

# Realizing Philosophy: Marx, Lukács and the Frankfurt School

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## Foreword

The rational foundations of modernity are in crisis. After World War II, the liberal and communist blocs each espoused a version of rationalistic universalism, based on Enlightenment values variously interpreted. These universalisms overshadowed ethnic, national and religious differences, and as universal each claimed to be the true path. The final triumph of liberalism seemed to many to signal the end of history, the ultimate resolution of conflicting ideologies in a rational framework of rights and values served by science, technology, and administrative expertise. But instead a rising tide of particularisms has placed liberalism on the defensive. The universalistic claim has itself been reduced to a particular in this new context. It is under attack from two quarters, from fundamentalist religious ideology and from post-modern scepticism. The latter attack has no armies but it is effective in a different way, challenging over-confidence in science and progress in the advanced countries and among global elites, just as much of the developing world seems poised to modernize in imitation of the West.

In this context, what has Marxist philosophy to offer? Clearly, one cannot simply return to the thoroughly discredited positions of Soviet ideology, nor adopt a so-called “orthodoxy” based on the works of a 19th century thinker of genius. Something fundamental has changed since 1989, not to mention 1847. But the question can be refined. Marxist thought is far from unified. In the period following World War I, a new interpretation of Marxism emerged in the West, enriched by the philosophy and sociology of the time. Throughout much of the last century this so-called “Western Marxism” played a significant role in philosophical debates. It has been eclipsed since the fall of the Soviet Union, but paradoxically so since it elaborated some of the most trenchant criticisms of Soviet communism from an original Marxist standpoint. In this book I return to this tradition for a second look. I believe it has resources for addressing the crisis of rationality that have been overlooked. I hope to show this in the pages that follow.

This book is a thoroughly revised version of my first book, *Lukács, Marx and the Sources of Critical Theory*<sup>1</sup>. The original was published over 30 years ago in 1981. The book grew out of a doctoral dissertation on Lukács prepared for Herbert Marcuse at the University of California, San Diego. In the original version I attempted to treat

Lukács not only as a major Marxist theorist but also as an important Continental philosopher. In this revised version I still pursue the same goals, but I hope with more success.

Over the years I have looked back on that first book with a mixture of pride and dismay. I have always believed there were good things in it, and this belief is occasionally confirmed by people who recall finding it helpful in navigating the flow of Lukács’ complicated argument in *History and Class Consciousness*. On the other hand, there are many problems with this first attempt. I have often thought about how I would write such a book “today,” my plans changing from year to year, decade to decade. The reading of Lukács’ recently published *Defence of History and Class Consciousness* encouraged me to set to work by confirming many of my own interpretations.

The early Lukács and the principal members of the Frankfurt School, Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse, are the major figures in Western Marxism. Marx’s early *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844 were immediately adopted as a founding text of this tradition after their publication in 1932. I describe the underlying doctrine of this whole tradition as “philosophy of praxis” for reasons I explain in the first chapter. The essential claim of this philosophy is the significance of revolution, not just for political and social theory but for the ultimate questions of epistemology and ontology. The early Marx and Lukács argue that the basic “demands of reason” that emerge from classical German philosophy are fulfilled not by speculation but by revolution. This is the famous “realization of philosophy” for which Marx calls in his early writings, and most notably in the eleventh “Thesis on Feuerbach.” Chapter 5 of this new version of the book presents the argument in its most elaborate form in Lukács. Soon after completing my thesis I was able to show a similar logic at work in Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of 1844. Like Lukács, Marx carries out a socially based “metacritique” of philosophy I explain in the first two chapters.

The pivotal text of philosophy of praxis is *History and Class Consciousness*, published in 1923. The key to understanding this text is the concept of reification. With this concept Lukács signified the limits of a modern culture based on the model of scientific-technical rationality. The usual technocratic understanding of modern society is reified in precisely Lukács’ sense of the term. Bureaucratic

administrations, markets, and technologies are all products of our scientific age; like science they are thought to be morally neutral tools beneficial to humanity as a whole when properly used.

But in reality these institutions are social products, shaped by social forces and shaping the behavior of their users. They more nearly resemble legislation than mathematics or science. Thus their claim to universality is flawed at its basis. Like legislation, they are either good or bad, never neutral. Lukács argued that when societies become conscious of the social contingency of the rational institutions under which they live, they can judge and change them. This implication of the theory of reification distinguishes society, including its technology, from the nature of natural science. Lukács believed that a revolution from below would overthrow reification and create a socialist alternative to capitalist modernity. That revolution would not reject reason and its fruits but would reconfigure rational institutions in response to the needs of the oppressed.

The Frankfurt School applied the concept of reification in a very different time. Writing under the influence of the post World War I revolutions, Lukács optimistically assumed that the working class would always retain an oppositional consciousness on the basis of the gap between its daily experience and needs and the rationalized economic and administrative forms imposed on it. Marcuse's theory of the "one-dimensional society" is the culmination of the Frankfurt School's critique of this optimistic assessment of revolutionary prospects. He recognized the extension of reification into the depths of social life. In advanced capitalism the working class is no longer even partially exempt as media propaganda and consumerism colonize everyday life and consciousness.

Yet Marcuse did not give up hope in the emergence of a counter tendency, first visible in the New Left. In his view, a "rational" organization of society through capitalist markets and administrations produced such irrational consequences — wars, economic and environmental crises, social pathologies — that new forms of opposition would emerge. With the decline of traditional forms of working class revolutionary struggle, these new forms of opposition are increasingly focused on the irrationality of capitalism, the absurdity of its pretension to organize all of social life through the market, and the

catastrophic environmental consequences of its frenetic pursuit of profit with the gigantic resources of modern technology.

The philosophy of praxis placed questions of rationality and irrationality at the center of its political vision. In this respect it still has something to teach us. The concluding chapters of this book will explore the philosophical basis in the Frankfurt School of the new politics of resistance to reified rationality.

Revising this early book was important to me for the light it sheds on my later work on the critical theory of technology.<sup>2</sup> The philosophers discussed in this book stood on the verge of a theory of technical politics but did not quite manage to develop it, no doubt because technology had not yet become an object of effective movements for change. This lacuna is of great significance. They are continually brought up against the problem of the status of science, technology and nature in their attempts to develop an all encompassing philosophy of praxis. No adequate resolution is possible without understanding the ways in which technology both mediates the human relation to nature and is itself mediated by political and social forces. Progress in insight into technology can be traced in the history of philosophy of praxis culminating, I argue, in Marcuse's late work. The critical theory of technology I developed in later books starts where he left off and attempts to complete the project these philosophers initiated.

This version of the book differs considerably from the original. I have retained the principal theoretical concepts, but I have added two entirely new chapters on the Frankfurt School (chapters 7 and 8) which provide a far better account of the relation of Critical Theory to the philosophy of praxis than the rather sketchy conclusion of the earlier edition. Chapter 4 presents a much revised evaluation of Lukács' theory of reification. I have also been able to update my understanding of Lukács' concept of nature from study of his *Defence of History and Class Consciousness*. This text is the background to new discussions in chapter 6 that address Lukács' critique of science and technology. The later chapters also draw on my research in philosophy of technology to solve problems left in suspense in the earlier version of the book.

The earlier version emphasized the Weberian and Hegelian influences on Lukács. My research on Heidegger for my book on *Heidegger and Marcuse* made me aware also of the neo-Kantian roots

of the critique of reification in both Heidegger and Lukács.<sup>3</sup> This was an influence I had previously under-estimated. It is important because it orients the interpretation toward the ontological significance of meaning in the constitution of worlds. This phenomenological theme, reinterpreted in social terms, clarifies basic concepts of philosophy of praxis such as Marx's early theory of sensation, Lukács' concept of "form of objectivity," and the Frankfurt School's critique of experience.

Finally, I have condensed and placed in an appendix two chapters on historical materialism and class consciousness that interrupted the flow of the main argument in the earlier version of the book.

Vancouver, August 2012

## Preface

It is one of the great ironies of intellectual history that Marx and Lukács failed to appreciate the significance of their own early works. Marx's *Manuscripts* were written in 1844 but had to wait nearly 100 years to see the light of day. Since its publication this unfinished early work has come to rival *Capital* as the text of reference for Marxists and others interested in Marxism. During the first half century after the publication of *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács' book became an underground classic, rejected by its author and known only to a few European scholars, among them the philosophers of the Frankfurt School.

Marx and Lukács' critical self-interpretation is only partially warranted. It is true that their early works reflect a "messianic moment" to which they responded with an implausible revolutionary eschatology. But the authority of their self-interpretation has misled commentators into projecting far too much unity and consistency on the early works. In reality, the theoretical resources deployed by these philosophers are not entirely congruent with their political program.

Philosophy resembles art in that the tools and materials have their own logic. The interpreter must uncover the tensions between the creator's ends and means, not simply assume the ends to be realized in the work. This is especially true of Lukács, whose text is full of contradictions between his Hegelian framework and his politics. In Marx's case the consequences appear later in his suppression of his own most interesting philosophical writings, the *Manuscripts* and the *Grundrisse*, published long after his death. Thus arose a whole tradition of interpretation according to which the later Marx abandoned philosophy as a youthful error.

The seminal importance of the early works was not widely recognized until the 1960s and 1970s. At that time the influence of thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School contributed significantly to the receptiveness of a youthful audience to what might be called "early Marxism." Marcuse, in particular, lived through a second messianic moment in old age in response to the New Left. In his case too there is a tension between his theoretical resources and his politics. Nevertheless, his writings from *Eros and Civilization* on excited unprecedented interest in philosophy of praxis.

The long eclipse of Marx's *Manuscripts* and Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*, left to what Engels once called "the nibbling of the mice," can be explained by their transitional position in the intellectual biographies of their authors. Both were trained as philosophers and steeped in romantic revolutionism. Their early works were written at similar turning points in their spiritual trajectories, at times when they felt the need to move beyond these intellectual origins and believed they could do so without violent rupture through a dialectical transcendence. Later, they judged this transcendence inadequate, still internal to positions they uncompromisingly rejected in elaborating their mature outlook. There is little doubt that after the break their judgment on their early work was too harsh, that it contains more of value and had more impact on the later work than the authors were willing to admit.

The romantic influence is undoubtedly present in these early writings. By romanticism is usually meant that trend in modern culture which exalts subjectivity against objectivity, life against rationality, concreteness against abstraction, traditional values against capitalist mercantilism. Certainly these philosophers' antagonism toward capitalism, analyzed and condemned in parallel critiques of "alienation" and "reification," is to some degree tributary of that trend. And yet it would grossly distort the theories of alienation and reification to reduce them to a romantic protest against reason as is frequently suggested by contemporary critics.

While Marx and Lukács were influenced by the romantic critique of capitalism, they were still more profoundly influenced by the Hegelian critique of that critique. For Hegel, as for a number of other major figures in modern thought, romanticism has the value of a transcended moment. It plays a propaedeutic role in the development of a rational outlook on the world that is not merely philistine and complacent but critical and rich in inwardness. It was Hegel who first systematically elaborated this "post-romantic" reconciliation with rational necessity and human finitude.

Marx and Lukács aimed to preserve the moment of revolt in romanticism without recapitulating the subjectivist errors so effectively criticized by Hegel. I will show that they are only partially successful in this task, but also that the task itself was well chosen and indeed still relevant to critical theory and practice.<sup>1</sup> They approached this task with

a similar method, which I will call "cultural" because of its orientation toward the most general patterns of meaning and practice, institutions and artifacts, of entire societies. Just such a pattern is signified by the concepts of alienation and reification which they employ to analyze capitalist society. At the same time, these concepts are derived from reflection on the philosophical tradition and function in the context of the authors' discussion of fundamental philosophical problems. This unity of culture, philosophy and politics is the distinctive trait of their early method.

They consider philosophy to be the discipline in which the operative horizon of everyday life is raised to consciousness and subjected to rational criticism. On this basis they argue that the conceptual dilemmas or "antinomies" of philosophy are symptomatic of deep contradictions in social life. Their most challenging conclusion is the demand for a "realization" of philosophy through the practical resolution of these contradictions. This is perhaps the least well understood aspect of the early philosophy of praxis of Marx and Lukács, and the study of it will be a major theme uniting the various investigations making up this book.

Despite their critical relation to the philosophical tradition, both the early Marx and Lukács adhere to the fundamental Enlightenment values, freedom and equality. They depart from the tradition in arguing that under capitalism, these values cannot be achieved by isolated individuals subject to the laws of the market. This argument is the bridge between philosophy and social theory. They not only dismiss the agency of the individual, they argue that subjectivity can no longer be identified with a version of the Cartesian *cogito* or transcendental ego. Only a collective, social subject can realize the values of philosophy. But a social subject is an object in the world, a phenomenon among others. And yet, this subject is still bound to the philosophical tradition by basic aspects of its logical structure, which Marx and Lukács rethink in social terms.

This hybrid approach leads to complications. The abstract individual subject of pure knowledge transcends nature and need. The freedom of a social subject is limited by both these determinations. The transcendental subject is purified of its materiality and enabled thereby to know the truth and even, in an idealistic framework, to constitute reality. But such a transcendence is unthinkable for a social

group. A social subject cannot be purified of materiality since it is only through material ties of one sort or another that it can form from out of the relations of the individuals who make it up. Abstract from geography, race, language, and technology and nothing remains to hold the individuals together in a group. But include those factors in its definition and it is inescapably earth-bound. The objectivity of the social subject situates it squarely within the real world.

Both common sense and the philosophical tradition would therefore argue that social subjects, should they exist at all, have no ontological significance. They are simply contingent assemblages of separate individuals with political powers and rights, perhaps, but no fundamental reality. If they had accepted this view, Marx and Lukács would have made a contribution to political philosophy but beyond that they would have had to rely on one or another traditional philosophical approach. But neither Marx nor Lukács did accept this view. Rather, they argue that the social subject must take over all the same powers that individual subjects enjoyed in the old philosophy. Somehow reality is to be understood in essential relation to a subject situated within it and dependent on it. Is this not a vicious circle? Why adopt such an improbable position?

I will argue that they brave the paradoxes that result from that move out of fidelity to the ambition of idealism to explain being starting out from human being, for example, from the forms and categories of transcendental subjectivity. These traditional explanatory schemes depend on an individual contemplative subject. But Marx and Lukács argue that the individual is derivative of one or another community in which it necessarily has its roots. The transcendental subject is an abstraction from the social being that grounds it. It cannot therefore resolve the ultimate problems of philosophy and the attempt to do so produces speculative myths. Only a social subject can provide the key to a resolution of the antinomies in practical life and philosophical theory.

The fact that Marx and Lukács share this conclusion is all the more remarkable since Lukács was unaware of the existence of Marx's *Manuscripts* when he wrote *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács found traces of Marx's early philosophy of praxis in *The German Ideology* and *Capital*. This suggests a theory of the continuity of Marx's intellectual development which I elaborate in a Lukácsian

interpretation of the early Marx. Lukács himself developed the most complex version of the philosophy of praxis. In his writings the structure of this *figure of thought* becomes clear. The identification of such figures, which ultimately are defined in ideal-types such as “empiricism” or “idealism,” is an important contribution of philosophy to the history of ideas.

The articulation of the logic of philosophy of praxis is essential to understanding its later transformation in the Frankfurt School. Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse are influenced by Marx and Lukács’ philosophy of praxis with which they were familiar quite early. However, there is a deeper connection: even where they write without reference to these sources, they operate within the logic of the philosophy of praxis. That logic requires that philosophical abstractions be traced back to their roots in concrete social conditions. And once those conditions have been identified, the hypothetical construction of their revolutionary transformation rebounds back on the philosophical concepts and shows how their contradictions can be resolved.

But the realization of philosophy through social practice is frustrated by the historical situation of the Frankfurt School which is very different from Lukács’ revolutionary background. Although the Frankfurt School works in a period of reaction, it remains bound by the demands of philosophy of praxis. Its focus shifts from the specific consequences of capitalism toward the more general problem of the domination of nature and the structure of modern experience, presumed to be the source of the failure of the revolution.

This approach leads to two possible outcomes: either the resolution of the antinomies through social transformation is treated as a utopian demand, devaluing social reality by contrast, or a new agent of revolution is discovered able to carry through the project of social transformation. These alternatives correspond roughly to the difference between Adorno and Marcuse’s late work. In Adorno the historical thesis of the philosophy of praxis serves primarily to provide an independent point of view for social critique. Marcuse eventually finds hopeful signs in the New Left. He sees the social movements of the 1960s and ‘70s not as a new agent of revolution but as prefiguring an emancipatory mode of experience. Revolution in an advanced society is at least possible in principle on the basis of a generalization of this new

way of experiencing the world. This is sufficient for Marcuse to construct a final version of the philosophy of praxis in which the transformation of technology plays a central role. Their versions of philosophy of praxis are discussed in the concluding chapters of this book.

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As noted above, Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse were deeply influenced by Lukács’ version of the philosophy of praxis. They seized on his concept of reification which, in combination with other sources, became the basis of their critique of positivism and their dialectical reformulation of Marxist theory. Somewhat later, in the period after World War II, French Marxism came under the influence of the early Lukács as a whole generation of social theorists sought radical alternatives to the dominant Stalinist orthodoxy. The most famous text of this trend is Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Adventures of the Dialectic*, which first introduced the term “Western Marxism” to describe the tradition stemming from *History and Class Consciousness*. The French were primarily interested in Lukács’ concept of praxis and his theory of class consciousness. They saw in these ideas an alternative to the official Marxist dogma of the party as surrogate subject of the revolution. With Lukács they reaffirmed the primacy of working class praxis, articulated ideologically by the party but not replaced by it.

I had the good fortune to study with representatives of both these schools of thought, with Herbert Marcuse and Lucien Goldmann. Starting out from the disparate traditions and emphases they represent, I propose a new interpretation designed to reestablish the unity of Lukács’ early Marxism. This background may help to explain the difference between my approach to Lukács and that of scholars widely read in the English speaking world such as Leszek Kolakowski, Gareth Stedman Jones and George Lichtheim, who condemn the theory of reification as irrationalist and the theory of class consciousness as Stalinist. These very negative evaluations square neither with the content nor the historical impact of Lukács’ text.

When Lukács is compared, not with Bergson or Stalin, but with Marx’s early philosophical works and the Frankfurt School, a very different picture emerges. Like the early Marx, the early Marxist



Lukács is a critic of the "alienation of reason" in modern capitalist society. But that critique is by no means irrationalist; rather, it aims at the establishment of a dialectical paradigm of rationality suited to the task of social self-understanding and human liberation. Such a dialectical rationality can be of no service to authoritarian regimes, but only to a socialist culture of self-rule. Not the least important dimension of these philosophers of praxis is the contribution they make to defining the broad outlines of such a culture.

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The writing and rewriting of this book has placed me in the debt of many people. Lucien Goldmann and Herbert Marcuse introduced me to Marxist philosophy and to the work of Lukács. My wife, Anne-Marie Feenberg, and Jerry Doppelt read chapter after chapter and frequently convinced me to make changes for the better. Many others read portions of the manuscript and offered criticism and encouragement. I recall with pleasure fruitful exchanges with Al Gouldner, Stanley Aronowitz, Doug Kellner, Bill Leiss, Stanley Rosen, Mark Poster, Steven Vogel, Deborah Cook, Stephen Crowell, Richard Westerman, Timothy Hall, Robert Pippin, Ian Angus, Samir Gandesha, Stefano Giacchetti, Shane Gunster, Hans Radder, Allen Wood, Woody Sayre, Michael Löwy, Frank Cunningham and William Rasch. We did not always reach agreement but I always learned something from our discussions.

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## Foreword

<sup>1</sup> Andrew Feenberg, *Lukács, Marx and the Sources of Critical Theory* (Totowa, New Jersey: Rowman and Littlefield, 1981). A paperback edition was published by Oxford University Press in 1986.

<sup>2</sup> My most recent contribution is Andrew Feenberg *Between Reason and Experience: Essays in Technology and Modernity*. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2010). For applications, see Andrew Feenberg and Norm Friesen, *(Re)Inventing the Internet: Critical Case Studies* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2012.)

<sup>3</sup> Andrew Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History* (London: Routledge, 2005).

## Preface

<sup>1</sup> For an analysis of the complex relation of Marxism to romanticism, see Michael Löwy and Robert Sayre, *Romanticism Against the Tide of Modernity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001), chap. 3. They write, “Marx’s ideas were neither romantic nor modernizing, but constituted an attempt at a dialectical *Aufhebung* between the two, in a new critical and revolutionary worldview” (99).