came to be known by the misnomer of "Western" Marxism, which developed under conditions of relative freedom outside the "Communist" world. Beginning in the 1920s-30s, and extending through the 1960s, Adorno's work sought to sustain this critical "return to Marx" in the period of triumphant counterrevolution that characterized the high 20th Century.

In this period, Marxism itself became an affirmative ideology of reactionary, “advanced” capitalism, for its emancipatory content — and hence its profoundest critique of modern society — was lost. Just as Marx’s thought originated in the attempt at the critique, from within, of the Left of the 19th Century, the modern socialist workers movement. Marx had tried to develop a self-reflexive and critical Leftist politics for overcoming capitalism immanently. For the same reasons, Adorno’s thought, his sustained engagement with the critical theory of 20th Century capitalism, necessarily pursued the immanent critique of Marxism. Hence, Adorno’s work is an attempt to “recover” Marx under more “advanced” conditions, and thus bring to conscious expression the esoteric content of Marxist politics. However, because of the compromised nature of the ostensibly Marxist politics of his time, the evacuation of the social-emancipatory content of Marxism, Adorno’s work took the form of “critical theory,” the attempt to register the disparity between theory and practice, indicating this by provoking the critical recognition not only of how Marxism had failed, but how it might yet point beyond itself.

The “return to Marx” that occurred in the two periods of the 1920s-30s and the 1960s-70s can be characterized well by referring to certain seminal statements, such as found in writings by Korsch and Lukács from the early 1920s, and by C. Wright Mills, Louis Althusser, Martin Nicolaus, and Leszek Kolakowski from the 1960s. Bringing these into communication with Adorno’s later work, including key passages from Adorno’s last completed major work, *Negative Dialectic*, published in 1966, and works from 1968-69, most especially his speech on “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society,” his essays “Subject and Object” and “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis” (which Adorno regarded as extensions of his *Negative Dialectic* project), and one of his last published articles, on “Resignation,” illuminates the social-political desiderata of Adorno’s Marxism through his very last writings. The last letters between Adorno and Marcuse,

in which they debated the merits of the 1960s Left, help situate Adorno's Marxism and the state of its legacy today to the extent that we might recognize the history for problems of any possible "Left" for our present in Adorno's critical prognosis on the 1960s.

### **The "New" Left of the 1960s (1): motivations for a "return to Marx"**

The prominent American sociologist C. Wright Mills can be credited with promulgating the term "New Left" in a sustained manner from an early date. In 1960, Mills wrote a letter to the newly founded British journal *New Left Review* (which took its name from its combination of the previous publications *Universities and Left Review* and *The New Reasoner* — *New Left Review*'s first editor, Stuart Hall, wrote in his "Introduction to *New Left Review*" that "the political discussion which those two journals have begun, and the contacts they have made are the basis of the New Left," thus coining the term for which the 1960s Left would be known.) In his "Letter" Mills delivered a series of suggestions and caveats to the younger generation of self-styled Leftists. Mills's "Letter" is an excellent text for grappling with issues for the emergence of the 1960s New Left. Mills accounted for the emergence of a "New" Left in the crisis of liberalism, at the levels both of ideology and practical politics, manifesting in a combination of what he termed the "liberal rhetoric and conservative default" that amounted to political "irresponsibility." Directing his comments specifically to his British readers and their Labor Party, Mills took issue with the attenuated politics of contemporary socialism, afflicted by, as he termed it, a "labor metaphysic." The politics of this "labor metaphysic," while apparently privileging the working class as "*the* historic agency of change," in actuality treated the workers merely as "The Necessary Lever," really the object and not, as was claimed, the subject of socialist politics. — So what would be the adequate "subject" of emancipatory politics? For

Mills, it was precisely discontented consciousness, in the forms taken by ideology. For this reason, Mills's greatest ire was reserved for "end of ideology" Cold War liberalism (and social democracy). He castigated "end of ideology" writers like apostate Marxist (and Adorno's former research assistant) Daniel Bell for their "attack on Marxism . . . in the approved style" of Cold War liberalism. Mills complained that

"these people have become aware of the uselessness of Vulgar Marxism, but not yet aware of the uselessness of the liberal rhetoric. . . . '[A]nswers' to vital and pivotal issues are merely assumed. Thus political bias masquerades as epistemological excellence, and there are no orienting theories."

Citing Marx repeatedly throughout his "Letter," Mills encouraged his readers to the return to Marx, if not to "Vulgar Marxism." Most remarkably, Mills inveighed in favor of the most radical politics of 20th Century Marxism:

"Forget Victorian Marxism [i.e., the late 19th Century Marxism of social democracy], except whenever you need it; and read Lenin again (be careful) — Rosa Luxemburg, too."

Thus the important thrust of Mills's "Letter" is its emphasis on the importance of ideology for Leftist politics. What was vital for Mills was the question of social imagination. Mills's acute term for this attention to ideology was "utopianism." "Utopianism" was necessitated, in Mills's view, precisely by the erosion of the prior established agencies for social and political change, the voluntary civic associations that had characterized liberal politics, and the workers movement that had characterized socialist politics. With the evacuation of such mediating institutions of social agency, the Left was left waiting for a return to a past historical formation, a turning of the historical tide back to past forms of social struggle and agency. Mills

remained agnostic on the forms that future social struggles might take: he was not excluding the workers. In the meantime, however, Mills suggested attention to the forms of discontent that had manifested in the post-WWII period, which he found among “intellectuals.” It would appear that it was in this spirit that Mills encouraged reconsideration of prior generations of radicalized Marxist intellectuals, such as Luxemburg and Lenin, against the quiescent “labor metaphysic” of the “Vulgar Marxism” in Western Social Democracy and Soviet-inspired Communism that had become uncritical, and hence implicated in political “irresponsibility.”

Steering clear of the vulgarized Marxism of their moment after 1917-19, the recognition of the importance of critical consciousness had been formative for the thought of Frankfurt School critical theorists like Adorno in the 1920s-30s. As pointed out by the historian of the Frankfurt Institute Helmut Dubiel [in *Theory and Politics*], as regards the role of consciousness, there had been no difference between Luxemburg and Lenin. From early on, the Frankfurt School critical theorists shared this perspective with their more directly political Marxist forebears.

“[The] ascription of a continuum — that is, of a mediated identity — between proletarian class consciousness and socialist theory — united even such [apparently] divergent positions as those of Rosa Luxemburg and Lenin. . . . Georg Lukács formulated this conception in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). Although this idea was traditionally held by the socialist intelligentsia [. . .] [this] speculative identity of class consciousness and social theory formed the self-consciousness of those socialist intellectuals who were not integrated into the SPD [German Social-Democratic Party] and KPD [German Communist Party] in the 1920s.”

By comparison, the Marxist “orthodoxy” of both Stalinized international Communism and rump, post-WWI Social Democracy became ensnared in the antinomy presented by the contradiction — the important, constitutive non-identity — of social being and consciousness, practice and theory (or, as in debates around historic Bolshevism, spontaneity and organization), whose dialectic had motivated the critical consciousness of practice for Marx as well as [for] the radicals in pre-1914 Social Democracy like Luxemburg and Lenin. As Karl Korsch put it in “Marxism and Philosophy” (1923),

“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.”

The Left is tasked with discovering the basis for its own discontents. Usually, this has taken the form of imputing interests to classes, but in the 20th Century this became an evasion and abdication of critical consciousness, and Marxism became an affirmative ideology for society based on and social existence justified through “labor.”

Among the thinkers who tried to break out of this quandary of self-understanding for critical consciousness that beset “orthodox” Marxism in the 20th Century, among the younger radicalized intelligentsia that Mills had seen in motion throughout the world by 1960 — on both sides of the “irresponsible” Cold War divide — one was the dissident Marxist [associated with the liberalizing Gomulka regime in Poland,] Leszek Kolakowski. Kolakowski and other dissident (and not yet apostate) Marxists in Eastern Europe were those who, as the former

member of the Communist Party of Great Britain E. P. Thompson put it, “were present at every moment in [the] political consciousness” of Western Leftists, especially after the crisis of international Communism in 1956 that had come with the Khrushchev “revelations” of Stalin’s crimes and with the suppression of the Hungarian revolt (in which Marxist radicals of the preceding generation like Lukács had also participated).

Kolakowski’s essay “The Concept of the Left” (1968) emphasizes the productive role of ideology for the Left, stating that

“The concept of the Left remains unclear to this day. . . . Society cannot be divided into a Right and a Left. . . . The Left must define itself on the level of ideas . . . the Left must be defined in intellectual and not class terms. This presupposes that intellectual life is not and cannot be an exact replica of class interests. . . . The Left . . . takes an attitude of permanent revisionism toward reality . . . the Left strives to base its prospects on the experience and evolutionary tendencies of history [rather than] capitulation toward the situation of the moment. For this reason the Left can have a political ideology. . . . The Left is always to the left in certain respects with relation to some political movements. . . the Left is the fermenting factor in even the most hardened mass of the historical present.”

Against the naturalization of “class interests” that confounded emancipatory politics for advanced, 20th Century capitalism, Kolakowski maintained that it was not society that was divided into Right and Left but ideology. Kolakowski recognized the Left as the critical element in progressive politics at the level of consciousness, and as such destined to remain always a spirited “minority.”

Kolakowski recognized the non-identity of social being and consciousness, of practice and theory, through his concept of “utopia,” which he described as a necessary “tool” of the Left.

“By utopia I mean a state of social consciousness, a mental counterpart to the social movement striving for radical change in the world — a counterpart itself inadequate to these changes and merely reflecting them in idealized and obscure form. . . . Utopia is therefore a mysterious consciousness of an actual historical tendency. . . . [Hence] the Left cannot renounce utopia; it cannot give up goals that are, for the time being, unattainable, but which impart meaning to social changes.”

Utopian consciousness, as a “tool,” is not a *subject*, but it might be an *agency*, however an indirect one; indeed, “as a “tool,” it would mediate the subjectivity and objectivity of critical consciousness and social practice. As Kolakowski put it, “revolution is a compromise between utopia and history.” However, Kolakowski recognized the importance that critical consciousness of emancipatory potential antedate social-transformative practice,

“A revolutionary movement cannot be born simultaneously with the act of revolution, for without a revolutionary movement to precede it a revolution would never come about. . . . The desire for revolution cannot be born only when the situation is ripe, because among the conditions for this ripeness are the revolutionary demands made of an unripe reality.”

Hence the necessity of a critical consciousness that cannot account for itself in terms of the expression of the present simply and directly, but only in terms of the present’s non-identity — its contradiction — with itself. For Kolakowski, this is expressed precisely in the contradiction

between consciousness and “reality” that takes the form of “utopia,” for consciousness can be nothing other than a constitutive part of the reality that produces the conception of “utopia.”

Such recovery of the essentially critical, intellectually provocative role of the Left was motivated precisely by the attempt to see beyond the “present,” and conditioned by Kolakowski’s recognition that Soviet Communism had long since become implicated and responsible for the status quo. The reconsideration of Marx that could be motivated through the emphasis on ideology, on the critical aspects of his work for provoking consciousness of unfulfilled possibility, was marked by the writings of dissident French Communist Louis Althusser and others such as André Gorz and Martin Nicolaus, those who had been termed (for instance by the president of the U.S. Students for a Democratic Society Carl Oglesby) “neo-Marxists.” Modern Marxism, to remain critical, was tasked with pursuing recognition of its constitutive conditions, the conditions of possibility for critical consciousness.

Nicolaus’s 1968 essay on “The Unknown Marx” (1968) sought to recover neglected aspects of Marx’s thought on the basis of the study of Marx’s *Grundrisse*, a collection of unpublished writings from Marx’s notebooks that Nicolaus acknowledges had garnered little substantial attention, and hitherto only by writers such as Gorz and Marcuse, “among a growing body of intellectuals, in the amorphous New Left.” Nicolaus arrayed Marx’s mature writings, using the *Grundrisse* to inform his approach, against interpretations derived primarily from Marx’s more influential early writings such as the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, and concluded that “the most important Marxist political manifesto remains to be written.” Reading Marx’s *Grundrisse*, Nicolaus sought to recover a perspective for revolutionary transformation precisely of “advanced” capitalism. Opposing the conclusions of the book *Monopoly Capital* by fellow New Leftists Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy, Nicolaus concluded that

“all of the obstacles to revolution, such as those which Baran and Sweezy cite, namely monopoly, conquest of the world market, advanced technology, and a working class more prosperous than in the past, are only the preconditions which make revolution possible.”

Nicolaus pointed out pithily that Baran and Sweezy’s “conclusion” that revolution in advanced capitalism was impossible was actually the premise of their work. This was an abdication of the necessary work for a critical theory and politics of advanced capitalism, because an abdication of self-reflexivity in critical consciousness, the task of critical self-recognition, and hence the reduction of consciousness to positivistic analysis divorced from any necessary connection to possible emancipatory social-political agency.

Among Marx’s writings, Nicolaus recognized only the “Critique of the Gotha Programme” (1875) as indicating a developed political direction from Marx’s mature works:

“Apart from the brief *Critique of the Gotha Programme* there exists no programmatic political statement which is based squarely on the theory of surplus value, and which incorporates Marx’s theory of capitalist breakdown as it appears in the *Grundrisse*.”

Nicolaus recognized that in the “Critique of the Gotha Programme” Marx objected to re-assimilating socialist politics back into the mere politics of the interests of the workers as such. The German Social Democrats whose program Marx took to task were bewildered by his critique. The importance of Marx’s “Critique” was recovered in the context of the crisis of Social Democracy during WWI and mostly as a result of the Bolshevik Revolution and the concomitant radicalization of Marxism, which motivated a reevaluation of the critical relation between Marx’s work and subsequent Marxist politics, a reconsideration that Luxemburg had

commenced earlier. For example, Korsch had written an important introduction to the republication of Marx's "Critique" in 1922, who called it "of all Karl Marx's shorter works, the most complete, lucid and forceful expression of the bases and consequences of his economic and social theory." At the time of its writing, however, the depth of Marx's "Critique" was not recognized by the "Marxists." August Bebel, one of the principal leaders of German Social Democracy, remarked of it only that "One can see that it was no easy thing to reach agreement with the two old men [Marx and Engels] in London."

### **The "New" Left of the 1960s (2): the politics and intellectual pitfalls of post-Marxism**

Examples of the similar kinds of obscuring of the social-emancipatory content of Marxian critical theory, and the blind alleys in which contemporary Marxists had found themselves can be drawn from writings of the late 1960s by Adorno's long-time colleague and friend Marcuse, such as his lecture on "The End of Utopia" (1967) and his interview in *New Left Review* on "The Question of Revolution" (1967). "The End of Utopia" begins with the following broadside against Marx:

"I believe that even Marx was still too tied to the notion of a continuum of progress, that even his idea of socialism may not yet represent, or no longer represent, the determinate negation of capitalism it was supposed to. That is, today the notion of the end of utopia implies the necessity of at least discussing a new definition of socialism. The discussion would be based on the question whether decisive elements of the Marxian concept of socialism do not belong to a now obsolete stage in the development of the forces of production. This obsolescence is expressed most clearly, in my opinion, in the distinction between

the realm of freedom and the realm of necessity according to which the realm of freedom can be conceived of and can exist only beyond the realm of necessity. This division implies that the realm of necessity remains so in the sense of a realm of alienated labor, which means, as Marx says, that the only thing that can happen within it is for labor to be organized as rationally as possible and reduced as much as possible. But it remains labor in and of the realm of necessity and thereby unfree. I believe that one of the new possibilities, which gives an indication of the qualitative difference between the free and the unfree society, is that of letting the realm of freedom appear within the realm of necessity — in labor and not only beyond labor.”

Thus Marcuse’s articulation expresses precisely the kind of “labor metaphysic” about which Mills had warned, the political incoherence that manifested with the attenuation of historical agencies of social change like the socialist working class movement — and the dearth of political imagination that Nicolaus marked, what stood in need of commensuration with Marx’s mature insights into the implications of the surplus-value dynamic of capitalism found in the *Grundrisse*. Concomitantly, in “The Question of Revolution,” Marcuse stated that “the conception of freedom by which revolutionaries and revolutions were inspired is suppressed in the developed industrialized countries with their rising standard of living.” Marcuse’s late writings thus belied the kind of conflation Kolakowski had critiqued, the inadequate conception of the Left that derived principally from the status of empirical social groups (e.g., classes) rather than from the very ideological dynamics of social consciousness. — Marcuse manifested precisely the failure of imagination decried by Mills.

For example, Marcuse made much of the brute oppression and (supposed) stark life-and-death struggle of the people of Vietnam and others in the Third World as a salutary factor for emancipatory politics:

“the revolutionary concept of freedom coincides with the necessity to defend naked existence: in Vietnam as much as in the slums and ghettos of the rich countries.”

By characterizing the military campaigns of the North Vietnamese Communist regime and the National Liberation Front in South Vietnam in terms of a defense of naked existence, Marcuse evacuates politics, with the result of eliminating any potential basis for a critique of these struggles, and crudely instrumentalizing the horror of their realities. Similarly, Adorno’s student Oskar Negt had characterized the war in Vietnam as “the abstract presence of the Third World in the metropolis.”

The German New Leftist Rudi Dutschke, in his 1968 essay on “Historical Conditions for the International Fight for Emancipation,” wrote of the war in Vietnam as “an intellectual productive force in the process of the development of an awareness of the antinomies of the present-day world.” Dutschke went so far as to say that it was “through lectures, discussions, films, and demonstrations” that “Vietnam became a living issue for us,” thereby blurring contemplative imagery and brute realities. Adorno questioned the direct connection between the anti-imperialist politics of the Vietnamese Communists and the discontents of the students. In his 1969 essay on “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis” (included as the last selection, one of the two “Dialectical Epilegomena” to *Critical Models: Catchwords*, the last collection of essays he edited for publication) Adorno laconically remarked that “it would be difficult to argue that Vietnam is robbing anyone of sleep, especially since any opponent of colonial wars knows that

the Vietcong for their part practice Chinese methods of torture,” repeating language he had used in one of his last letters to Marcuse questioning Marcuse’s less than critical support for late-’60s student radicalism.

In his letters to Marcuse, Adorno defended the record of the re-founded, post-WWII Frankfurt Institute for Social Research for its continuity with the formative politics of the 1920s-30s that had sustained the coherence of its work in the years of American emigration from the 1930s through the early ’50s. Adorno pointed out that the differences of the Institute in the ’60s from the ’30s were attributable, on the one hand, to the character of the official funding they received that demanded a specific focus on empirical sociological studies, but also, on the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, to the fact that whereas “in New York. . . . we were able to draw together a large number of more or less mature intellectuals, most of whom had worked together for quite some time; here we had to train up all the affiliates ourselves.” Nevertheless, Adorno demanded that Marcuse recognize how the re-founded Institute in Frankfurt allowed for the continuation of Adorno’s own work: “Not to mention my books.” Taking Marcuse to task on the issue of support for the student movement/New Left, Adorno sums up their differences as follows:

“You think that praxis — in its emphatic sense — is not blocked today; I think differently. I would have to deny everything that I think and know about the objective tendency if I wanted to believe that the student protest movement in Germany had even the tiniest prospect of effecting a social intervention.”

Adorno had argued the reasons for such an estimation of political possibilities in his last major monograph, *Negative Dialectic* (1966). There, Adorno argued for critical theory in the context

of attenuated conditions for emancipatory social-political transformative practice — as Mills had argued in his 1960 “Letter to the New Left.”

While Adorno had indeed supported the earlier configuration of student protest in 1968, in tandem with workers’ organizations, against the proposed “emergency laws” [*Notstandgesetze*] in the Federal Republic of Germany, by 1969, as Adorno pointed out, the student movement was in crisis and sought provocations to sustain its existence. Directly addressing the infamous incident in which he called the police to clear the Institute of demonstrators, Adorno responded to Marcuse:

“You write that my letter gave no indication of the reasons for the students’ hostility towards the Institute. There were no such reasons until the occupation. This took place once they had calculated that we were under compulsion to call the police. Given the slackening interest of the students in the protest movement, it was the only means to achieve some sort of solidarity. [The radical student leader Hans-Jürgen] Krahl [one of Adorno’s doctoral students] calculated that quite correctly. You would not have been able to act any differently in our position; the case cited by you, ‘if there is a real threat of physical injury to persons, and of the destruction of material and facilities serving the educational function of the university’ was exactly applicable here. What you call their hostility towards the Institute stems simply from the fact that we reacted in accordance with the provocation.”

Next to the empirical stakes of the social-political struggles of the 1920s-30s, the global economic crisis of the Great Depression, rise of fascism, the Spanish Civil War, the turbulence of the politics of the Popular Front, the Purge Trials in the Soviet Union, and the resumption of

world war, the social-political stakes and direction of the “New” Left of the 1960s were quite unclear, apart from some traditional Leftist positions to be taken such as defense of democratic rights and civil liberties, and opposition to war (especially to [neo-] colonial adventures). The Cold War was a highly distorting framework through which any social and political discontents had to pass, both in the United States and in West Germany. Adorno and Marcuse contrasted the conditions in the U.S. and the B.R.D. by reference to the struggle against anti-black racism in the U.S., which lent the radicalism there a more serious — and grave — character. By comparison, it was easy to regard the student radicalism in Germany as being more infantile in character. Nevertheless, the point would have been to discern the actual ground for the discontents that were manifesting. The categories offered by the prime activists of the German movement like Dutschke had to strike Adorno as evidence among the student radicals of the severe regression in critical consciousness the greater society had exhibited.

In a letter to Adorno, Marcuse tried to maintain that activists like Daniel Cohn-Bendit, who had publicly castigated Marcuse at a lecture for his work for the Office of Strategic Services (predecessor in the U.S. government to the CIA) during WWII, were isolated and minor figures in the movement of student radicals. But Adorno had perceived something more significant in the kind of “political” action advocated by Cohn-Bendit and Dutschke, especially in its self-conception, an idealistic “intransigence” that was grounded more in ethical posturing than in authentic self-recognition. As Cohn Bendit put it, in his 1968 book on *Obsolete Communism: A Left-Wing Alternative*, a retrospective account of the May 1968 events in France in which Cohn-Bendit had participated, “Make the revolution here and now.” Cohn-Bendit spurned the idea of revolutionary organization precisely because his conception was for an unceasing “revolution” in

everyday life that had more to do with rejecting the “deadly love-making on the [cinema] screen” than with actual politics. On the other hand, this is how Dutschke put it:

“The underprivileged in the whole world constitute the historical mass base of liberation movements. In them alone lies the subversive-explosive character of the international revolution”

Dutschke cited favorably the Maoist conception of the politics of “Third World” liberation, arguing that the actual movement in struggle, the “mass character and the permanence of the revolutionary process” had transfigured and qualified the character of the otherwise clearly Stalinist (or worse) politics that led these movements. So the heroism of the Vietnamese against the U.S. — or of the students’ actions in “the streets” against the police — placed to one side the serious political problems of any attempts at radical social transformation in Vietnam — and Germany, France, and the U.S., etc. On both counts, in the guise of the anarchistic Cohn-Bendit or the New-Leftist Marxist Dutschke, Adorno had good grounds to interrogate the claims to actual social “radicalism” of the student activists. Even Marcuse acknowledged, in one of his 1969 letters to Adorno, a fatal mixture, “Rational and irrational, indeed counter-revolutionary demands are inextricably combined.”

Such a combination should not, in itself, have disqualified the student radicalism of the 1960s, but for the lack of critical self-awareness the activists manifested to Adorno. The critique and opposition Adorno had to the ’60s radicalism was not due to the juxtaposition of the orthodoxy of the 1930s against the movements of the 1960s that were thus found wanting. As Adorno put it in his “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis” (1969),

“Praxis is a source of power for theory but cannot be prescribed by it. It appears in theory, merely, and indeed necessarily, as a blind spot, as an obsession with

what is being criticized . . . this admixture of delusion, however, warns of the excesses in which it incessantly grows.”

Critical consciousness is tasked with reflexively recognizing this delusionary aspect of any possible emancipatory social-political practice.

### **Adorno in 1969: the non-identity of subject and object**

For Adorno, the subject mediates the object, or, in sociological terms, the individual mediates society, and, in philosophical terms, consciousness mediated reality. This mediation takes place in the commodity form, of which the human being is both subject and object. The non-identity of subject and object is a non-identity of social being and consciousness. Adorno’s critique of reconciliation philosophy (of Hegel, et al.) is based on the desideratum of subjectivity: as yet there is no subject, only critical consciousness of its possibility, there can be only a negative recognition, a recognition of its present absence, which is socially and historically specific, however appropriating all past history and other social forms to its present forms of appearance.

For Adorno, it is precisely the non-identity of social being and consciousness, of theory and practice, that is salutary for their critical relation. As he put it in the “Marginalia to Theory and Praxis,”

“If, to make an exception for once, one risks what is called a grand perspective, beyond the historical differences in which the concepts of theory and praxis have their life, one discovers the infinitely progressive aspect of the separation of theory and praxis, which was deplored by the Romantics and denounced by the Socialists in their wake — except for the mature Marx.”

In his *Negative Dialectic* (1966), in a section titled “Objectivity and Reification,” Adorno had written of the emancipatory aspect of the vision for “planning” in a socialist society in preserving the non-identity of subject and object:

“In the realm of things there is an intermingling of both the object’s [non]identical side and the submission of men to prevailing conditions of production, to their own functional context which they cannot know. The mature Marx, in his few remarks on the character of a liberated society, changed his position on the cause of reification, the division of labor. He now distinguished the state of freedom from original immediacy. In the moment of planning — the result of which, he hoped, would be production for use by the living rather than for profit, and thus, in a sense, a restitution of immediacy — in that planning he preserved the alien thing; in his design for a realization of what philosophy had only thought, at first, he preserved its mediation.”

The “functional context which they cannot know” is capitalism, which generates not only critical subjectivity, but the theory-practice problem as a non-identity of subject and object of practice. By comparison, the 1960s radicals had anticipated overcoming the separation of theory and practice immediately through their own efforts at (personal) transformation. Such a mistaken configuration of the problem was to the detriment both of practice and of critical consciousness, including to the present. In this they had been encouraged by thinkers like Marcuse in their abandonment of the emancipatory desiderata of history accumulated in the most radical exponents of Marxist politics that the critical theory of the earlier Frankfurt School thinkers had sought to preserve against the “Vulgar Marxism” of both Social Democracy and Stalinism in the 1920s-30s — in the aftermath of failed and betrayed revolution after 1917-19,

the moment in which social-political possibilities for overcoming capitalism opened to their greatest extent to date.

Following Adorno, properly accounting for the actual emancipatory contents of possible social-politics, as Marx and later Marxist radicals had tried to do, continues to task the present.

The Social Theory Workshop presents:

— **ADORNO IN 1969** —

**Adorno's Marxism and the problem and legacy of the 1960s Left  
in theory and practice**

**Chris Cutrone**

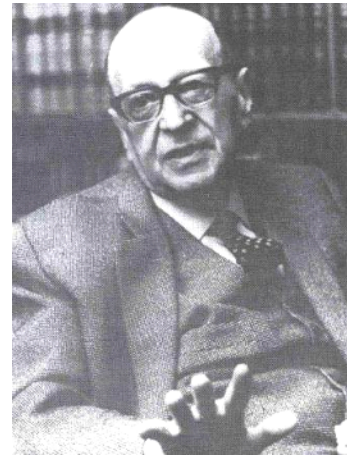
Committee on the History of Culture, University of Chicago



Rudi Dutschke



Theodor W. Adorno



Max Horkheimer

A certain legend of the 1960s New Left has it that the Marxist critical theorist Theodor W. Adorno had been hostile to student radicalism. This placed Adorno's legacy for progressive politics in doubt for at least two decades after 1968. Adorno had defended his junior colleague Jürgen Habermas's warning of "left fascism" among 1960s student radicals, and challenged Herbert Marcuse's support for student radicalism, questioning its emancipatory character. Adorno's collaborator Max Horkheimer commented about the '60s radicalism, "But is it really so desirable, this revolution?" Infamously, Adorno called the police to clear demonstrators from the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research in 1969. Students protested that "Adorno as an institution is dead." Some months later, while hiking on vacation, Adorno suffered a heart attack and died.

Eulogizing Adorno in 1969, Habermas raised two issues for the post-1960s reception of Adorno's work: 1.) Adorno's work was both inspiring and frustrating for the critique of modern society; and 2.) Adorno left little to suggest directions to take beyond a "meager reprise of Marxism." Fredric Jameson and others revisited Adorno's legacy around 1990, the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union, to challenge the politics of postmodernism.

Controversy over Adorno is over the nature and character of Adorno's Marxism, formulated in the 1920s-30s, and yet to be given a proper account.

**Monday, October 23, 2006, 8:00PM, Wilder House, 5811 S. Kenwood Ave.**

Limited number of hard copies are available outside SS 225; to request a file attachment, e-mail Robin Bates at [rdbates@uchicago.edu](mailto:rdbates@uchicago.edu)