

The Philosophy of Praxis: Marx, Lukács and the Frankfurt School

Andrew Feenberg

In 1844, Marx wrote that “Philosophy can only be realized by the abolition of the proletariat, and the proletariat can only be abolished by the realization of philosophy” (Marx, 1963: 59). Adorno later commented, “Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed” (Adorno, 1973: 3). What is the meaning of this strange concept of a “realization” of philosophy? The purpose of this talk is to sketch an answer to this question which is more fully developed in my forthcoming book, entitled *The Philosophy of Praxis: Marx, Lukács, and the Frankfurt School*.

Gramsci used the phrase “philosophy of praxis” as a code word for Marxism in his *Prison Notebooks*. It has come to signify interpretations of Marxism that follow his lead in situating all knowledge in a cultural context, itself based on a class specific worldview. Gramsci called this “absolute historicism.” It characterizes the Hegelian Marxism of Marx’s early work, Lukács, Korsch, Bloch, and the Frankfurt School. I will refer to this trend as philosophy of praxis to distinguish it from other interpretations of Marxism.

The philosophy of praxis holds that fundamental philosophical problems are in reality social contradictions abstractly conceived. These contradictions appear as practical problems without solutions, reflected in cultural dilemmas. Philosophy treats them as theoretical antinomies, insoluble conundrums over which the thinkers struggle without reaching a convincing solution or consensus. They include the antinomies of value and fact, freedom and necessity, individual and society and, ultimately, subject and object. Traditional philosophy is thus theory of culture that does not know itself as such. Philosophy of praxis does know itself as cultural theory and interprets the antinomies accordingly as sublimated expressions of social contradictions.

This argument has two implications: on the one hand, philosophical problems are significant insofar as they reflect real social contradictions; on the other hand, philosophy cannot resolve the problems it identifies because only social revolution can eliminate their causes. As Marx says in his eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point is to *change* it” (Marx, 1967:402). But as we will see, the change envisaged by philosophy of praxis encompasses nature as well as society, creating new and puzzling antinomies.

The most developed version of this argument is Lukács’ notion of the “antinomies of bourgeois thought.” Hegel claimed that the fundamental task of philosophy is overcoming the antinomies and reconciling their poles. Lukács accepted Hegel’s view but argued that this is not a speculative task. The antinomies arise from the limitations of capitalist practice, its individualistic bias and technical orientation which he calls “reification.” They cannot, therefore, be resolved theoretically.

Consider the “antinomy” of value and fact. Philosophy has struggled with this antinomy ever since scientific reason replaced Aristotelian teleology. Most modern philosophers have tried

to rationally justify moral values so as to avoid their reduction to mere preferences, despite their expulsion from nature by modern science. Lukács argued that this procedure is misguided. The underlying problem is the dominant understanding of rationality and the corresponding concept of reality in capitalist society. Science exemplifies these categories for philosophy but they have a social origin in the structure of market relations and the capitalist labor process. It is in this context that values appear opposed to a reality defined by obedience to economic laws indifferent to humanity. So far the argument appears relativistic and reductionist, but Lukács reached the startling conclusion that a transformation of social reality can alter the form of rationality and the nature of reality and thus resolve the antinomy.

I call this a “metacritical” argument. It takes the abstract concepts of value and fact, grounds them in their social origin and then resolves their contradiction at that level. Lukács applied this approach to the fundamental antinomy of subject and object. His argument has three moments: first, sociological desublimation of the philosophical concept of the subject which, from its idealist definition as transcendental *cogito* is redefined as a living and laboring human being; second, reconceptualizing the relation of the desublimated subject to the objective world in accordance with the structure of the cognitive subject-object relation in idealist philosophy; third, resolving the antinomies that arise in this context through projecting a revolution in the relations of the desublimated terms. Metacritique in this sense underlies the philosophy of praxis.

The four philosophers I discuss in this talk develop the metacritical argument under specific historical conditions. Differences in these conditions explain much of the difference between them since philosophy of praxis depends on a historical circumstance—the more or less plausible revolutionary resolution of the antinomies.

Marx first proposed a consistent version of the philosophy of praxis. He wrote at the beginning of the proletarian movement in a backward society with a sophisticated philosophical culture, conditions that favored a broadly speculative conception of the future. He projected a total revolution, transforming not only society but also experience and nature. He dismissed modern science as alienated and promised a new science uniting man and nature, subject and object. The rather fantastical quality of these speculations gave way to a sober scientific analysis of capitalism in later works that restrict the metacritical argument to political economy.

The early Marx sought a resolution of the antinomies through revolution. His concepts of the subject as a natural being, of objectification of human faculties through labor, and the revolutionary overcoming of capitalist alienation correspond to the three moments of metacritique. From this perspective the *Manuscripts* of 1844 appear as a historicized ontology with a normative dimension. They promise the “realization” of philosophy in social reality.

Marx’s argument begins with an analysis of the place of revolution in political philosophy. Revolution has been justified in modern times either on the grounds that the existing state is an obstacle to human happiness, or because it violates fundamental rights. There are thus both teleological and deontological grounds for revolution. Marx introduced an original deontological ground which he called the “demands of reason.” Idealism originally formulated these demands as the resolution of the antinomies of thought and being, subject and object.

The early work developed the argument in three stages. Marx started out from the antinomy of moral citizenship in the bourgeois state versus economic need in civil society. Citizen and man are moved by completely different and conflicting motives, the one by universal, rational laws, the other by individual advantage. In a first stage, he showed the importance of transcending this opposition but did not explain how needs can be harmonized and universalized to overcome their competitive nature. He argued next that the proletariat is the agent of revolution and as such tasked with resolving the antinomy of man and citizen. But since he did not clarify the relation of reason to need, this argument creates a new antinomy of Marxist theory and proletarian practice. Has the proletarian revolution anything to do with Marx's project? What sort of practical, material motivation in society would correspond with Marx's philosophical goals? The third phase of the argument answered these questions with a metacritical deconstruction of the antinomy of reason and need.

The key to understanding Marx's *Manuscripts* is their radical redefinition of need as the ontologically fundamental relation to reality. If need rather than knowledge is fundamental, the claims of idealist philosophy to derive being from the thinking subject are overturned. But Marx did not simply reject the idealist formulation. On his ontological account, need is not accidentally related to the natural means of satisfaction but is essentially correlated with nature. That correlation is lived out in work, which objectifies human faculties in nature while fulfilling needs. This is the "true" unity of subject and object, similar in form and function to idealism's cognitive unity. The liberation of the subject of need from the law of the market thus satisfies the demands of reason and grounds Marx's revolutionary critique of the alienation of labor. The antinomies are overcome in history, not just the antinomy of man and citizen which emerged from his first essays on politics, but the ontologically fundamental antinomy of subject and object as well.

But is this a plausible claim? The goal of idealist philosophy is to demonstrate the unity of subject and object by showing the *constitution* of the object by the subject. What happens to this ambition if subject and object are redefined as natural beings? In the context of philosophy of praxis this gives rise to a new antinomy of society and nature: can a living social subject constitute nature? Marx's *Manuscripts* answer "yes": nature is reduced to a human product through labor and sensation, understood as socially informed and thus constitutive of a specifically human dimension of the objective world.

But surely nature existed before human beings and does not depend on them for its existence. Natural science studies this independent nature which appears as true reality. If this is so, history is an insignificant corner of the universe and human being is a merely natural fact without ontological significance.

Naturalism is thus a central challenge to philosophy of praxis from the very start. Marx rejected it, arguing that if you imagine nature independent of human beings you imagine yourself as questioner out of existence. In short, nature independent of human beings is a meaningless postulate, not a concrete reality. Marx condemned the "view from nowhere" as a leftover from the theological notion of a disembodied subject. His idea of nature was not that of modern natural science which he considered a mere abstraction. His nature is experienced in need, perceived by the socialized senses, and mastered by labor. This lived nature has a historical

dimension the nature of natural science lacks. Marx called for the creation of a new science of lived nature that encompassed that dimension. We will see that Lukács faced a similar challenge although he solved it differently and more plausibly.

Although Lukács' version of the philosophy of praxis has similarities with that of the early Marx, he was influenced primarily by Marx's later works. His most important theoretical innovation, the concept of reification, combines Weber's theory of rationalization with Marx's critiques of the fetishism of commodities and mechanized labor.

There is much confusion in the literature about the meaning of reification. According to its etymology, "reification" is the reduction of human relations to relations between things. For Lukács, the word "thing" in this context has a specific meaning: an object of factual knowledge and technical control. Reification is not a mental state but constitutes the society through a specific pattern of beliefs and practices. Lukács generally avoided the word "culture," but reification belongs to what we would call the culture of capitalism.

Writing at a time when invasive social rationalization threatened to overwhelm Europe, Lukács interpreted Marx's analysis of capitalist economic rationality as the paradigm and source of the modern conception of rationality as such. The economic limitations of capitalism are the model for Lukács' analysis of the limitations of rationality in every sphere. These limitations have to do with what Lukács calls "formalism."

Reified economic rationality is formal in the sense that it abstracts from specific qualitative contents to quantitative determinations, e.g. price. The form/content dialectic is played out in the contradiction between the abstract economic form of the worker as seller of labor power and his or her concrete life process which overflows the boundaries of that form. The tension between form and content is not merely conceptual but leads to crisis and revolution. The theory of reification thus builds a bridge between Marx's crisis theory and the intensifying cultural and philosophical crises of early 20th century capitalist society, all of which Lukács attributes to the formal character of modern rationality in every sphere.

Lukács developed this argument through a critical history of philosophy. Reified thought, as exemplified by Kant, takes the scientific-technical relation to nature as the model of the subject-object relation. But just as capitalist economic rationality is correlated with a content it cannot fully embrace, much escapes a rationality modeled on science. With Kant the contradiction of form and content is generalized to knowledge as such. The content that does not go into the formal concepts without remainder appears as the thing-in-itself. The antinomy of subject and object divides the knowing subject from ultimate reality.

Kant's three critiques of pure and practical reason and aesthetic judgment correspond to the three attempts in classical German philosophy to resolve the antinomies of a formalistic concept of rationality. Three demands of reason emerge from this "philosophical experience." First, the principle of practice, according to which only a practical subject can overcome the antinomy of form and content. Second, the identification of history with reality, because only in history is practice effective at the ontological level. Third, dialectical method, which overcomes

the limitation of rational explanation to formal laws. Lukács organized his account of post-Kantian philosophy around the struggle to meet these demands which Marxism finally fulfills.

Lukács argued that the metacritical desublimation of the concept of rationality in Marxism makes possible a resolution of the antinomies of classical German philosophy, social antinomies such as the conflict of value and fact, freedom and necessity, but also the ontological antinomy of subject and object exemplified by the thing-in-itself. The contradictions are resolved by an “identical subject-object” for which knowledge and reality are one. The proletariat is this subject-object because in consciousness of its reified condition *qua* mass of exploited individuals, it rises above that condition and transforms itself and the society through collective action. The revolution invoked by the third moment of the metacritique satisfies the demands of reason.

But the meaning of this argument is obscure. Is the proletariat a metaphysical agent, a constituting subject *à la* idealism, a version of the transcendental ego, positing the existing world. Or does it, as I argue, mediate the *meaning* of reified social reality in a continuous process of which it is a part? I call this latter interpretation a “methodological” concept of revolution. It does not substantialize the proletariat nor view dereification as the achievement of a final unreified state of affairs. Rather reified institutions and social relations produce collective subjects which contest the reified forms from within.

This alternative is a permanent source of controversy over the meaning of Lukács’ work. The disagreement is especially relevant to Lukács’ considerations on nature and natural science because it is here that the metaphysical interpretation leads to the most dubious consequences. I argue that Lukács is betrayed by his rhetorical references to idealism but actually holds a much more plausible dialectical view. In fact, he denied that nature “in itself” is constituted by historical practice. Is this an inconsistency? How then can proletarian revolution resolve the antinomies if nature “in itself” lies beyond history?

Lukács lived in an advanced society in which science and technology played an essential role; he could not envisage their total overthrow as had the early Marx. He had to find a more subtle version of the revolutionary resolution of the antinomy of subject and object. For this purpose he drew on the neo-Kantian distinction between meaning and existence. Reification is a “form of objectivity,” that is, an apriori condition of meaning. This is not exactly a Kantian apriori since it is enacted in social reality by human beings, rather than by an abstract subject that can never be an object. Nevertheless, it operates at the level of the intelligibility of the world even as it plays a material role in the practical activities that constitute that world. Transposing the antinomy of subject and object to this level makes their reconciliation in a unity possible.

On these terms, the subject need not posit the material existence of nature to overcome the antinomy. Instead, the question is reformulated in terms of the relation of the subject to the system of meanings in which the world is lived and enacted. That relation takes two different forms which are, in effect, “methods,” both cognitive and practical. What Lukács rather confusingly called the “contemplative” method of natural science posits reified facts and laws. Science is contemplative not because it is passive, but in the sense that it constructs the world as a system of formal laws that cannot be changed by a dereifying practice. Contemplative method

produces truths about nature but it is ideological in its social scientific application. Social institutions can be transformed ontologically by human action which, in modifying their meaning, changes their actual functioning. Lukács claimed that a transformative relation to society is a condition for true knowledge of it. He called this the “unity of theory and practice.”

This methodological distinction between contemplative and transforming practice is central to the argument. Both are social, although in different ways. All forms of knowledge depend on historically specific apriori constructions of experience. The nature of natural science is a product of one such cultural form, the contemplative form, and so belongs to history even as it posits a world of facts and laws beyond the reach of historical practice. Lukács thus incorporated science into history through its apriori form of objectivity, not through the constitution of its factual content. The dualism of nature and society is methodological, not metaphysical and is situated within a larger social framework. It thus satisfies the requirements of philosophy of praxis.

I turn now to the Frankfurt School. Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse wrote in the wake of the revolutionary tide that carried Lukács forward to communism. The Frankfurt School’s critique of science and technology is a direct descendent of the theories of alienation and reification. These philosophers agreed with Lukács that the capitalist construction of experience lies at the basis of the scientific worldview. The limitations of that worldview are manifest in the forms of rationalization characterizing modernity and the crises and pathologies they provoke.

The Frankfurt School philosophers believed that socialism could resolve the antinomies in principle, but the revolutionary potential of the proletariat was in precipitous decline. In Adorno and Horkheimer the historical thesis of the philosophy of praxis serves primarily to support uncompromising social critique. Even if the alternative is only an abstract possibility, the existing society can be judged by contrast with it.

With *Dialectic of Enlightenment* the focus shifts from class issues to the domination of nature and the structure of modern experience. This text criticizes the unbounded extension of instrumental rationality in modern societies. The underlying purpose of rationality is self-preservation. The modern technical form of rationality splits the instrumental subject from the object, blinding the subject to its own natural basis. As a result the instinctual struggle for survival triumphs within the rational forms and twists them to destructive ends. This is the revenge of suppressed nature. The authors invoked the potential of reflective reason to reconcile humanity and nature through “mindfulness of nature in the subject,” that is, through recognition of human limits, the fact that human beings and rationality itself belong to nature too. The meta-critical pattern is apparent here.

While he rejected the Lukácsian identical subject-object, Adorno’s later concepts of identity and non-identity recapitulate the form/content dialectic of reification. Identity thinking is formal. It impoverishes experience by “identifying” the experienced object with the abstract concepts that subsume it in thought while erasing more complex connections and potentialities. The lost content is recaptured by the dialectical study of concrete experience. We can get a hint of what we miss from art and reflection.

Adorno proposed a “rational critique of rationality.” He recognized the essential role of instrumental reason while resisting the exorbitant form it takes under capitalism. For example, he argued that the machine is both an oppressive instrument of capitalist domination and contains a promise of service to all humanity through its objective form. He made similar arguments in relation to the market and other modern institutions, but these arguments are never developed beyond brief aphorisms. The concept of “formal bias” I have introduced in my critical theory of technology develops this aspect of Adorno’s argument as a critical method.

Marcuse’s philosophy of praxis was influenced not only by Marx, Lukács and Horkheimer and Adorno, but also by Husserl and Heidegger. Marcuse shared Adorno’s critique of instrumental reason, which he formulated in terms of a “two-dimensional” ontology. Like Adorno’s concepts of identity and non-identity, Marcuse’s “dimensions” refer to the reified form of the object and its wider connections and potentialities blocked by the existing society. The phenomenological concepts of experience and lifeworld are invoked to explain the flawed inheritance of science and technology and the promise of the New Left.

Marcuse’s metacritique of science and technology tied them to their source in the capitalist exploitation of human beings and the earth. Technological domination increasingly restricts experience and knowledge to their instrumental aspects. Revolution will transform the historically evolved “apriori” conditions of experience that emerge from the capitalist project. A new mode of experience structured by a new apriori will reveal potentialities intrinsic to its objects, the second dimension. Just as reified “technological rationality” is derived from the lifeworld of capitalism, so a radically different rationality is promised by this new mode of experience. This dialectical rationality will incorporate the imagination as the faculty through which the reified form of things is transcended.

According to Marcuse, the new emancipatory form of experience relates to nature and other human beings non-instrumentally, as subjects rather than reducing everything to raw materials in an exploitative project. Contrary to Habermas’s famous critique, this does not imply conversational familiarity, but rather recognition of the integrity of the object as a substance with its own potentialities. In Marcuse, the subject-object antinomy is overcome not through objectification as in Marx, or the unity of theory and practice as in Lukács, but through shared participation in a community of nature.

But the critique of technological rationality in Marcuse is ambiguous and requires significant revision. His concept of nature is unclear. Did he intend to “re-enchant” the nature of natural science, or was his theory aimed at a reform of technological design? A clarification of Marcuse’s rather confusing statements suggests that he was primarily concerned with the politics of technology, which must be redesigned to reflect the potentialities of both human beings and nature. Human subject and natural object will be reconciled in a world transformed in accordance with the potentialities of both.

Marcuse reached more positive conclusions than Adorno although he too found no effective agent of change. He argued that the New Left movements of the 1960s and ‘70s were not revolutionary agents but their “new sensibility” prefigured an emancipatory mode of

experience. Revolution in an advanced society is at least a “real possibility” in Hegel’s sense on this basis. Marcuse thus constructed a final version of the philosophy of praxis.

Much of his thought applies to contemporary social movements, such as the environmental movement, that grew out of the New Left and continue in new forms many of its contributions to radicalism. These movements address the limitations of technical disciplines and designs in terms of the lessons of experience. Often these lessons are reformulated on the basis of counter-expertise in critiques of the dominant approaches. Ordinary people—workers, consumers, victims of pollution—are often the first to notice and protest dangers and abuses. In other cases, users may identify unexploited potentialities of the systems they use and open them up through hacking. This is how the Internet was re-functioned as a communication medium. More generally, the Precautionary Principle is a reformulation of the traditional virtue of prudence in modern technical terms.

In all these cases the basic structure of the meta-critique holds. The desublimation of rationality takes the form of a social critique of rational technical disciplines. The place of need in Marx, of consciousness in Lukács and of the “new sensibility” in Marcuse is now occupied by practical-critical experience with technology in the lifeworld. Labor and class are no longer theoretically central although that certainly does not mean that they are unimportant politically. Labor is one domain of the lifeworld in which people have significant experiences that are brought into relation with the rational forms of technology through various types of social engagement and struggle. But there are other ways of encountering technology that issue in a critical relation to technical disciplines and designs.

These movements offer no more than prefigurations of a more democratic structure of modernity. Marcuse’s caution in evaluating the promise of the New Left is just as appropriate here. Social struggle can teach us something about a possible transformation of the relation between reason and experience, but that is a far cry from predicting a revolution by simple extrapolation. Nevertheless, we can move beyond the systematic pessimism of Adorno on this basis.

This new version of the philosophy of praxis follows Marcuse in this respect and continues his approach to living social movements. It supports a break with the restriction of much Marxist theory to political economy by critically addressing the whole range of reifications in modern society. These include not only the reification of the economy, but administrative and technological reifications as well as consumption and the capitalist aestheticization of daily life. To be sure, administration, technology and consumption have been shaped by economic forces, but they are not reducible to economics, nor is resistance in these domains less significant for a contemporary radical movement than labor struggle.

The question whether the philosophy of praxis in this new form can resolve the “antinomies of bourgeois thought” is more difficult. The ambitious claims of the early Marx, Lukács and Marcuse assumed that the meta-critical desublimation of philosophical categories permitted a social resolution of the antinomies. Subject and object, which were conceptually sundered by idealism, could be rejoined when redefined in sociological terms. Though problematic, the application of this schema to nature has always been essential to this program.

A social account of nature and natural science seems more plausible today, after a generation of work in Science and Technology Studies, than at any time in the past.

The philosophy of praxis is significant for us today as the most developed attempt within Marxism to reflect on the consequences of the rationalization of society under capitalism. It was the first to raise fundamental philosophical questions about science and technology from a critical, dialectical standpoint. It attacked capitalism not at its weak points, such as inequality and poverty, but at its strongest points: the rationality of its markets and management techniques, its idea of progress, its technological efficiency. But it does not reject rationality as such. Rather, philosophy of praxis dared to formulate a “rational critique of rationality” that identifies the flaws in modernity’s achievements and proposes a rational alternative on a new basis.