

CRITICAL THEORY AND ITS FUTURE

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IN THE 1930s, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse gave an interpretation of critical theory and its aims. Both Horkheimer and Marcuse prefaced the republication in 1968 of their earlier essays with a reassessment of the state of critical theory, and both contended that changing historical circumstances in the period from the 1930s to the present undermined certain crucial presuppositions of the theory and necessitated modifications in its aims and structure.¹ Their basic presupposition had been that the transition from capitalism to socialism in at least some of the European nations was a real and immediate possibility. Their basic intention was to assist that transition (in however small a measure) by unmasking a problem which had received insufficient attention in the Marxist literature up to their day—namely, the inhibition of the revolutionary potential of the masses through the manifold devices of culture which had resulted from the centuries-long internalization of

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relations of domination and subordination within the character-structure of individuals among the exploited social classes.²

The theory of culture elaborated by the Frankfurt School in their individual and collective studies is a brilliant achievement.³ Indeed, in a manner of speaking, it was too successful: The results of these studies pointed toward certain conclusions which were not drawn at that time, conclusions which implicitly undermined at least some of the force in the theory's basic presupposition concerning the imminent possibility of the transition to socialism in the capitalist world. The theory illustrated the subtle mechanisms whereby every aspect of both "high" and "low" culture, as well as social agencies such as religion and the family, had inculcated values and behavior patterns among the oppressed social groups that served the interests of their masters. (To be sure, there was always another dimension in culture, which necessarily remained suppressed: the promise of freedom and happiness.) In practical terms, this theory could only have functioned as a warning against dismissing the inheritance of domination too quickly in the politics of a transitional period; although the phrase was not employed, it implicitly argued the case for "cultural revolution."⁴ But, in the context of the failure of revolutionary expectations, this theory of culture provided a framework for an explanation of the remarkable resilience of capitalist society during a severe crisis period and the tendency toward an integrated administrative structure of domination.⁵

Against this background, the assessment of critical theory that Horkheimer gave in his interview with *Der Spiegel* in early 1970, which reads like an obituary and goes beyond what is contained in his 1968 prefaces to *Kritische Theorie*, represents not so much a betrayal of his own earlier writings as a belated acknowledgement of their unstated conclusions.⁶ For Horkheimer, the disappearance of classical liberalism marks the crucial dividing line in recent historical development, and now it is clear that this occurrence was a central reference point for the Frankfurt School's theory of culture. The evolution of liberalism in modern bourgeois society from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries was a period of increasing tension between the traditional modes of authority and the growing demand for a sphere of autonomy within which individual self-development could take place. The tension can be seen, for example, in John Stuart Mill's attempt (in *On Liberty*) to demarcate the boundaries of individual autonomy and social authority. The material foundation for individual self-development was competition in the economic marketplace, a sphere of activity which (like the conscience of the person) ideally would

be universally accessible and self-regulating—i.e., outside the domain of institutional supervision.

Interestingly enough, Mill regarded his own defense of liberalism—in 1859—as little more than a holding operation against the powerful social developments that were undermining it, thus anticipating by a full century the task which Horkheimer would assign to critical theory. Mill argued that all the most fundamental social changes discernible in his day, notably the spread of commerce, public education, and mass communications, were sapping the foundations of individual autonomy.⁷ This theme reappears everywhere in the seminal work of the Frankfurt School during the 1930s, with an added note of urgency occasioned by the rise of fascism. By means of a critical social psychology, they attempted to understand what sociocultural forces had prepared a mass basis for the fascist movements. In one of his major essays, "Egoism and the Movement for Emancipation," Horkheimer argued that bourgeois society required a means of containing the competition among individuals in the marketplace, so that the entire social fabric would not be torn apart as a result of the releasing of constraints on economic activity. The mechanism was the internalization of moral and religious norms (Protestantism is a prime example), a gradual acceptance of self-disciplining and self-denial among the ruled as well as the rulers, which resembles a kind of "internal slavery." Over the course of centuries, this code became deeply entrenched in the character-structure of individuals, and the recognized values of self-sacrifice, industriousness, and postponement of gratification could be employed in fascist ideology to elicit a popular response for totalitarian authority.

In order to understand Horkheimer's later position, however, it is important to recognize that this critique of bourgeois culture was never one-sided. What was described above he referred to (using Hegelian terminology) as its "negative moment"; but it had a positive aspect as well—namely, the evolution of a conception of the autonomous individual which could and should be realized in a different kind of society:

In the present epoch egoism has in fact become destructive, including the shackled and deflected egoism of the masses as well as the obsolete egoistic principle of economic life, which only shows its most brutal side. Should this be overcome, it could become productive in a new sense. The pernicious character of egoism lies not in itself, but in the historical situation; should this be changed, its concept would carry over into that of the rational society.⁸

The notion that socialism could bring to fruition the ideal of individuality that bourgeois society had originated—but was unable to realize—was, of

course, central to Marx's work. Not just in his youthful writings, as with the famous image of the many-sided individual in the 1844 *Manuscripts*, but throughout all his works Marx refused to hypostatize the image of a new society, and instead always referred to the concrete manifestation of human freedom in the expected flowering of individuality.⁹ Socialism would be a genuine *Aufhebung* of bourgeois society only if the twin meanings of both preservation and cancellation contained in that paradoxical concept guided the process of revolutionary transformation.

The crisis of liberalism was thus the impetus for the Frankfurt School's attempt to unravel the historical dialectic of culture in bourgeois society. The collapse of this dialectic in the rise of fascism was discussed most directly in Marcuse's essay, "The Struggle Against Liberalism in the Totalitarian View of the State."¹⁰ However, the analysis even in these pre-World-War-II studies suggested, directly and indirectly, that this collapse was not exclusively a feature of the terroristic-totalitarian period of recent history, but rather reflected the inauguration of a permanent phase of authoritarianism which would survive the military defeat of fascism. In his interview, Horkheimer explained that the approach of fascism turned his intellectual sympathy for Marxism into the active conviction that the working-class revolutionary movement was the only alternative to fascist totalitarianism; when by the early 1940s this had turned out not to be the case, he began to turn away from Marxism. His reasoning on this point is extremely interesting. The apparently permanent eclipse of liberalism in Western society represented for him a negative judgment also on the expected social transformation inherent in Marxism, which for Horkheimer was premised on the possibilities for the actualization of liberalism's ideals: "Marx projected the all-sided development of personality as a goal in the future. Yet just this development was largely a consequence of the liberalistic period, which tended to disappear along with liberalism."¹¹ To put the matter bluntly: If Marxism was the heir of liberalism, then the destruction of liberalism within the internal development of bourgeois society itself meant that the anticipated bequest had been squandered irretrievably before the reading of the will could occur. The implication of Horkheimer's views is that a fortiori the fate of socialist revolution was predetermined in all those lands which had never experienced a liberalist phase at all: Without the possibility of actualizing liberalism's promise of individual freedom and autonomy, the agonies and sacrifices required for the victory of socialism stood condemned from the outset.¹²

I will undertake a critical appraisal of this perspective later in this essay. What remains here is to understand the outlook of critical theory that in

Horkheimer's view corresponds to the social situation outlined above. The eclipse of liberalism ushers in the world of "total administration," wherein individual autonomy is gradually subverted by the increasing organization of all aspects of life, public and private. The immediate presence of the social totality in the daily life of individuals, guiding and preforming the synthesis of everyday sense-experience (for example, the constant, unavoidable pressure of the realm of commodities), smothers the "mental space" in which the imagination might nurture the desire and need for a qualitatively different society. Under these circumstances, a critical theory can do no more than register a protest and render an accounting of what is being lost. No determinate image of a different society can be supported, but rather only the "yearning for the Other" (*Sehnsucht nach dem Anderen*), the faith that "injustice may not be the last word," which is the "theological idea applied to a rational theory of society."¹³ No historical retrogression is conceivable, so that there persists only the hope—radically divorced from any practical scheme of political action—that the progressive content of the liberalist program may reappear in a new guise at some future time. Critical theory becomes the bad conscience of bourgeois society.¹⁴

This quixotic posture, adopted self-consciously as the outcome of the theory's own inner progression, may not be so much the evasion it seems to be at first glance. Marcuse's famous essay "Repressive Tolerance" shows that an attempt to distill a positive principle of political action, applicable to contemporary society, from the residue of classical liberalism's internal contradictions is highly problematical. Reconsidering John Stuart Mill's conception of liberalism, Marcuse argued that social changes since that time had vitiated its fundamental presupposition:

But even the all-inclusive character of liberalist tolerance was, at least in theory, based on the proposition that men were (potential) *individuals* who could learn to hear and see and feel by themselves, to develop their own thoughts, to grasp their true interests and rights and capabilities, also against established authority and opinion. This was the rationale of free speech and assembly. Universal toleration becomes questionable when its rationale no longer prevails, when tolerance is administered to manipulated and indoctrinated individuals who parrot, as their own, the opinions of their masters, for whom heteronomy has become autonomy.¹⁵

Mill's prophecy had proved accurate: Marcuse could point to numerous contemporary mechanisms that create high insuperable obstacles to the formation of rational judgments by individuals. This much was consistent

with the Frankfurt School's earlier researches. However, Marcuse went beyond this analytical conclusion to formulate a political principle designed to reverse the prevailing trend—namely, the justifiability of employing “apparently undemocratic means” to withdraw freedom of speech and action from “regressive and reactionary” social movements and of encouraging the subversive criticism of progressive groups: “Liberating tolerance, then, would mean intolerance against movements from the Right, and toleration of movements from the left.”¹⁶ Yet one must immediately ask: Under what conceivable historical circumstances would this principle be applicable?

Germany's Weimar Republic, with its failure to act against the Nazi movement, suggests itself at once. But no fascist party attains power without the blessing of the existing ruling circles, especially the holders of corporate economic power, who have themselves previously conducted the funeral of classical liberalism. So Marcuse's principle presupposes just what his prior analysis denies—namely, the existence of a vital liberalist tradition, firmly grounded in the forms of intercourse in daily life and institutionalized in a truly democratic government—that could overcome such destructive social movements. For what power other than a duly constituted liberalist authority (supported by its majority of enlightened citizens) is to apply this principle? The “left” is incapable of doing so, since the principle itself has been formulated in view of its relative weakness in contemporary society; the “right” would be rather foolish to assist its own demise. And should the left attempt it anyway, with the hope of somehow quickly awakening the majority, it is far more likely to elicit instead a decisive (and unpleasant) response from the armed might of the state. As a principle of political action, “liberating tolerance” is impotent.

Marcuse's more recent political essay, “The Left Under the Counterrevolution,” marks a retreat from this principle. Here he remarks that “the initiative and power are with the counterrevolution,” a fact that severely limits the available options for radical political action: The ever-present danger of precipitating a neo-fascist response within the establishment—including the ordinary citizens as well as the rulers—means that disruptive or “illegal” tactics must be carefully and concretely evaluated in the light of their probable consequences.¹⁷ The left's chief task is said to be “*political education*, dispelling the false and mutilated consciousness of the people so that they themselves experience their condition, and its abolition, as vital need, and apprehend the ways and means of their liberation.”¹⁸ There is no mention throughout of the

principle enunciated in “Repressive Tolerance.” The program of enlightenment is premised upon the central feature of classical liberalism—namely, the struggle against those pressures originating in social institutions that subvert the possibilities for the self-creation of autonomous rationality in individuals. For Marcuse as well as for Horkheimer, the desperate struggle to rejuvenate the ailing spirit of classical liberalism is an unavoidable necessity for radical theory and action.

II

Critical theory was conceived as an element in the ongoing self-clarification of Marxist theory and practice. More specifically, its basic motif can be identified as an attempt to explore the modalities of the reproduction of class domination in relation to the expectation that it might be permanently abolished in human society; or, negatively phrased, to explain why—in the words of Pannekoek quoted earlier—the proletariat might rebuild bourgeois domination “with their own hands.” To the extent that the theory accomplished its objective, it tended to call into question, hesitantly and never with full self-awareness, the original foundations of its own peculiar logic as a mode of thought that could comprehend not only its object (the existing social reality) but also its own role in the dialectical movement of its object. Habermas has summarized this original intention well:

The type of social theory that we find developed first by Marx is distinguished by the fact that the theory is reflexive in a double respect. Historical materialism wishes to accomplish a clarification of social evolution so comprehensive that it extends even to the contextual relationship in which the theory itself is generated and applied. The theory specifies the conditions under which a self-reflection of species-history becomes objectively possible; and it names the addressees as well who with the aid of the theory can achieve understanding about themselves and their potentially emancipative role in the historical process. With the reflection on the context of its genesis and the anticipation of its situational applicability the theory comprehends itself as a necessary catalyzing moment of the same societal life-association that it analyzes; and to be sure the theory analyzes it as an integral, necessary connection from the viewpoint of its possible transcendence.¹⁹

Traditional theory (to use Horkheimer's term) assumes a contemplative stance vis-à-vis an independent, pregiven reality which it can interpret but not alter. Marxist theory, on the other hand, styles itself as the

understanding of reality which is also the necessary self-consciousness of an element in that reality working toward its transformation. In technical terms, at the core of the theory was the aspect of subjectivity—i.e., social change conceived as the potential act of identifiable human agents conscious of their historical mission to liberate all of society from the thrall of class domination.

This crucial aspect of subjectivity was never secured permanently within Marxist theory; rather, it was constantly embattled as a result of the theory's involvement in the social milieu and had to be reformulated time and again under the pressure of events. Throughout the period of the Second and Third Internationals, there was a powerful tendency toward what Russell Jacoby has termed "automatic Marxism," a determinist view of history as proceeding unerringly toward its final goal, governed inexorably by the "laws" of dialectics.²⁰ This was, in fact, a capitulation—against which Marxists such as Lukács, Korsch, and the Frankfurt group arrayed themselves—to the ideology of science and the triumph of positivism within bourgeois society, in both of which the element of subjectivity, existing in the nature of their social function within the process of capitalist production, was obscured.²¹ This determinism rendered the formation of revolutionary class-consciousness both mysterious and somehow superfluous and converted the alleged bearer of that consciousness (the proletariat) into a metaphysical entity.

Lukács grappled with this fundamental dilemma, formulating a theoretical reconstruction of Marxism which "demands a series of distinctions between class consciousness, real consciousness, class action and theory" while retaining an emphasis on the activity of the proletariat.²² The Frankfurt theoreticians were more cautious. Horkheimer maintained that critical theory had no unique, determinate content at all, but rather that it was an interconnected series of particular insights bound together by its "inherent interest in the transcendence of class domination."²³ What is often conspicuously absent in these essays is a recognizable place for the social force which in Marxist theory operates as the unifying ground for that interest in the overcoming of class domination—namely, the activity of the proletariat. In their published essays of the 1930s, this issue is not confronted, but it emerges in the private editorial correspondence of the Institute for Social Research. According to Martin Jay, the use of "Aesopian language" in the institute's journal during the latter part of the decade reflected, in addition to the fear of political reprisal, "a growing loss of that basic confidence, which Marxists had traditionally felt, in the revolutionary potential of the proletariat."²⁴

The matter goes deeper than that. Earlier in this essay, I suggested that the theory of culture developed by the Frankfurt School demonstrated how powerful is the spell of domination in bourgeois society—and how the apparatus of domination steadily intensifies its hold on popular consciousness in the monopolistic stage of capitalism. Marxist theory asserts that the proletariat can break that spell as it gathers strength for the moment of revolutionary violence—i.e., while it is still under the rule of bourgeois class domination. Yet how is this theoretically and practically conceivable? To examine this question closely is to understand how the critical theory of society could one day find itself entangled in the unresolved dilemmas of classical liberalism. As indicated above, the theory defines its own role as an integral dimension of the social reality that it analyzes; thus the question concerning the situation of the proletariat affects the underlying logic governing the relationship of theory and practice in Marxism. And this is a problem which has its roots in Marx's earliest writings.

The class analysis of society postulates the existence of different groups, defined by their relationship to the production process, which have essentially different interests. The capstone of class analysis, the element that represented the culmination of all the stages in the class-dominated structure of history, was the *idea of a class whose interest was general emancipation*. In his formulation of this idea, Marx argued that the possibilities for radical social change were dependent upon

the formation of a class with radical chains, a class in civil society that is not of civil society, a class that is the dissolution of all classes, a sphere of society having a universal character because of its universal suffering . . . a sphere, finally, that cannot emancipate itself without emancipating itself from all the other spheres of society, thereby emancipating them; a sphere, in short, that is the complete loss of humanity and can only redeem itself through the total redemption of humanity. This dissolution of society existing as a particular class is the proletariat.²⁵

This conception of the proletariat, which appears in Marx's criticism of Hegel's political theory published in 1844, is heavily influenced by Hegelian philosophy, even in its terminology.²⁶ The grammatical form of the last sentence in this passage seems to confer a quasi-ontological status on the proletariat. This impression is reinforced by the language of *The Holy Family*, which was written in the same year. There the proletariat is described as the negative moment or manifestation of the contradiction inherent in private property. In a few paragraphs patterned after Hegel's notion of historical development as the unfolding of the Idea, Marx assigns

a social role to the proletariat on the basis of a purely logical deduction from speculative premises. Indeed, the very existence of the proletariat is deduced from the contradiction inherent in private property, and its "essence" is postulated abstractly as "dehumanization conscious of its dehumanization." This formulation is important, because it seems to make class-consciousness an original and inherent attribute of the "essence" of the class itself.²⁷ In the following paragraph, however, Marx retains the emphasis on the logical necessity of the proletariat's existence but separates out the question of class-consciousness:

It is not a question of what this or that proletarian or even the whole proletariat momentarily *imagines* to be the aim. It is a question of *what* the proletariat *is* and what it *consequently* is historically compelled to do. Its aim and historical action is prescribed, irrevocably and obviously, in its own situation in life as well as in the entire organization of contemporary civil society. There is no need to explain here in detail that a large part of the English and French proletariat is already *conscious* of its historic task and is continuously working to develop that consciousness into complete clarity.

In a sense, the various propositions are but different formulations of a basic idea; however, one of them is especially revealing—namely, the notion of the proletariat as "a class *in* civil society that is not *of* civil society" (my italics). What does this mean? Clearly, Marx is referring in large part to the actual material conditions of its life, the utter degradation of unremitting toil under inhuman circumstances, as well as the moral squalor depicted so effectively in the *Communist Manifesto* and elsewhere. Yet, are there not historical precedents of other groups who would fit the entire description in this passage—for example, the slaves of antiquity? Would they not be the perfect instance of a group which is "in" but not "of" society? But, unlike the slaves, modern proletarians have been "educated" by bourgeois society—i.e., they have experienced a historical transformation (carried out by the bourgeoisie) in which all "naturalistic" illusions have been destroyed. Human society no longer appears as embedded in nature, endlessly repetitive, and subject to the whim of external forces, but rather can be understood as the outcome of man's own activity, as permeated with subjectivity. Thus, this proletariat would possess a priori that autonomy, that freedom from the illusions permeating earlier stages of class domination, requisite for the leap into a qualitatively different stage of human history. And this concrete dimension of autonomy is the "substratum" in which Marxian theory is supposed to flourish, thus rooted internally in the medium of revolutionary trans-

formation. In other words, it is the guarantee of the ultimate unity of theory and practice.

The theory seems to presuppose what it ought to prove—namely, that the formation of such a class is a real possibility under *any* conceivable historical circumstances. Thus, this is in the first instance a general theoretical problem and only secondarily a question of precisely what forces at work in the internal dynamic of bourgeois society could be responsible for the emergence of a class that can emancipate all classes. Marx's philosophical conception of the proletariat intersects a very old tradition of political theory, which maintained that the "general interest" could only be embodied in and effectuated by an individual or group that stood outside the contentious process of social reproduction. The best-known examples are Plato's guardians, Rousseau's Legislator, and Hegel's state bureaucracy and hereditary monarch (in a different sense, one might also include the personnel of the medieval church). Marx turns this tradition inside out, claiming, in effect, that the proletariat—"a sphere of society having a universal character *because of* its universal suffering" (my italics)—embodies the general interest not by virtue of any positive attributes, but rather on account of having been shorn of all the attributes of humanity by capitalist society.²⁸ The unsolved mystery is how the negative aspect of the proletariat's existence (universal suffering) can be the springboard for its positive act of universal emancipation.

The outstanding dilemma of rationalist political theory from Plato onward was to explain how the idea of the general interest, which had been formulated deductively, could be actualized. Rousseau displayed the greatest courage in facing it and boldly inserted a historical myth amid the deductions. In his early philosophical conception of the proletariat, Marx became enmeshed in the same dilemma. An interest in general emancipation, or, in other words, the realization of the general interest, was postulated as the essence of "the proletariat *as* proletariat" (as Marx puts it in *The Holy Family*, echoing Plato's discussion of "the ruler as ruler" in the *Republic*). Consciousness was likewise postulated as a *necessary* aspect of its essence—"dehumanization conscious of its dehumanization." Hegel's method survived Marx's critique unscathed, and the proletariat emerged spontaneously in the logical unfolding of the idea of private property.

Of course, Marx soon abandoned this approach and sought to identify more concrete modes for the arousal of proletarian class consciousness. Throughout his later writings, there are two forms of activity which have this function—namely, trade-union organization and participation in electoral politics.²⁹ But the problem posed by the original conception of

the proletariat was not thereby resolved, because Marx could not show that these concrete activities would necessarily surpass their immediate objectives and realize the "essential" mission of the class.³⁰ Recently, Bertell Ollman has pursued this point in some detail, arguing that Marx's error lay in attempting to advance "from the workers' conditions of life to class consciousness in a single bound; the various psychological mediations united in class consciousness are treated as one." His delineation of these mediating steps is worth quoting in full:

First, workers must recognize that they have interests. Second, they must be able to see their interests as individuals in, their interests as members of a class. Third, they must be able to distinguish what Marx considers their main interests as workers from other less important economic interests. Fourth, they must believe that their class interests come prior to their interests as members of a particular nation, religion, race, etc. Fifth, they must truly hate their capitalist exploiters. Sixth, they must have an idea, however, vague, that their situation could be qualitatively improved. Seventh, they must believe that they themselves, through some means or other, can help bring about this improvement. Eighth, they must believe that Marx's strategy, or that advocated by Marxist leaders, offers the best means for achieving their aims. And, ninth, having arrived at all the foregoing, they must not be afraid to act when the time comes.³¹

At every stage in this process of mediations—and others could be added—the problem of the potential consciousness of a revolutionary class can be referred back to the underlying dilemma of the potential *existence* of a class with an interest in general emancipation. If we abandon the philosophical plane, as Marx himself did, with the "analytical" notion of such a class emerging necessarily from the logic of contradiction inherent in private property, we are faced with the task of conceiving how this class could constitute itself "synthetically" within bourgeois society (more precisely, within the changing character of the production process under capitalism). Yet there has been a powerful tendency in Marxism, which has blocked the recognition of this task, to simply assume the existence (actual or potential) of a class with an interest in general emancipation. On this assumption rests the argument that a *qualitatively* different epoch of human history is attainable; but the bases of the assumption itself remain unsecured.

The problem of the *formation* of this class (referred to either as the proletariat or the working class) was never addressed with sufficient analytical rigor. Faced with examples of workers whose aims were strictly limited in scope, Marx usually vented ad hoc aspersions.³² As a result, the

original philosophical conception of the proletariat as a class already in the process of its formation standing "outside of society," was not effectively modified and remained lingering in the background of revolutionary theory. Thus there was a propensity in Marxian theory to assume the existence of a class which was autonomous a priori; or, in other words, to assume that capitalist society *necessarily* produced a class whose essential interest was general emancipation. This class would be, as it were, the material medium of Marxian theory, a medium already prepared for the theory which was the simple expression of its objective being. To the extent to which this assumption governed the outlook of Marxian socialism, the theory of revolutionary change became "contemplative," a meditation on a pre-given objective reality, and thus exhibited the same crucial fault that it correctly attributed to traditional theory. This contemplative nature of the relationship between theory and practice, wherein the theory's truth is constituted a priori in its subject-object (the revolutionary social class), became a hallmark of "orthodox" Marxism.

To summarize: The capstone of Marx's analysis of historical development is the notion that a qualitative transformation of human society can emerge from the dialectic of capitalism. The mechanism of this transformation is the emergence of a class whose essential interest is the achievement of general emancipation—i.e., the final overcoming of domination and exploitation. This interest was supposed to be grounded in the position of that class in the production process and the dialectic of private property within capitalist society. But neither the basis of that interest itself nor its relationship to the internal development of the capitalist production process were sufficiently clarified in a theoretically rigorous manner. The consequences of this were that the stages of the formation of such a class remained obscure and, more concretely, that the abolition of private property in the means of production was assumed to be identical with the achievement of general emancipation. This assumption was rooted in the original philosophical conception of the proletariat expounded by Marx in 1844. As a result, the meaning of that qualitative historical transformation, and especially the problem of "the continuum of domination" (to use Marcuse's phrase), never received sufficient attention.

If this argument is correct, then there exists an unresolved issue at the deepest level of Marxian theory, underlying the problem of class-consciousness which has been the subject of much debate during this century. This is the issue of whether the dialectic of capitalist or bourgeois society is in fact inherently capable of producing a class or group that can

function as the agent of a qualitative transformation in history toward general emancipation (as opposed to, for example, a rationalization of the production process through state capitalism or bureaucratic socialism). For this issue, the crucial questions are those concerning the sociocultural mechanisms through which patterns of domination and subordination were developed, perpetuated, and intensified in bourgeois society; I have argued above that this was a central concern of critical theory and occasioned its preoccupation with the heritage of liberalism. In this sense, critical theory had engaged a problematic issue that can be traced back to the origins of Marxism, and, in clarifying this issue, it contributed significantly to the progress of radical social thought.

III

The traditional manner of conceptualizing the problem of radical social transformation in Marxian theory, by focusing primarily on the state of the proletariat (or "working class") and its consciousness, is inadequate. Taken to its logical conclusion, this approach can only result in fundamental paradoxes, as is illustrated well in the following passage by Marcuse, written only a few years ago: "By virtue of its basic position in the production process, by virtue of its numerical weight and the weight of exploitation, the working class is still the historical agent of revolution; by virtue of its sharing the stabilizing needs of the system, it has become a conservative, even counterrevolutionary force."³³ As a result, the familiar path of Marxian theory terminates in a cul-de-sac. Inasmuch as the classical medium of the theory was conceived as somehow existing "outside" bourgeois society, the radical theory of social change has been condemned likewise to spend its days in limbo, hovering precariously between the equally subjective states of hope and despair. A fresh approach is required in order to ground its dialectic firmly in the still-developing contradictions of bourgeois society itself, an approach that will be truly consistent with the theory's original reflexive intention.³⁴ Here I can offer only a few preliminary remarks along these lines.

The obstacles which have blocked the formation of a majority class within capitalist society with an interest in general emancipation are constituted by the quintessential operational mechanism of the capitalist economy—namely, the ever more thorough fragmentation of the networks of social relations among individuals and groups. Over the course of centuries, all the traditional ties of interdependence (extended family,

religion, regional differences, ethnic identity, personal dependence, inherited craftsmanship, wide dispersion of life-skills, popular amusements, and so forth) are undermined, and capitalism strives toward an ideal limit in which all of them will be replaced by a single principle of social cohesion—namely, *exchange*. Under the universal hegemony of exchange, all personal and social relations among individuals are mediated through material objects; this process of reification and commodity fetishism extends its scope inexorably so long as bourgeois society persists. To be sure, the universality of exchange constitutes a real and substantial basis of interdependence among individuals, and even broadens dramatically the physical dimensions of that interdependence, so that the citizens of the most favored areas enjoy the fruits of others' toil plucked from every corner of the globe; but it is an external relationship because the process of mediation through material objects (via the medium of exchange, money) creates an increasingly impenetrable veil between the active subjects of this activity, the men and women who produce the objects. Marx writes: "Exchange . . . presupposes the all-round dependence of the producers on one another, together with the total isolation of their private interests from one another, as well as a division of social labour whose unity and mutual complementarity exist in the form of a natural relation, as it were, external to the individuals and independent of them."³⁵

The crucial element here is to understand the dialectical interplay between the apparent opposites, increasing interdependence and increasing isolation. The expanding realm of commodity production creates both conditions simultaneously. The traditional ties mentioned above represented a concrete dimension of intersubjectivity—which had as well many repressive features, of course—wherein individual work and needs were articulated with reference to "regions" of consciousness that maintained a degree of relative autonomy vis-à-vis the economy. As those ties steadily disintegrate, the individual increasingly moves unaided through the marketplace, discovering modes of production and satisfaction that anticipate his or her half-formed desires, thus legitimizing them a priori. In consumption, for example, older values are subtly employed to allay the guilt which might otherwise arise from spontaneous and reckless indulgence: An advertisement portrays a happy family gathering, including four generational levels in one room (young children, teenage youths, parents, and grandparents), but with a new twist—each is watching a different television program on one of four sets, using private earplugs to avoid the otherwise inevitable cacophony. Togetherness and isolation are reconciled through the magic of the newest commodity.

The fragmentation of interpersonal bonds among individuals is accompanied by a concentration of power at the level of the ruling strata. Both aspects militate against the possible precipitation of the traditionally conceived revolutionary moment, the seizure of state power by the mass-based vanguard. This does not mean that it was never a real possibility at any time during the evolution of capitalist society; in view of the latitude afforded by historical contingencies at a time when the bourgeois apparatus of domination was considerably weaker, such an event might well have occurred in one or more capitalist nations. However, taking into account the analytical perspective sketched above, I would maintain that it is extremely unlikely that this will occur in the future. Moreover, the same perspective might partially explain why revolutionary movements outside Western Europe and North America *were* successful. The disintegration of capitalist hegemony during the two world wars and the Great Depression assisted (negatively) the rise of revolutionary forces in areas of the world that had been penetrated by Western capitalism but not transformed into capitalist societies. Thus, the older bases of human solidarity (in Vietnam, for example, the village and the extended family), which had been already undermined in Western society, could form the mass basis for support for the vanguard party.³⁶

Quite obviously, the above sketch is composed of broad generalizations that are subject to qualification. The traditional bonds of interdependence have not been completely dissolved; significant variations in the stages of this process are found among capitalist societies (those bonds are stronger in southern Europe than in North America, for example); exchange is not the only disintegrating force; and so on. Yet I do not think that such qualifications would render this perspective useless, nor would they alter the overall conclusion that the usual conception of revolutionary transformation in the fully developed capitalist nations of Western Europe and North America is generally inapplicable. However, a corollary proposition must be added immediately: This by no means implies that the transition to socialism in those societies is impossible. Quite the contrary. But it does strongly suggest that it is an error to regard the revolutionary moment itself as the decisive rupture in the continuum of domination. Marx remarked that the new social order issuing from capitalist society "is thus in every respect, economically, morally and intellectually, still stamped with the birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it emerges."³⁷ Actually, the damage goes much deeper. To pursue Marx's analogy, we might say that the societal offspring is akin to the heroin addict's baby, who becomes hooked on its mother's habit in the

womb and whose postnatal agonies duplicate the withdrawal symptoms of the deprived junkie.

"Breaking the habit": Marxist theory argues that capitalist society is by its very nature incapable of creating a decent social order and that it necessarily becomes increasingly irrational. I think that these are still rationally demonstrable assertions. But it is beyond the power of theory to chart a sure course toward liberation. What theory can do is to aid in understanding the nature of the problems of transition. We need to identify the possible limits of the process of fragmentation and isolation under capitalism and the conditions under which a regeneration of human solidarity might occur within the spheres of producing and consuming. We must examine closely the idea of qualitative social transformation in order to specify the possibilities for the emergence of an interest in general emancipation on the part of the majority of the population. Indeed, the idea of "general emancipation" requires clarification, so that the essential task of creating nonauthoritarian structures in all spheres of social activity can become a focus of debate. Finally, we should strive to understand how a genuinely autonomous consciousness in individuals may be substantively grounded in forms of social interaction and collective decision-making that are appropriate to advanced industrial societies. In this manner, the objectives of classical liberalism, which have been thwarted by the society which produced them, but which possess enduring value, may be preserved in a new synthesis.

All these considerations refer to historical contingencies within the internal dialectic of capitalist society, which is, after all, the original focus of Marxian theory. Thus there is one crucial error in Horkheimer's evaluation of the current impasse in which critical theory finds itself, and that is the unqualified assertion that there is but a single historical path to the heaven of liberalism—namely, through the terrifying purgatory of bourgeois society. The obvious ethnocentrism of this attitude is unsupportable. The possibility of alternate historical routes, based upon the vital non-Western cultural traditions, must be affirmed. Certainly one could not maintain a priori that the ongoing dynamic of cultural revolution in China, for example, is inherently incapable of resulting in a truly democratic, nonauthoritarian socialist society. To preserve and transcend the heritage of classical liberalism may well be a necessary aspect of any social progress in Western capitalist society, but it is not the last word in political wisdom for all of humanity.

NOTES

1. For a discussion of their remarks see my essay, "The Critical Theory of Society: Present Tasks and Future Prospects," in *Critical Interruptions*, ed. Paul Breines (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970). Martin Jay's *The Dialectical Imagination* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973) is an excellent account of the genesis of critical theory.
2. For example: Max Horkheimer, *Kritische Theorie*, ed. Alfred Schmidt (Frankfurt: S. Fischer, 1968), vol. I, p. 298; *Critical Theory* (New York: Herder, 1972), p. 67. The early writings of Wilhelm Reich are also important in this regard; see the collection edited by Lee Baxandall, *Sex-Pol* (New York: Vintage, 1972).
3. One general statement of it can be found in Herbert Marcuse's essay, "On the Affirmative Character of Culture," *Negations* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), pp. 88-133.
4. We now know from sources published only recently that Lenin had begun to recognize this problem shortly before his death. See Moshe Lewin, *Lenin's Last Struggle* (New York: Pantheon, 1968), pp. 113 ff.
5. The Dutch Marxists and Lukács first developed this point around World War I. For example, Anton Pannekoek wrote in an essay entitled "World Revolution and Communist Tactics" (1920): "Because the proletariat masses were still wholly ruled by a bourgeois mode of thought, after the collapse (in 1918) they rebuilt with their own hands bourgeois domination." Quoted in Russell Jacoby, "Towards a Critique of Automatic Marxism: The Politics of Philosophy from Lukács to the Frankfurt School," *Telos*, no. 10 (Winter, 1971), p. 125. For Lukács cf. Paul Breines, "Lukács, Revolution and Marxism," *The Philosophical Forum*, vol. III, nos. 3-4 (1972), p. 416.
6. *Der Spiegel*, 5 January 1970, pp. 76-84. His remarks in other interviews (*Verwaltete Welt* [Zurich: Verlag der Arche, 1970]; *Der Spiegel*, 16 July 1973; *Die Weltwoche*, 25 July 1973) are of the same tenor. Horkheimer was expressing only his own views, which were not shared by Marcuse and others; it is important to note that there never was a *definitive* conception of critical theory for the Frankfurt School. Thus in the following pages certain criticisms are relevant only to the work of the particular writer under discussion.
7. J. S. Mill, *On Liberty* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), pp. 89-90.
8. "Egoismus und Freiheitsbewegung," in *Kritische Theorie*, vol. II, p. 79. The term "egoism" as used here means the principle of individual self-assertion and self-development.
9. For example: *Capital* (Moscow edn.) vol. I, p. 592: The capitalist "forces the development of the productive powers of society, and creates those material conditions, which alone can form the real basis of a higher form of society, a society in which the full and free development of every individual forms the ruling principle," Cf. Albrecht Wellmer, *Critical Theory of Society* (New York: Herder, 1971), p. 117.
10. In *Negations*, op. cit., pp. 3-42.
11. *Der Spiegel*, op. cit., p. 80.
12. This sentiment has been echoed recently by another social theorist: "I believe very firmly that unless future radical movements can somehow synthesize the

achievements of liberalism with those of revolutionary radicalism, the results for humanity will be tragic." Barrington Moore, Jr., *Reflections on the Causes of Human Misery* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 192.

13. *Der Spiegel*, op. cit., p. 81. Cf. Wellmer, *Critical Theory of Society*, p. 52: "The latter extensions of critical theory by Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse therefore include a tacit avowal of the absence of any reference to *praxis*: Critical theory conceives itself as a protest, but a protest impotent in practice, against an apocalyptically self-obturing system of alienation and reification; and as the spark whose preservation in a self-darkening world will keep alive the memory of something quite different."

14. At least in theory: The myopic character of Horkheimer's recent political judgments (many examples can be found in his interview with *Der Spiegel*) is a perfect illustration of the willful blindness that usually afflicts the self-appointed oracles of the social conscience.

15. Wolff, Moore, Marcuse, *Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), p. 90.

16. *Ibid.*, p. 109. Cf. Moore, *Reflections on the Causes of Human Misery*, pp. 81 ff.

17. *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), pp. 29, 51-53.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 28 (italics in original).

19. Jürgen Habermas, "Einleitung zur Neuausgabe," *Theorie und Praxis* (2nd edition, Neuwied and Berlin: Luchterhand, 1971), p. 9.

20. Jacoby, op. cit., pp. 127-134.

21. In the ideology of the domination of nature the element of subjectivity relating to science and technology is present in a distorted form. See the discussion in my book, *The Domination of Nature* (New York: Braziller, 1972).

22. The quotation is from Andrew Feenberg's excellent article, "Lukács and the Critique of 'Orthodox' Marxism," *The Philosophical Forum*, vol. III, nos. 3-4 (1972), pp. 422-467; the quotation is from p. 439. See also Andrew Arato's essay, "Notes on History and Class-Consciousness," pp. 386-400 of the same volume; Paul Breines, "Introduction to Lukács," and Georg Lukács, "Old Culture and New Culture," *Telos*, no. 5 (Spring, 1970), pp. 1-30.

23. "Traditionelle und Kritische Theorie," *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, vol. VI (1937), p. 292; cited by Göran Therborn, "The Frankfurt School," *New Left Review* 63 (1970), p. 68.

24. Jay, op. cit., pp. 44, 205.

25. *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1970), pp. 141-142. See the background discussion for this passage in Shlomo Avineri, *The Social and Political Thought of Karl Marx* (Cambridge: At the University Press, 1968), Chapter 2, and David McLellan, *Marx before Marxism* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972), pp. 200-203.

26. Hegel's term *Stand* ("estate") is used by Marx throughout, including the passage quoted above, where it has been translated as "class"; on this point see Stanley Moore's review of O'Malley's edition in *The Owl of Minerva*, vol. 3, no. 2 (Dec., 1971), p. 4.

27. Marx's phrase is "die ihrer Entmenschung bewusste und darum sich selbst aufhebende Entmenschung." This and the following quotation are cited from *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. L. Easton and K. Guddat (New York: Doubleday, 1967), p. 368 (italics in original).

28. See Joseph O'Malley's comment on the passage under discussion: "The ability of the proletariat to play the historical role of a truly universal class derives from the universal character of its deprivation... The proletariat is repeatedly characterized in these terms in Marx's subsequent writings." Editor's Introduction to Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's 'Philosophy of Right'*, op. cit., p. liv. Cf. Ernest Mandel, *The Formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 16, 23, which also refers to a comparison of the proletariat with the ancient slaves and which adheres to the usual view that in his mature works Marx located the proletariat's power of emancipation in the "position" it occupies in the production process.

29. See generally Stanley Moore, *Three Tactics* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1963), chapter 2.

30. Moore, *Three Tactics*, p. 44. Cf. Dick Howard, "On Marx's Critical Theory," *Telos*, no. 6 (Fall, 1970), p. 232: "It is striking that Marx never discusses the mechanisms by which the proletariat actually becomes conscious of itself as the revolutionary agent."

31. "Toward Class Consciousness Next Time: Marx and the Working Class," *Politics and Society* (Fall, 1972), pp. 7-8.

32. See the examples cited by Ollman, *passim*.

33. *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 16. There is a different emphasis in his more recent book, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, p. 39: "It follows that, if the working class is no longer this 'absolute negation' of the existing society, if it has become a class *in* this society, sharing its needs and aspirations, then the transfer of power to the working class alone (no matter in what form) does not assure the transition to socialism as a *qualitatively* different society. The working class itself must change if it is to become the power that effects this transition" (italics in original).

34. See Habermas's statement of this, quoted above at the beginning of Section II. In a brief essay entitled "The Concept of Negation in the Dialectic" (*Telos*, no. 8 (Summer, 1971), pp. 130-132), Marcuse criticizes the Hegelian-Marxist dialectic for overemphasizing the degree to which "negating forces" emerge *within* a historical totality and thus assure the continuity of progress in the transition to a new totality (cf. Jacoby, op. cit., p. 145 on Horkheimer's earlier formulation of this criticism). *Per contra* he suggests "the real possibility that in the historical dynamic an existing antagonistic whole is negated and superseded *externally*" by social forces that are "outside the whole: their needs and aims represent what is suppressed and cannot develop in the existing antagonistic whole" (italics in original). Marcuse explicitly denied that the function of negation is to be attributed to any particular class. The fundamental, unresolved difficulty of radical theory is to formulate a general hypothesis to explain how the rupture with the "continuum of domination" can emerge concretely out of existing societies.

35. Karl Marx, *Grundrisse*, tr. Martin Nicolaus (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1973), p. 158.

36. See Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), pp. 468 ff. for a few cautious suggestions on this point.

37. Karl Marx, *Critique of the Gotha Programme* (New York: International Publishers, 1966), p. 8.