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Absolute Historicism in Gramsci, Lukács and Marx

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Abstract: Gramsci and Lukács argue for an integrally historicist ontology which encompasses nature and natural science as well as society. They attempt to save the concepts of truth and reality without assuming a thing in itself wholly independent of history and therefore of human being. On this basis they reject both scientific naturalism and skeptical relativism. There is a precedent for their position in Marx’s early writings, as interpreted by Marcuse. This “finite horizon” of being is shared with very different thinkers such as Latour, Heidegger and Nietzsche.

Introduction: Latour’s Dilemma

This paper discusses ideas on the nature of truth and reality entertained by Marx and by certain Marxist philosophers in the period between the two world wars. A few years ago, one might have dismissed such issues as purely academic, fodder for the debates of earnest graduate students and their professors. But today these issues are all too relevant. Truth and reality are now front page news and are discussed by the most fashionable thinkers.

The breakdown of faith in natural science is particularly worrisome as climate change demands actions predicated on models and projections. Some blame Thomas Kuhn and post-modernism for this state of affairs. Indeed, a whole new discipline, Science and Technology Studies (STS), now treats science as just another social institution. Gramsci and Lukács anticipated this approach in its broad outlines without challenging the validity of scientific research. Before I turn to a consideration of their thought, I want to show how one contemporary STS scholar addresses the issues that concerned them long ago.

In 2004 Vice President Cheney told a critic of the war in Iraq that he, the critic, belonged to "what we call the reality-based community," which Cheney defined as "people who believe that solutions emerge from your judicious study of discernible reality." He went on, "That's not the way the world really works anymore, we're an empire now, and when we act we create our own reality."¹ You might consider this the origin of "alternative facts" and "fake news." We are living with it daily now. Bush may have failed to create his own reality in Iraq but he certainly made a mess of what we use for reality in the United States and increasingly throughout the world.

When Bruno Latour learned of this incident, he felt targeted. After all, as a founding member of STS was he not a constructivist who denied that reality is "out there," independent of human beings? Had he not defined nature as what the victorious actors in scientific controversies proclaimed it to be? Was he not responsible for the post-modern rejection of truth? If the most powerful actor, the United States government, now claims the power to define reality, who is Latour to complain?

Latour responded to such accusations in a little article called “The Emperor's Brand

¹ Bob Herbert, “For Bush, real life just gets in the way” in *International Herald Tribune*, 23-10-04.

New Clothes.”² He imagined a dialogue in which a "modernist" defends the traditional notion of truth and blames constructivism for Bush. The modernist discounts the role of society in knowledge in order to postulate a timeless reality of things in themselves known by a pure rational subject. Latour demurs. He objects that he is neither on the Left nor the Right, and has never supported Bush. The modernist replies that he has given weapons to his enemies by subverting the distinction between might and right. If reality is simply what people end up believing, then those with power create it. The emperor may be naked but there is no reason to listen to the little boy who naively says so.

I won't take you through the details of Latour's attempt to defend himself but a brief sketch is instructive. He tries to avoid dogmatic scientism, the view that science is the ultimate and only repository of truth, while also saving the concept of truth from a skeptical or post-modern relativism that would fail to distinguish between science and politics. Common sense wavers between these two positions. To sum up the dilemma, science is either ontology (scientism) or ideology (constructivism).

Scientism implies a contrast between scientific knowledge, which gets at the truth of reality, and culture, which is relative to social circumstances and natural causes such as evolution or brain structure. Science is objective and culture is relative, a local construction. Constructivists are accused of pursuing relativism to its logical conclusion by incorporating science itself into culture. Skeptical relativism dismisses the truth claims of science and treats it as an ordinary social phenomenon, which in some sense it obviously is.

This view is often attributed to Foucault who said, "Truth is a thing of this world."³ But Foucault was actually rather cautious. He confined his critique of science to disciplines such as psychiatry and criminology. He did not concern himself with the validity of these dubious sciences, still less with natural science. He argued that they require specific material conditions and powers which have consequences for their human objects. Knowledge is itself a kind of action when subject and object are both human.

Latour goes further; like the constructivists, he extends the analysis to the natural sciences. This places him squarely in the dilemma addressed in his imaginary dialogue. Nature is either "out there" independent of human beings or it is created through human action. Latour's privileged example is the "creation" of microbes. Either Pasteur's lactic acid ferment, yeast, existed before he discovered it or his discovery created it. Latour affirms the dependence of the phenomena on their discovery. But he insists that despite its worldly character science has a valid claim to knowledge.

According to Latour, the way to avoid relativism is not to pound on the table and exclaim "I refute it thus," but to treat things as legitimate members of an extended idea of society. Nature and society form a constantly interacting whole rather than two separate substances. The sharp distinction between them that characterizes modern thought since Descartes must be overcome by analysis of the actual complexity of their interactions. Once things enter society, they too have a history. "My solution," he writes, "is to historicize more, not less."⁴ The discovery of the lactic acid ferment was an event in its exist-

² Bruno Latour, "The Emperor's Brand New Clothes," *Domus*, 1-2005.

³ Michel Foucault, "Truth and Power," in Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. C. Gordon, trans. C. Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

⁴ Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 169.

tence as well as ours. Reality is not, it becomes.

Gramsci's Absolute Historicism

Latour's distaste for Marxism is well known, but surprisingly his "solution" was anticipated by Gramsci and Lukács, the two founders of Western Marxism. They too argue that the real is ultimately historical and that truth is "a thing of this world." And like Latour they are anxious to avoid scientism while preserving science from the wreckage of the traditional notion of truth. Of course there are big differences, but the common historicism is striking. Gramsci called this pre-post-modern view "absolute historicism," and this is a suggestive description of Lukács's early Marxist theory as well.

In the remainder of this paper I will compare the understanding of truth and reality in the writings of Gramsci and Lukács. Their position has other precedents in the history of philosophy I'll discuss in my conclusion.⁵

Both Gramsci and Lukács were influenced by contemporary versions of idealist philosophy, Gramsci by the neo-Hegelian Croce and Lukács by the neo-Kantians, Rickert and Lask.⁶ These thinkers distinguished meaning from existence. They did not deny the independent existence of reality, but they also claimed that we can have no notion of that reality apart from some humanly instituted meaning. Natural science does not transcend this limitation. It cannot give access to "things in themselves." This approach has interesting consequences for Marxism, while the idealist premise is also transformed in contact with historical materialism.

What makes Gramsci's historicism absolute is the inclusion of science in the history of culture, the "superstructures" in his Marxist vocabulary. Where scientism claims that culture is an effect of natural causes, absolute historicism reverses the direction of influence and interprets nature through the history of culture. The fact that historical research is not firmly grounded in quantitative measurement and experiment does not disqualify it as a valid form of knowledge. It has its own methodological foundation: dialectics, itself relative to a historical situation.

Historicism often supports skepticism, the view that no beliefs are actually true because all are relative to the particular circumstances of their birth. Gramsci does indeed argue that knowing subjects belong to a certain historical moment and can therefore only understand the world through the hegemonic culture prevailing in that moment. But he pushes historicism to its ultimate limit. At that limit historicism ceases to be relativistic. He argues that it is the idea of an unattainable model of perfect knowledge that devalues human knowledge. Relativism presupposes a true reality known to God but hidden from man. If it makes no sense to postulate a reality and a truth beyond culture, then our knowledge is not essentially defective simply because it is culturally inflected. The very definition of truth should be reconsidered if the traditional one has no application at all. I call this view "epistemological atheism."

Here is Gramsci:

It might seem that there can exist an extra-historical and extra-human objectivity.

⁵ For a contemporary version inspired by Kuhn and Foucault rather than Gramsci and Lukács, see Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002).

⁶ See Thomas Nemeth, *Gramsci's Philosophy: A Critical Study* (Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1980); Andrew Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis: Lukács, Marx and the Frankfurt School*. (London and New York: Verso, 2014).

But who is the judge of such objectivity? Who is able to put himself in this kind of ‘standpoint of the cosmos in itself’ and what could such a standpoint mean? It can indeed be maintained that here we are dealing with a hangover of the concept of God.... We know reality only in relation to man, and since man is historical becoming, knowledge and reality are also becoming and so is objectivity.⁷

Gramsci argues accordingly that the idea of a “reality in itself,” apart from any connection to man, makes no sense. The rejection of the notion of a wholly independent reality makes it possible to transcend the dilemma of scientism and relativism. It has a parallel in Lukács, to which I will get in what follows.

In sum, knowledge is a social phenomenon, part of what Gramsci calls “a *historical bloc* in which precisely material forces are the content and ideologies are the form.” Gramsci notes that the distinction is “didactic,” artificial, since the material level of the bloc could not exist without its corresponding ideology, and ideology without a material basis would be mere individual fantasy.⁸ By this he means that societies are held together by a hegemonic culture which is also the basis of knowledge. Knowledge is not an immediate relation of an individual mind to reality, but arises from and reflects the culture. Society is implicated in knowledge on the basis of its relation to nature—“the material forces.”

Gramsci’s historical materialism thus underlies his epistemology. But the matter he invokes is not identical to the nature posited by the natural sciences. Rather, it is the matter actually engaged in the process of production, that is, nature as experienced through the mediation of labor and technology. He writes,

The various physical (chemical, mechanical, etc.) properties of matter... should be considered, but only to the extent that they become a productive ‘economic element.’ Matter as such therefore is not our subject but how it is socially and historically organized for production, and natural science should be seen correspondingly as essentially a historical category, a human relation.⁹

He goes on to dismiss attempts to explain history with the natural scientific concept of causality. This has consequences for the understanding of the results of scientific inquiry. Where scientism interprets those results as ontologically fundamental, and as independent of the process of their construction, Gramsci insists on their historical contingency.

What does this mean for Pasteur? Had Gramsci considered Latour’s argument, he would have said that the problem is not whether yeast existed before it was known, but rather the “ideological” character of the terms on which it is known. Knowledge does not give direct access to a thing in itself that already possesses the meanings we attribute to

⁷ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Q. Hoare and G.N. Smith, eds. and trans. (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 445-446. There is an echo of Nietzsche’s perspectivism here. “Let us, from now on, be on our guard against the hallowed philosophers’ myth of a “pure, will-less, painless, timeless knower”; let us beware of the tentacles of such contradictory notions as “pure reason,” “absolute knowledge,” “absolute intelligence.” All these concepts presuppose an eye such as no living being can imagine, an eye required to have no direction, to abrogate its active and interpretive powers—precisely those powers that alone make of seeing, seeing something. All seeing is essentially perspective and so is all knowing.” (Friedrich Nietzsche, “The Genealogy of Morals,” in *The Birth of Tragedy and the Genealogy of Morals*, F. Golffing, trans. (New York: Doubleday, 1956), p. 255.)

⁸ *Ibid.*, 377.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 465-466.

it. Of course the ferment existed but it did not exist *qua* ferment, and was not so described. Our concept of “lactic acid ferment” belongs to a historical sequence in which these creatures, or at least their effects, were described and understood in different ways at different times, and that sequence is not finished but may lead on to yet further understandings, further designations.¹⁰

It adds nothing and is confusing to claim that reality already had the meaning we give to it today before we gave it that meaning and—this is the critical point—dependent of our relation to it. To reject this confusion is in no way to claim that we created the reality we know by granting it a meaning. It is to acknowledge that the meaning we grant may well be superseded in the future and that therefore no meaning can pretend to describe an ultimate reality independent of humanity. Talk of such a reality as anything more than the occasion for knowledge and action is strictly speaking meaningless.

Gramsci attempts to sum up his position in an example that raises further questions. He notes that the terms “East” and “West” are arbitrary conventions and, furthermore, that these terms are attributed to parts of the globe in accordance with an imperialist logic. “Yet these references are real; they correspond to real facts, they allow one to travel by land and by sea, . . . to understand the objectivity of the external world. Rational and real become one.”¹¹ The terms on which reality is known refer to real entities but the terms themselves are culturally relative.

Does the reality of the “real facts” in this example qualify them as in some sense human-independent despite Gramsci’s earlier rejection of any such thing? In that case he would be advocating a rough version of the position Hans Radder calls “referential realism,” according to which “we can say of terms in scientific propositions *that* they refer to elements in a human-independent reality, but not that these propositions describe reality as it is in itself. . . . This kind of realism implies reference but not correspondence, picturing, reflection, representation, or something like that.”¹² It is impossible to be sure if this is what Gramsci intended. His language is imprecise, but at least we can get an idea of the positions between which he oscillates.

However, there is still an issue with relativism since so many different views contend and “reality” as described by any one of them is no longer a usable measure of truth. The question is not just which one to believe, but whether to believe anything at all since no final test of truth seems to exist once knowledge is totally enclosed by culture. Gramsci has an answer to this skeptical conclusion which is not so different from Latour’s.

Ultimately, he argues, knowledge is a matter of consensus rather than correspondence with a supposed absolute known in its immediate truth only by God. Building a consensus is not easy; it requires serious research. To some extent, this has already been achieved by natural science, but social knowledge remains contested under the influence of conflicting class cultures. Gramsci writes, “Man knows objectively in so far as knowledge is real for the whole human race *historically* unified in a single unified cultural sys-

¹⁰ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 446-448. See also the section of the Notebooks entitled “La Scienza e le Ideologie ‘Scientifiche,’” especially 55, in (Antonio Gramsci, *Il Materialismo Storico* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi, 1966). Latour’s account of the historical “relative existence” of entities posited by science is found in his *Pandora’s Hope*, 155-156.

¹¹ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 447-448.

¹² Hans Radder, *The Material Realization of Science* (Dordrecht Heidelberg New York London: Springer, 2012), 93.

tem.”¹³ But the condition for such a universal consensus is an end to the divisions within the human community that cause so much disagreement. That in turn will require an end to the most basic social division, the division between classes. Thus the triumph of the revolution will not only change laws and economic arrangements. It will also establish the epistemological conditions of true knowledge.

This brief survey of Gramsci’s absolute historicism shows how he would have answered Cheney. Political and military power do not get to the foundation of the real. Neither the truth nor the social relativity of knowledge are to be found at that level. The real foundation is not specific facts, which power can of course create. Rather, it is the state of our ability to control nature, the material base. That depends in turn on knowledge acquired through experience and experiment. The evidence that progress has been made is clear from the cognitive and technical superiority of modern science and technology. Progress is not the result of imperial fiat but of a combination of social and economic developments and cognitive and technological achievements far beyond the power of any state.

Lukács’s Theory of Reification

I will turn now to Lukács’s version of absolute historicism. He would certainly have agreed with Gramsci’s remarks on objectivity, but he has a more elaborate theory of social “form.” Recall that Gramsci says that knowledge belongs to a “historic bloc” of which ideology is the form. By “form” Gramsci means particular beliefs and worldviews which shape society as the hegemonic common sense. Lukács’s concept of form refers not to the content of belief but to the formal structure of consciousness that underlies that content.

Lukács call this a “form of objectivity,” in keeping with his neo-Kantian background. The neo-Kantians argued that knowledge presupposes the construction of objects in accordance with certain fundamental logical principles. These principles put order into our perception of the world. Objectivity is thus constituted rather than immediately given. Lukács historicized this notion, defining cognitive epochs, each with its own form of objectivity, corresponding to the Marxist periodization of modes of production.

Karl Mannheim will later call such a historicized form of objectivity a “total conception of ideology,” a universal perspective on the world rather than a specific content of belief.¹⁴ Such perspectives resemble Kant’s universal preconditions of the possibility of experience, although they are social and multiple rather than singular and transcendental. Gillian Rose explains: “The status of the precondition [of objectivity] becomes ambiguous: it is an *a priori*, that is, not empirical, for it is the basis of the possibility of experience. But a ‘sociological *a priori* is, ex hypothesi, external to the mind, and hence appears to acquire the status of a natural object or cause.”¹⁵

We are familiar with this notion in the simplified version known as cultural relativism. Presumably, each culture has its own perspective on the real which can be summed up in certain principles applied unconsciously to the objects of perception. One famous version of cultural relativism is the so-called “Whorfian hypothesis” according to which each language determines a particular worldview. Kuhn’s theory of scientific revolutions

¹³ Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks.*, 445.

¹⁴ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia: An Introduction to the Sociology of Knowledge*, L. Wirth and E. Shils, trans. (New York: Harcourt Brace. 1936), 57.

¹⁵ Gillian Rose, *Hegel Contra Sociology* (London: Athlone Press, 1981), 14.

argued for the existence of distinct “worlds” corresponding to epochs in the history of science. Medieval and modern science were shown to be “incommensurable.” As a Marxist, Lukács applied something like Kuhn's theory to the “worlds” created by changing modes of production.

Lukács argues that the a priori “form” of capitalism is shaped by what Marx called “commodity fetishism.” Capitalism is unique among social formations in assigning a price to all available goods, quantifying social reality. He calls the result “reification,” from the Latin root “res” for thing. The commodity society is “reified” in the sense that it presents itself as a vast collection of things subject to laws, the laws of the economy.

Reification becomes the general form in which objects are perceived by the members of a capitalist society. But when everything is perceived in terms of its thing-like characteristics, other dimensions are obscured. These other dimensions include the human relations underlying the institutional realities of the society and the potentialities of social development. These are not “facts” and so are excluded from the reigning social sciences of his day.

The reified mode of perception drives the individuals to perform the actions that reproduce the system. The stock market is a good example of this dynamic: the investor acts as an individual on the stock market, predicting future values in terms of the “laws” of the economy, but it is the multiplication of such individual acts that generates those laws and those future values. While the market looks like a “thing,” and is considered as such by economics, in reality it is the systematic consequence of human actions.

Escape from the reified logic of the system is possible, Lukács argues, for the social class which is forced by its everyday circumstances to see the human reality behind the veil of reified appearances. That class is the proletariat which can dereify the society starting out from the gap it perceives between its own reified form as wage labor and the life process of which that form is only an aspect. Here is a social thing that defies its thing-like character.

Lukács writes of the proletariat, “The quantitative differences in exploitation which appeared to the capitalist in the form of quantitative determinants of the objects of his calculation, must appear to the worker as the decisive, qualitative categories of his whole physical, mental and moral existence.”¹⁶ This realization makes it possible for the workers to combine their forces in a social movement to overcome reification. Marxism is the translation of this realization into a method of social analysis that gets behind the reified appearances to the human reality underlying them.

The theory of reification has implications for the concept of objectivity. Like Gramsci, Lukács argues against both scientism and relativism. The relativist must invoke an absolute which devalues the merely human perspective, whether it be God or nature. In every case the relativity of human thought presupposes a sphere of being that is not relative but that is fixed and eternal. Lukács calls this the “systematic place” of being.

In a passage that resembles Gramsci's critique of the God's eye view of reality, he argues that,

It is only meaningful to speak of relativism where an ‘absolute’ is in some sense assumed. The weakness and the half-heartedness of such ‘daring thinkers’ as Nietzsche or Spengler is that their relativism only abolishes the absolute in appearance. For, from the standpoint of both logic and method, the ‘systematic place’ of the

¹⁶ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, R. Livingstone, trans. (Cambridge: MIT, 1971)

absolute is to be found just where the apparent movement stops. The absolute is nothing but the fixation of thought, it is the projection into myth of the intellectual failure to understand reality concretely as a historical process.¹⁷

According to Lukács, nature as understood by the natural sciences is privileged as the systematic place under capitalism. Like Gramsci, Lukács rejects mechanical materialism and the scientism associated with it. The identification of the results of scientific inquiry with the thing in itself, independent of human beings, is a vestige of theology that presupposes a view from nowhere. Science does not have a direct line to nature, but is a social institution. Lukács writes that objectivity is achieved in “the real historical interaction of objective and subjective moments of development...in its living interaction.”¹⁸ This is Lukács’s equivalent of Gramsci’s “historical bloc.” It is the actual experienced world, analyzed in terms of the interaction of human beings and nature, rather than a theoretical representation such as science provides. As the basis on which such representations can be constructed it is ontologically fundamental.

Gramsci could not read Lukács’s work but he seems to have heard rumors that Lukács was a dualist who opposed nature to society. In one passage Lukács denied that nature exhibited the principal features of the dialectic, which he described as the unity of theory and practice, subject and object. In another passage Lukács acknowledges the existence of an objective dialectic of nature lacking these features.¹⁹ But he also claims that “Nature is a societal category.”²⁰ These apparently contradictory affirmations have given rise to much confusion.

I think the undialectical nature to which Lukács refers in the first passage is the nature of natural science, while the ontologically significant nature for Lukács, as for Gramsci, belongs to history and is the object of labor rather than science. That nature, with which human beings are in “living interaction,” is implicated in the unity of theory and practice, subject and object. To be sure, the natural objects of labor are independent of human beings, but Lukács seems to believe they are so only in the sense that their relations to humans are contingent. The objects belong to experience in principle, if not in practice at any given time and place. There is no need to invoke ontological realism to explain their presence in the world. The case is different for human beings; they are never independent of nature both because they are natural beings and because they must appropriate nature to be. From the standpoint of the total process engaging human beings and nature, nature participates in the dialectic of theory and practice, subject and object.²¹

¹⁷ Ibid., 187.

¹⁸ Georg Lukács, *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic*, E. Leslie, trans. (London: Verso, 2000), 101.

¹⁹ Gramsci’s remark is found in Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, 448. Lukács’s two apparently contrary positions are found in Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 24 n6 and 207. For his distinction between the two natures, see Lukács, *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness*, 129-130. See also Andrew Feenberg, “Democracy, Epistemology, Ontology, Methodology” in *Critical Theory and the Thought of Andrew Feenberg*, D. Arnold and A. Michel, eds., (Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2017), 303-313; and Konstantinos Kavoulakos, *Georg Lukács’s Philosophy of Praxis: From Neo-Kantianism to Marxism*, (London: Bloomsbury, 2018), 213-218.

²⁰ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 234.

²¹ Does Adorno’s emphasis on the “priority of the object” contradict absolute historicism? The “non-identity” of subject and object does not reinstitute naïve realism or the Kantian thing in itself. Adorno writes, “That the object takes precedence even though indirect itself does not cut off the subject-object dialectics” (Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, E.B. Ashton, trans. (New York: Seabury, 1973), 186). Both

But can scientific knowledge be reconciled with this absolute historicist account? This is a serious issue for Lukács. His theory of reification attributed a general form of objectivity to society under capitalism. That society appears to its members as a collection of quantifiable facts. But quantifiable facts are precisely the way in which the natural sciences understand reality.²² Are the sciences merely capitalist ideology? Even Gramsci, who locates the natural sciences in the superstructures, concedes that they have a special status because they are also a force of production. How to reconcile these two roles with each other and with absolute historicism?

Lukács distinguishes history and nature by their relation to human action. He argues that the reification of social facts can be overcome by a revolutionary social movement. But that movement cannot overthrow science as though it were a political or economic institution. He writes, “When the ideal of scientific knowledge is applied to nature it simply furthers the progress of science. But when it is applied to society it turns out to be an ideological weapon of the bourgeoisie.”²³ Why? Because unlike wage labor, nature is not a mere appearance veiling a structure of human action. Human action presupposes the nature on which it works, it does not create it. It creates institutions; it does not create stars and planets.

But stars and planets belong to history in a different way, through the cultural conditions of our knowledge of them. Capitalism opens a perspective on nature which makes modern science possible, but that same perspective obscures the dependence of social relations on action. Lukács calls this a “methodological” distinction between nature and society in contrast with an ontological distinction that would divide being into two incommensurable aspects. True, science posits a timeless nature independent of humanity. But science itself belongs to history through its reified presupposition. In sum, Lukács resists the notion that the object of natural science is wholly independent of experience.

This means that modern science cannot be understood as producing an accurate picture of things in themselves. As forms of objectivity change in history, so do the “pictures” of reality. But science is not arbitrary. It validates its truths methodically, if within a cultural framework, in this case, the reified form of objectivity of capitalist society. But here a historical asymmetry appears: all epochs are not equally close to God. Like Gramsci, Lukács argues that modern science represents a progressive development, evident in its increased power over nature. This is a sort of pragmatic criterion, not of individual truths—Gramsci and Lukács have no intention of telling scientists how to do their job—but of forms of objectivity which support more or less successful knowledge systems.

This notion of progress is rooted in the progressive character of reification itself. Reification reflects a social world that has recognized itself as such, that does not attrib-

Brian O’Connor and Deborah Cook agree that the non-identical is a feature of experience, not something beyond experience. See Brian O’Connor, *Adorno’s Negative Dialectic: Philosophy and the Possibility of a Critical Rationality* (Cambridge, MA / London: MIT Press, 2004), 63; Deborah Cook, *Adorno on Nature* (Durham: Acumen Publishing Ltd, 2011), 40. This is already explicit in the tension Lukács notes between working class experience and the category of wage labor, which can be read as an instance of non-identity. See Andrew Feenberg “Why Students of the Frankfurt School Will Have to Read Lukács,” *Handbook for Critical Theory*, M. Thompson, ed. (London: Palgrave, 2016), 117-121.

²² Surprisingly, Ian Hacking makes a similar argument, attributing the rise of modern science to the generalization of economic exchange. Ian Hacking, *Historical Ontology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 13.

²³ *Ibid.*, 10.

ute its origin to a divine source. This is the great cognitive advance made possible by capitalism. The liberation of nature from the irrational makes modern science possible, just as the parallel liberation of society will make socialism possible. However, the process is more complex in the latter case because the aim is itself more complex. Where science seeks to understand the way nature works, its lawful order, social knowledge also informs human action, enabling the individuals to modify reified social relations, the rules of their own collective behavior. Dereification is thus an inherent potential of a reified society, a potential that is only fully actualized under socialism.

Lukács draws an astonishing conclusion from his argument for the sociality of knowledge. All knowledge is culturally conditioned in so far as it depends on a form of objectivity that opens a perspective on the world. Normally, these forms go unchallenged as absolute presuppositions of knowledge. The middle ages made great strides in the advancement of knowledge of nature, all the while believing that nature was designed by God for a purpose. Modern science arose in conjunction with early capitalism, and the machine formed its model of reality. Neither medieval nor modern scientists contested their own implicit idea of nature, which served as the basis of their discoveries.

According to Lukács, when the proletariat overthrows the reified form of objectivity, it changes the general relation of knowledge to culture. In class society,

Truth could only achieve an ‘objectivity’ relative to the standpoint of the individual classes and the objective realities corresponding to it. But as soon as mankind has clearly understood and hence restructured the foundations of its existence truth acquires a wholly novel aspect. When theory and practice are united it becomes possible to change reality and when this happens the absolute and its ‘relativistic’ counterpart will have played their historical role for the last time.²⁴

The term “reality” in this passage refers to the fundamental social relations that produce the institutions of the society. These relations condition the forms of knowledge possible at the given stage of social evolution. Under capitalism the reified form of objectivity both opens ways of knowing and closes off awareness of “reality” in this sense. When this reality becomes the object of conscious choice, as the proletariat dereifies society, the form of objectivity is no longer beyond question. Reflection no longer meets an obstacle at the threshold of knowledge but is limitless. Yet this does not devalue knowledge but reveals it as the human product it has always been. To be sure, the content of knowledge is not an arbitrary human creation; rather, the framework within which knowledge is constructed is social in nature. This is what Lukács means by his claim that the absolute and its correlated relative are finally transcended. In more familiar terms, he is saying that culture loses its quasi-natural character and becomes an object of knowledge and practice.

Is this where Cheney wins the argument? Perhaps not with armies but with television broadcasting and Internet trolls? Surely those with power today have the power to create culture for the rest of us. Has Lukács given weapons to his enemies as Latour’s modernist complains? Not so fast. On Lukács’s terms today’s media managers can create particular cultural objects only by reproducing the reified structure of the cultural system as a whole. Domination through technical control is inscribed in that system and it is reproduced through cultural manipulation on the media. The one thing the dominant can never do is eliminate their own technical relation to their subordinates. This is not evidence of

²⁴ Ibid., 187.

ill will on their part; that relation is quite simply the only way they know how to get things done from their position in society. Thus reification—the ultimate basis of capitalist culture—is reproduced by the culture industry, whatever the content of its productions.

Lukács's argument is a version of Marx's notion of socialism as human control of history. For Lukács history is essentially a succession of cultural forms: "*history is the history of the unceasing overthrow of the forms of objectivity that shape the life of man.*"²⁵ Hence human control of history requires cultural self-reflection. It cannot be arbitrary because it must always start out from the existing cultural forms, which allow only limited possibilities of transformation.

In socialism as Lukács imagined it, cultural self-reflection is a process of dereification leading to an ever more fluid relation between the members of society and the institutional frameworks within which they live. Unfortunately, he has little to say about socialism as human control of culture. There is only one passage which hints at its nature.

The world which confronts man in theory and in practice exhibits a kind of objectivity which—if properly thought out and understood—need never stick fast in an immediacy similar to that of forms found earlier on. This objectivity must accordingly be comprehensible as a constant factor mediating between past and future and it must be possible to demonstrate that it is everywhere the product of man and of the development of society.²⁶

An original concept of socialism can be developed out of this passage, but that is a subject for another paper.²⁷

Marcuse's Marx: The Finite Horizon

Can these unusual interpretations of Marxism find support in Marx's work? Most Marxists draw on Engels' *Anti-Duhring* and its Soviet successors for their philosophical views. It is significant that both Gramsci and Lukács criticized Bukharin's, *Historical Materialism: A System of Sociology*. This early Soviet textbook in Marxist philosophy advocates technological determinism and mechanical materialism, the unfortunate heritage of Engels, crudely interpreted. Gramsci and Lukács have much more sophisticated philosophical positions elaborated in dialogue with the most advanced philosophy of their times. But this raises the suspicion that they are not really Marxists.

Marx's *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 offers the strongest support for their claim to be doing Marxist philosophy, but it was not available to them. This is a puzzling text which has itself been excluded from the properly Marxian corpus by the Althusserians and "orthodox" Marxists. Alfred Schmidt finds a "hidden nature speculation" in the *Manuscripts*.²⁸ Marx writes that "Nature is the inorganic body of man."²⁹ He appears to propound a metaphysics in which nature mediates itself by creating human consciousness. The "metabolism" of man and nature expresses this notion through a biological metaphor. Taken literally, the metaphor obliterates the distinction between history

²⁵ Ibid., 186, trans. modified, italics in original.

²⁶ Ibid., 117.

²⁷ I have discussed this issue in Andrew Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis* (London and New York: Verso, 2014), 112-119,

²⁸ Alfred Schmidt, *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, B. Fowkes, trans. (London: New Left Books, 1971), 79-80.

²⁹ Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, T. B. Bottomore, trans. and ed. (London: C. A. Watts, 1963), 126-127.

and nature and justifies Marx's remarkable claim that "*society* is the accomplished union of man with nature, the veritable resurrection of nature, the realized naturalism of man and the realized humanism of nature."³⁰ This claim supports the rejection of the existing natural sciences which depend on an unhistorical concept of nature.³¹ By contrast, the usual materialist view holds that human beings stand in contingent causal relations with nature.

The metaphysical interpretation arises from a fundamental ambiguity in Marx's text. He repeatedly states that the human being is an objective, natural being associated with real, natural objects, but he also describes the relation between the human being and its objects as one of unity, even ontological interdependence. The attributes of human being belonging to the second description are incompatible with the first description, and indeed suggest the peculiar metaphysics Schmidt detects and most Marxists reject as incompatible with science as we know it.

Marx's text can be "saved" from such a metaphysics by ideas drawn from Dilthey, neo-Kantianism and phenomenology current in the philosophical environment of Marcuse, Gramsci and Lukács. No doubt had Gramsci and Lukács had access to the text, they would have grounded their absolute historicism in it. In fact, the task fell to Marcuse, shortly after the *Manuscripts* were published in 1932.

Marcuse was still influenced by Heidegger at this time and the influence shows in his ontological interpretation of Marx's argument. Heidegger's ontological concept of "world" is the key notion that links his interpretation to Heidegger. Recall that "world" is exemplified in *Being and Time* as a workshop consisting of tools that refer to each other (for example, hammers refer to nails), and ultimately to Dasein, which grants them their purpose. Dasein's "care," or concern for its own future being, orients the system of references. This apparently subjective concept Heidegger treats as the original, ontologically fundamental "opening" or revelation of meaning. His remarkable innovation is to treat meaning and the recognition of meaning as primarily practical. Meanings are not just in the mind but are "enacted;" they inhabit human action and define the objects of action as well.³² Subject and object are united in this practical relation to meaning. Heidegger understands objective knowledge as the result of de-worlding entities in order to reveal aspects not specifically engaged by Dasein's care. This distinction allows him to accept the validity of the existing natural sciences while denying that they ground worlds. The primordial ontological relation is a unified "being-in-the-world."

Marcuse's early essay on labor follows this approach. The echo of Heidegger is clear in propositions such as this: "Human praxis is labor on and in the present through the transformative 'sublation' of the past with anticipatory care for the future."³³ But as a Marxist Marcuse rejected the dependence of Heidegger's conception on a universalized

³⁰ Ibid., 157.

³¹ Ibid., 164.

³² An "enacted" meaning is one which is lived in experience rather than formulated explicitly. When one sits in a chair, one enacts the meaning "chair" although it is unnecessary to conceive that meaning consciously to perform the operation. Sitting on a chair involves recognition of a meaning—chairs are "for" sitting. Books stacked on a chair cannot experience this "for" but are simply obstructed in their downward movement. Nothing about this distinction implies either the unreality of chairs or the subjectivity of the meaning, "chair."

³³ Herbert Marcuse, "On the Concept of Labor in Economics," in *Heideggerian Marxism*, eds. Richard Wolin and John Abromeit, (Lincoln and London: University Nebraska Press, 2005), 141.

individual, *Dasein*, and its abstract care for its own identity. In other early essays published while he was Heidegger's student, he argued instead that worlds are differentiated by the class status of human subjects and are rooted in the mode of production. In Marx's concept of need he found a more concrete version of "care." But he still granted the ontological priority of the practical relation to reality as a system of meanings corresponding to the concerns of subjects, a "world" in something like Heidegger's sense. In Marcuse's revision of phenomenology the unity of subject and object is mediated by labor which itself is understood as enacting meanings brought to bear on nature in its transformation and incorporation into history.

Marcuse follows Heidegger in finding the original source of this approach in Dilthey. In *Being and Time* Heidegger lays down the principles of his own absolute historicism in a section on Count Yorck's correspondence with Dilthey. The essential point is the unity of the "ontical" and the historical. By this Heidegger means that beings in general must be explained *essentially* in terms of a historical ontological, rather than treated as a separate domain, nature, indifferent to history.³⁴ Marcuse shares Heidegger's appreciation of Dilthey. He argues that Dilthey's concept of the cultural objectification of life anticipates Heidegger's ontological concept of historicity. Meaning then becomes a fundamental ontological category of historical being. Marcuse writes that for Dilthey, "Life is an interaction complex (*Wirkungszusammenhang*) which is essentially determined by the category of 'meaning' (*Bedeutung*)."³⁵ Admittedly, the connection to Heidegger is not explicit in Marcuse's later essay on the *Manuscripts*, but it helps to understand his idiosyncratic interpretation of Marx.

In fact, Marcuse would later date his break with Heidegger from his encounter with this early Marxian text. But the break was not complete because through his studies with Husserl and Heidegger, Marcuse gained insights that persist in his thought in one form or another to the end. Those insights show up in his interpretation of Hegel and Marx. Specifically, Marcuse distinguishes meaning from existence along lines similar to the idealists and phenomenologists who influenced Gramsci and Lukács. On this basis he distinguishes implicitly the concept of "'nature' in the wider sense given to this concept by Marx [in the *Manuscripts*], as also by Hegel" from the nature of natural science.³⁶ This "wider sense" is articulated in phrases like the following: "Not only man emerges in history, but also nature, in so far as it is not something external to and separated from the human essence but belongs to the transcended and appropriated objectivity of man: 'world history' is 'the emergence of nature for man.'"³⁷

By distinguishing two senses of nature Marcuse finesses the conflict between Marx's early critique of the natural sciences and his later acceptance of their validity. He can echo the *Manuscripts*' thesis of the unity of history and nature without the negative cri-

³⁴ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, J. Macquarrie & E. Robinson, trans. (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 455.

³⁵ Herbert Marcuse, "Der Problem der geschichtlichen Wirklichkeit," in *Herbert Marcuse: Der deutsche Künstlerroman Frühe Aufsätze*. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978), 480. A partial French translation of this important text is available in Gérard Raulet, *Herbert Marcuse: Philosophie de l'Emancipation* (Paris: PUF, 1992), 99-102.

³⁶ Herbert Marcuse, "New Sources on the Foundation of Historical Materialism," in *Heideggerian Marxism*, eds. Richard Wolin and John Abromeit, (Lincoln and London: University Nebraska Press, 2005), 97

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 102. See also Marcuse, "On the Concept of Labor in Economics," 139.

tique.³⁸ In any case, when he read the *Manuscripts*, he was ready for them, although by this time he had for the most part dropped explicit reference to Heidegger.

The *Manuscripts* define the essence of the human being as “sensuousness.” Exactly what this means is unclear. Although Marcuse echoes Marx’s insistence that “man” is an “objective natural being,” he is at pains to distinguish the concept of “sensuousness” from materialism. The sensuous relation to objects is not a causal relation to matter but rather refers to the concept of receptivity in Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*.

In Kant the senses are the receptive faculty; they receive the given in experience which is then structured by the mind. This is a passive relation Marx expands to include needs, which he calls “ontological affirmations of being (of nature).”³⁹ Whatever Marx originally meant by this strange proposition, in Marcuse’s interpretation it refers to a necessary correlation between needs and the means of satisfaction. The ontological interpretation of needs binds them to their objects in an essential unity. This unity cannot be understood in the trivial sense that human beings are natural beings. Rather it suggests the interdependence of object and subject at a deeper level, which Marcuse takes to be the level of meaning. Hunger and food do not relate as two separate things but as meanings that require each other to be intelligible. But this is not subjective idealism. Like Gramsci finding his way between East and West in the real world, Marcuse conceives meaning as access to the real.⁴⁰ The real in this context is nature as it is experienced, not the nature of natural science. This lived nature is objective, but it belongs to human history, as do human needs.

Similarly, Marcuse insists that the human essence is also historical: “We are no longer dealing with an abstract human essence, which remains equally valid at every stage of concrete history, but with an essence which can be defined in *history* and *only* in history.”⁴¹ As Marx defines it, this historically inflected essence is “species being,” often taken to mean that human beings are cooperative beings who depend on society for their full development.

This is not Marcuse’s peculiar interpretation of the concept of “species being.” Rather, the human being is characterized by what Marcuse calls, in the original German, “*die Sich-verhalten-Können zum ‘Algemeinen’ der Gegenstände.*” The English translation states that the human being has the ability to “relate” to beings through their “species,” their “general aspects,” their meaning. This reveals possibilities which go beyond their immediate state. Human freedom is based on this ability which the German text identifies as a mode of comportment, an essential power.⁴²

That power is exercised in labor, as distinct from the animals’ immediate relation to nature. Labor responds to physical needs, but also to the spiritual needs of the social human being. It is a practical engagement with a world encountered through its meaning. That engagement consists in “objectifying” human being in nature.

³⁸ The mature Marx still refers to this unity but he interprets it objectivistically, in terms of the introduction of historical considerations into natural science, for example, evolutionary theory.

³⁹ Karl Marx, *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, ed. and trans. T. Bottomore (London: C.A. Watts, 1963), 189.

⁴⁰ This is what in actor-network theory might be called a “material-semiotics.”

⁴¹ Marcuse, “New Sources on the Foundation of Historical Materialism,” 105-106.

⁴² Herbert Marcuse “Neue Quellen zur Grundlegung des Historischen Materialismus,” in *Der Deutsche Künstlerroman, Frühe Aufsätze* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979), 522. Marcuse, “New Sources on the Foundation of Historical Materialism,” 96.

“Objectification” is another ambiguous concept which, like “sensuousness” and “species being” Marcuse interprets in an unusual way. Objectification is not merely a contingent causal relation between separate substances, but rather, actualizes the object, grants it its appropriate form. This is the sense of Marcuse’s reference to Hegel for whom the actual is not immediate but results from the labor of the Concept, here reinterpreted as actual labor. “It is man’s ‘need’ – as already interpreted above – for objects alien to him, ‘overpowering’ and ‘not part of his being’, to which he must relate *as if* they were external objects, although *they only become real objects through and for him.*”⁴³

Marx, as Marcuse understands him, thus affirms the implication of human being in being as such. The connection is inescapable once both subject and object are interpreted in terms of a phenomenological concept of meaning. Marcuse writes,

In this freedom man reproduces ‘the whole of nature’, and through transformation and appropriation furthers it, along with his own life, even when this production does not satisfy an immediate need. Thus the history of human life is at the same time essentially the history of man’s objective world and of ‘the whole of nature’ (‘nature’ in the wider sense given to this concept by Marx, as also by Hegel). Man is not in nature; nature is not the external world into which he first has to come out of his own inwardness. Man is nature. Nature is his ‘expression’, ‘his work and his reality’.⁴⁴

Conclusion

Like Gramsci, Marx dismisses as meaningless any attempt to think reality in abstraction from human being, as in the idea of creation. I call this a “finite horizon” of knowledge. It characterizes many thinkers in the 19th and 20th centuries, for example, Nietzsche, Husserl, Heidegger and Foucault. Marx’s version is expressed in a remarkable paragraph that reads like a Zen *koan*.

If you ask a question about the creation of nature and man you abstract from nature and man. You suppose them non-existent and you want me to demonstrate that they exist. I reply: give up your abstraction and at the same time you abandon your question. Or else, if you want to maintain your abstraction, be consistent, and if you think of man and natures as non-existent, think of yourself too as non-existent, for you are also man and nature. Do not think, do not ask me any questions, for as soon as you think and ask questions your abstraction from the existence of nature and man becomes meaningless.⁴⁵

A similar idea is expressed in Heidegger’s *Being and Time*. The idea of an “absolute subject” is dismissed as a “residue of Christian theology” and therewith of any access to the real apart from that of *Dasein*.⁴⁶ But *Dasein* has access to the real only through the meanings granted by *das Man*, that is, by culture. Hence the notion of a reality “in itself”

⁴³ Marcuse, "New Sources on the Foundation of Historical Materialism," 112, my italics.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 97.

⁴⁵ Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts," in *Karl Marx: Early Writings*, trans. and ed. Tom B. Bottomore, (London: C. A. Watts, 1963), 166.

⁴⁶ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John MacQuarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper & Row, 1962), 272.

is meaningless as strictly nothing can be said about it.⁴⁷

Here is Heidegger's more theoretically rigorous version of Marx's formulation of the finite horizon of thought and being. "The independence of things at hand from humans is not altered by the fact that this very independence as such is possible only if humans exist. The being in themselves of things not only becomes unexplainable without the existence of humans, it becomes utterly meaningless; but this does not mean that the things themselves are dependent upon humans."⁴⁸ And he too has a *koan*: "When Dasein does not exist, 'independence' 'is' not either, nor 'is' the 'in-itself.' In such a case this sort of thing can be neither understood nor not understood...*In such a case* it cannot be said that entities are, nor can it be said that they are not."⁴⁹

Gramsci and Lukács each present variants of the finite horizon. As I have shown, they affirm the historical nature of being. History itself is ultimately based on the form of the interaction in production of human beings with nature. Marcuse finds this notion in the *Manuscripts* and imports Lukács's concept of reification into his account of it. Reality "is" in Heidegger's sense only relative to the cultural meanings that emerge from human interaction, and these meanings themselves change over time. But so long as reality "is," that is so long as it is encountered in history with the meanings that prevail at the time, it has the independence from human beings required by a non-relativistic concept of truth.

Abstract from human participation in that all-encompassing concept of history and there is nothing left to "say," no meaningful way of signifying the "things in themselves" that so troubled Kant. Like Marx, Gramsci and Lukács could object to those who seek a reality "in itself," "Do not think, do not ask me any questions, for as soon as you think and ask questions your abstraction from the existence of nature and man becomes meaningless."

Gramsci and Lukács historicize science under such a finite horizon without falling into skeptical relativism or reducing it to power. The fact that they are Marxists links this approach to political action. They anticipated the coming of a radically different social world in which truth would be a "thing of this world" not just in theory but in practice as well.⁵⁰

A coherent version of their historicist position can be summed up in four basic propositions:

1. scientific knowledge reflects a limited standpoint on reality, hence no naturalism or scientism;
2. experience gives the only access to the real through culturally specific meanings;
3. human being is therefore implicated in ontology;
4. the progressive development of human being and knowledge of reality is evidenced by the growth of technical control over natural processes.

The discussion of these propositions in the preceding pages makes it clear that the question of reality is more complicated than Cheney imagined. STS would certainly

⁴⁷ I follow the interpretation offered by Herman Philipse, "Heidegger's 'Scandal of Philosophy': The Problem of the *Ding an Sich* in *Being and Time*," in *Transcendental Heidegger*, S. Crowell and J. Malpas, eds. (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 2007), 169-198.

⁴⁸ Martin Heidegger and Aristotle, *Aristotle's Metaphysics 1-3: On the Essence and Actuality of Force*, trans. Walter Brogan and Peter Warnek. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 173-174.

⁴⁹ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, 255. The original passage is found in Martin Heidegger, *Sein und Zeit* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1967), 212.

⁵⁰ I develop this concept in Feenberg, *The Philosophy of Praxis*, chapter 3.

agree. Latour argues that a phenomenon such as Pasteur's ferment is constructed by the whole network of objects and procedures through which it is discovered. Even after the discovery, it cannot subsist independent of the network. It continues to rely on the activities which made it real in the first place as it is reproduced across space and time. The network stands in the place of the transcendental conditions Gramsci and Lukács locate in the historical bloc or the form of objectivity.

But this does not mean that "anything goes." Latour, no more than Gramsci and Lukács, intends to strip method and care from the construction of knowledge. The work of construction takes skills that, as the example of Pasteur shows, have nothing to do with force.⁵¹ Human action is implicated in the construction of reality, but not simply through the exercise of power. There are many types of action and that of empires and their armies is not alone, nor even pre-eminent, in transforming the world. In the long run creativity and knowledge play a greater role.⁵² Marxism acknowledges another sphere of action in which creativity and knowledge find their roots: "the production and reproduction of real life." That sphere creates worlds; it is more fundamental than empire. The notion that knowledge-making is a worldly activity is the great insight Gramsci and Lukács attempted to validate in their absolute historicism as an alternative to scientism and relativism.

⁵¹ Where Latour's concept of science departs from these predecessors is in his explicit rejection of the universality of conceptual reference, reducing it to its conditions of construction much as Marxism reduces social institutions to underlying social processes. Whether this radical dereification of science is successful is in dispute. See Hans Radder, *The world Observed / The World Conceived* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006), 145-153.

⁵² For a time Heidegger blurred the distinction, comparing state action to artistic production as world-constituting *technai* but he quickly retreated from the comparison. His later work gives up on any human-historical intervention into being.