

Marx's Influence on the Early Frankfurt School

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3.1 INTRODUCTION: THE INSTITUTE AND THE MATERIAL CONDITIONS OF RESEARCH

The early Frankfurt School's theoretical tendency is best described as Western Marxism, while its institutional origin was the Institute of Social Research (*Institut für Sozialforschung*), founded in Frankfurt, Germany, in 1923. Marx's influence on the early Frankfurt School was profound, uneven, and largely filtered through a revived Hegelian Marxism that broke with the economic and mechanistic doctrines of the Second International (1889–1916).¹ From the beginning, the members and financiers of the Institute explicitly understood its research program as Marxist, although there was no general agreement about what it meant to be Marxist. A few years before the Institute's founding, Georg Lukács wrote: "Great disunity has prevailed even in the 'socialist' camp as to what constitutes the essence of Marxism," and who has "the right to the title of 'Marxist'" (Lukács 1971: 1). The competing Marxist tendencies in the early twentieth century informed both the internal development of the Institute of Social Research and the contours of Western Marxism more generally.²

¹The International Workingmen's Association was founded in London, England in 1864 as an organization of Left labor and socialist parties. Karl Marx attended the founding meeting and subsequently wrote the "Inaugural Address of the International Working Men's Association" that same year (Marx 1864). The First International, as it would later be called, split in 1872 and dissolved in 1876 due in large part to the irresolvable differences between the communalist/anarchist and Marxist/statist groups. The Second International was founded in 1889.

²One could say that Marxism was born shortly before Marx's death in 1883, but Marx found its first interpretation disagreeable. "What is certain is that I am not a Marxist," he purportedly said

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While the Institute was affiliated with the Goethe University Frankfurt, it was financially independent, thanks to its wealthy patron Felix Weil. A self-described “salon Bolshevik” (Wiggershaus 1994: 13), Weil used inherited wealth from his mother and donations from his father to promote Marxist research through the Society for Social Research (*Gesellschaft für Sozialforschung*), which he directed. In 1922, Weil financed a nonsectarian Marxist summer retreat (*Erste Marxistische Arbeitswoche*) that over two dozen Marxist theorists attended, including Georg Lukács. Weil would later write: “I hit upon the idea to provide Marxist research with an academic home in the early year of 1922 at the *Erste Marxistische Arbeitswoche* in Ilmenau, Thüringen” (Yagi 2011: 323).

In 1923, the Institute in Frankfurt became this “academic home.” According to an agreement between the Society for Social Research and the Ministry of Culture, reached early the following year, the Institute’s director was required to be a full professor at the Goethe University (Jay 1973). This presented academic and ideological constraints that ruled out early members such as Max Horkheimer and Friedrich Pollock, who had just completed their dissertations in 1923, and communist party leaders and activists such as Karl Korsch and Lukács, who would be unpalatable to university administrators (Wiggershaus 1994). Carl Grünberg (1861–1940), a Marxist professor of law and political science in Vienna, became the Institute’s first acting director, with Friedrich Pollock (1894–1970) and Henryk Grossmann (1881–1950) as his assistants. Grünberg had founded the *Archive for the History of Socialism and the Workers’ Movement* (1910–1930), which was the first major European journal of labor history (Anderson 1979). Under his directorship, the journal would be associated with the Institute and remain a significant venue for Marxist scholarship and labor history throughout the 1920s (Grünberg 1930).

In his inaugural address on June 22, 1924, Grünberg identified himself as “one of the supporters of Marxism,” but specified that he was referring only to the “purely scientific” and “eminently inductive” understanding of Marxism, and not any “party-political” notion. The scientific understanding of Marxism, he emphasized, involves a materialist conception of history in which “every single expression of the life of society is a reflection of the current form of economic life,” and all history is “a series of class struggles” (Wiggershaus 1994: 26). The Institute was able to circumvent party factionalism by remaining politically unaffiliated, although nonpartisan differences remained concerning its research. The material conditions that enabled the Institute’s independent work, namely, its private funding and affiliation with a public university, also brought constraints, which is why I recount them here. The nonpartisan differences within the Institute did not divide it into factions as much as divide the Institute’s history into periods. Under Grünberg’s directorship, the Institute focused on historical and empirical work generally, and on strictly economic

in reaction to the news that French socialists were self-identifying as “Marxist” (Engels 1882: 356). He was referring to the socialists of the French Workers Party (*Parti Ouvrier Français*), founded by Jules Guesde and Paul Lafargue, Marx’s son-in-law, in 1880.

relations in particular. The first official publication by the Institute was Henryk Grossmann's *The Law of Accumulation and Breakdown of the Capitalist System* (1929) and, in collaboration with the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow, several volumes of the *Marx-Engels Gesamtausgabe* (MEGA) were published, the first of which in Frankfurt (Anderson 1979). There were only occasional works in cultural analysis, such as Leo Löwenthal's "Sociology of the German Novella in the Nineteenth Century" (1926) (Wiggershaus 1994).

Grünberg stepped down as acting director of the Institute in 1928, and retired from the university in 1929. Pollock served as interim director until Horkheimer could assume the position in 1930. Under Horkheimer's directorship, the ratio of empirical and historical work to philosophical and cultural analysis was nearly inverted—marking a new phase in the Institute's history and the beginnings of what is now called "The Frankfurt School." In this period, younger members of the Institute came to the fore and new members joined, pursuing a new research program integrating historical, materialist, psychoanalytic, and cultural forms of critique. While Horkheimer had already outlined this research agenda in his inaugural address of 1931 (Horkheimer 1931), it was his essay "Traditional versus Critical Theory" (1937) that defined the Institute's project as a "critical theory of society" (Horkheimer 1972: 209).

In the following, I trace Marx's influence on the development of the early Frankfurt School, making explicit the Marxist dimensions of its cultural critique, its dialectical, historical, and materialist methods, as well as the role of praxis and class in its critical social theory. I begin by outlining the general characteristics of Western Marxism, before contrasting them with the deterministic doctrines of the Second International and Soviet Marxism. I then examine the Marxist heritage of the Institute of Social Research's influential and programmatic texts of the 1930s, beginning with Horkheimer's inaugural address of 1931. Although I briefly discuss the work of Institute members such as Henryk Grossmann, Leo Löwenthal, and Erich Fromm, my focus is primarily on the work of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse.

3.2 WESTERN MARXISM: REIFICATION, CRITIQUE, AND PRAXIS

Western Marxism was, as the name suggests, defined in opposition to Eastern or Soviet Marxism. Its major figures returned to Marx's work to identify the foundations for a materialist and dialectical account of class consciousness, cultural critique, and revolutionary praxis—all of which were thought to be neglected to the detriment of a revolutionary workers' movement (Jacoby 1991). If one had to identify the date of Western Marxism's emergence, 1923 would be a strong contender. In that year the Institute of Social Research was founded, Korsch published *Marxism and Philosophy* (in Grünberg's *Archive*), and Lukács published *History and Class Consciousness*. On the political front, the socialist uprisings that began in earnest after World War I had subsided by

the early 1920s, and the crushing defeat of the October uprising in Hamburg in 1923 resulted in the banning of the Communist Party and the beginning of a postrevolutionary period in the Weimar Republic (Halliday 1970; Jacoby 1981). On the theoretical front, clear schools of thought were taking shape, distinguishing themselves from both classical Marxism and each other. As Korsch described it, the “Marxist-Leninist philosophy” had sought to purge all other philosophical concerns from the workers’ movement and as it moved westward it “encountered the works of Lukács, myself, and other ‘Western’ Communists which formed *an antagonistic philosophical tendency within the Communist International itself*” (Korsch 1970: 119).³ This Western philosophical tendency was critical, dialectical, and, in a shift away from so-called scientific Marxism, concerned itself with the integration of theory and practice as well as the cultivation of class consciousness, or what Antonio Gramsci referred to as a “philosophy of praxis” (Gramsci 2000).⁴

The critical and dialectical elements of Western Marxism were deepened through a return to the philosophical work of G. W. F. Hegel (1770–1831). “For anyone wishing to return to the revolutionary traditions of Marxism,” wrote Lukács, “the revival of the Hegelian tradition was obligatory” (Lukács 1971: xxi). This revival distinguished Western Marxism from the anti-Hegelian doctrines of the Second International (1889–1916), which Ernst Bloch once described as “a vulgar, schematic, and traditionless Marxism” (Bloch 1962: 382).⁵ One such anti-Hegelian member of the Second International was Eduard Bernstein (1850–1932), who, in his revisionist and influential book, *Evolutionary Socialism* (1899), provided a twofold critique of competing tendencies within this association of Left and socialist parties. The first critique targeted the “dialectical scaffolding” of Marx’s work, which Bernstein rightly attributed to Hegel (Bernstein 1909: 212).⁶ Western Marxists would not only reject this critique, but intentionally move in the opposite direction, reinforcing that scaffolding. The second critique concerned the economic determinism of the time, which focused on identifying capitalist society’s objective laws of motion. This antisubjectivist methodology was exemplified by a mechanistic

³Although Korsch wrote explicitly of a clash between “Russian and Western Marxism” (Korsch 1970: 120), it was Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s use of “Western Marxism” in his *Adventures of the Dialectic* in 1955 (Merleau-Ponty 1973) that popularized it (Jay 1984).

⁴Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937) made significant contributions to Western Marxism, but his writings, penned while imprisoned in fascist Italy, were not published until the late 1940s and early 1950s (Gramsci 1992) and thus had no direct impact on the early Frankfurt School.

⁵Cited in Anderson 2007: 123.

⁶There were, however, Marxists engaging Bernstein’s critiques of Hegel and dialectics during the time of the Second International. Georgi Plekhanov (1856–1918), for example, was a sophisticated reader of Hegel and it deeply informed his Marxism and his critiques of Bernstein, as in his “Cant Against Kant or Herr Bernstein’s Will and Testament” (Plekhanov 1976). Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919) entered into an intense debate with Bernstein and forcefully argued to retain the dialectical structure of Marxist thought. In her “Social Reform or Revolution,” she accused Bernstein of “saying goodbye to the mode of thought of the revolutionary proletariat, to the dialectic, and to the materialist conception of history” (Luxemburg 1902: 167)

theory of the inevitable collapse or breakdown (*Zusammenbruch*) of capitalism, based on Marx's various comments about the tendencies toward immiseration (the "immiseration thesis") and objective crisis in capitalism. Western Marxists would share this critique, so it is worthwhile to examine it in greater detail.

On the propensity toward immiseration or pauperization, which was said to prepare the grounds of revolution, Marx wrote: "It follows therefore that in proportion as capital accumulates, the situation of the worker, be his payment high or low, must grow worse" (Marx 1982: 799). A similar tendency is found in Marx's statement about crisis in capitalism: "The monopoly of capital itself becomes a fetter upon the mode of production, which has sprung up and flourished along with, and under it. Centralization of the means of production and socialization of labour at last reach a point where they become incompatible with their capitalist integument. This integument is burst asunder" (Marx 1982: 929). Marx's description is echoed and sharpened by Bernstein's contemporary Karl Kautsky (1854–1938) in the Second International: "We consider the breakdown of the present social system to be unavoidable, because we know that the economic evolution inevitably brings on conditions that will compel the exploited classes to rise against this system of private ownership" (Kautsky 1910: 90). Bernstein's rejection of this "breakdown theory" was, according to Rosa Luxemburg (1871–1919), tantamount to rejecting the objective necessity of socialism (Luxemburg 1902). Paul Sweezy would later argue that Bernstein wanted to "eradicate Marxism, root and branch, from the socialist movement" (Sweezy 1942: 193), because his revisionism rejected not only inevitable capitalist collapse, but also the revolutionary moment such a collapse was supposed to enable. The latter was supposedly facilitated by the immiseration of the proletariat—they would have nothing to lose but their chains. In lieu of a decisive breakdown, Bernstein argued on neo-Kantian grounds that the German Social Democratic Party—the largest and most influential party in the Second International—should promote a gradual transition to socialism through reformist measures, public education, and moral persuasion (Colletti 1972). This prompted Luxemburg to ridicule Bernstein's socialist program as one achievable "by means of 'pure reason'" (Luxemburg 1902: 134). The most sophisticated attempt to defend a version of the "breakdown theory" was published at the Institute of Social Research in 1929, namely, the aforementioned *Accumulation and Breakdown Law of the Capitalist System* by Henryk Grossmann. Grossman would be the only adherent to the "breakdown theory" at the Institute under Horkheimer's directorship and none of the members would subscribe to the "immiseration thesis" (Held 1980: 42).⁷ No longer able to rely on these two mechanisms of inevitability, Western Marxists

⁷In their coauthored book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), Horkheimer and Adorno wrote: "it is no longer the objective laws of the market which govern the actions of industrialists and drive humanity toward catastrophe. Rather, the conscious decisions of the company chairman execute capitalism's old law of value, and thus its fate, as resultants no less compulsive than the blindest price mechanisms" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 30).

refocused on the role of critique and the subjective conditions necessary for successful praxis. Thus, Marx's famous claim in the *Communist Manifesto* that the bourgeoisie produced "its own gravediggers" (Marx and Engels 1848: 496) would need to be qualified: The bourgeoisie may have produced the objective conditions, but social and self-critique were still needed to cultivate the subjective conditions for a successful working-class revolution. As Lukács argued, class conflict was "equally a struggle of the proletariat *against itself*: against the devastating and degrading effects of the capitalist system upon its class consciousness" (Lukács 1971: 80). This shared sentiment informed subsequent Frankfurt School critiques of the "culture industry" (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002) and "one-dimensional thinking" (Marcuse 1964) in advanced industrial capitalism.

The Second International dissolved with the onset of World War I, as member parties of this organization to varying degrees rallied behind their own national war efforts at the expense of class solidarity and international socialism. In his 1915 pamphlet "The Collapse of the Second International," Vladimir Lenin (1870–1924) denounced the parties' support capitulation to "petty-bourgeois conciliatory and nationalist-oppositional strivings" in the war as treachery (Lenin 1915: 207). The war, disintegration of the Second International, and rapidly changing domestic political conditions all served as an urgent call for the revitalization of Marxist theory. Lenin returned to Hegel and embarked on a systematic study of several of his works, the *Science of Logic* (1816) in particular. "It is impossible fully to grasp Marx's *Capital*," wrote Lenin, "and especially its first chapter, if you have not studied through and understood the whole of Hegel's *Logic*" (Lenin 1914b: 180).

The division between Western and Soviet or Eastern Marxism often obscures this shared origin in Hegel's historical and dialectical philosophy (Bloch 1962; Anderson 1995, 2007). Although Stalin's mechanistic doctrine of Dialectical Materialism or "Diamat" quickly extinguished this critical impulse in the Soviet Union, Lenin's Hegelianism had already significantly influenced the early figures of Western Marxism.⁸ Theorists such as Korsch, Lukács, and Gramsci understood themselves to be continuing Lenin's project, even if the guardians of Soviet orthodoxy disagreed (Anderson 2007).⁹ The epigraph of Korsch's groundbreaking *Marxism and Philosophy* is a quote from Lenin: "We must organize a systematic study of the Hegelian dialectic from a materialist standpoint" (Korsch 1970: 29; Lenin 1922: 233). It could stand as an epigraph for Western Marxism generally.

What came to distinguish Western Marxism from its Eastern sibling was not, then, a renewed Hegelianism, but rather the focus on culture, critique,

⁸The definitive statement of Dialectical Materialism as the official position of the Marxist-Leninist party was published in the fourth chapter of *The History of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union* (Commission of the Central Committee of the C.P.S.U. 1939: 105–131).

⁹Korsch was expelled from the Communist Party in 1926. Lukács walked back his analysis in *History and Class Consciousness* rather than face expulsion (Goode 1979; Halliday 1970; Kellner and Korsch 1977). See Lukács own analysis in his 1967 Preface (Lukács 1971).

and praxis. This divergence from Soviet orthodoxy is understandable given the differing social and political conditions. Capitalist social relations and the cultural forces that support them had a long history and were deeply embedded in European nations, which in turn affected class consciousness and thus the possibility for collective action. As Russell Jacoby notes: "Leninism bore the indelible marks of specific Russian conditions: a relatively small proletariat, a massive agrarian population, a feeble bourgeois culture. The last was decisive: The impact of bourgeois and national culture sharply distinguished Western European from Russian society" (Jacoby 1981: 61). The failure of the revolutionary workers movement in Europe, despite the favorable objective conditions for it, created a sense of urgency to critically analyze the national cultural forces that inhibited revolutionary praxis. This was the project of Western Marxism. It was a different problematic than the one Soviet Marxists were facing and it could not be solved through better organization or a vanguard party.¹⁰

Given these conditions, the element of Marxist theory most in need of critical reformulation was surely the deterministic and dichotomous account of historical materialism as an asymmetrical base–superstructure relation. This account was the foundation of the "breakdown theory" and the antisubjectivism of the Second International. It also treated philosophy as little more than an epiphenomenon that would be superseded through the transformation of the material conditions supporting it. There is some evidence for this position in the works of Marx and Engels, however, the dialectical subtlety of their own historical studies often contradicted their explicit remarks on the subject (Gramsci 2000: 190–91). In their unpublished work, *The German Ideology* (1846), Marx and Engels argued that the "ruling ideas" of the time are "nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relationships" (Marx and Engels 1846: 59). The *locus classicus* of this sentiment in their published work is in Marx's Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (Marx 1859: 263):

The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.

This formulation left little room for anything other than a unidirectional causal relation, which was then coupled with a sense of inevitability: "changes in the

¹⁰ "Critical Theory was initially developed in Horkheimer's circle to think through political disappointments at the absence of revolution in the West, the development of Stalinism in Soviet Russia, and the victory of fascism in Germany," writes Jürgen Habermas. "It was supposed to explain mistaken Marxist prognoses, but without breaking Marxist intentions" (Habermas 1987a: 116).

economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure” (Marx 1859: 263). Lenin described Marx’s Preface as “an integral formulation of the fundamental principles of materialism” (Lenin, 1914a: 55) and Engels perpetuated a deterministic reading of this model in his later writings, such as *Anti-Dühring* (1878) and *Dialectics of Nature* (1883). Korsch called it “vulgar-marxism” (Korsch 1970: 79) and sought to deepen the dialectic of material and intellectual life—through a revival of Marxism’s Hegelian heritage—and defended a radically historicist philosophy as a necessary part of ideological struggle. Marxism, argued Korsch, “is a revolutionary philosophy whose task is to participate in the revolutionary struggles waged in all spheres of society against the whole of the existing order, by fighting in one specific area—philosophy” (Korsch 1970: 76). Gramsci made a similar move and even challenged the mechanistic reading of Marx’s Preface directly. Contrary to vulgar historical materialism, Gramsci argued that the philosophy of praxis includes “ethico-political history” and recognizes the essential role of “cultural activity, of a cultural front as necessary alongside the merely economic and political ones” (Gramsci 2000: 195). Ideologies, he said, must be combatted and revealed as mechanisms of domination “in order to destroy one hegemony and create another, as a necessary moment in the revolutionizing of praxis” (Gramsci 2000: 196). Lukács criticized Engels’ account of dialectics, arguing that he “does not even mention the most vital interaction, namely the *dialectical relation between subject and object in the historical process*” (Lukács 1971: 3). This omission, Lukács contends, prevents Engels’ dialectics, and presumably the mechanistic version of historical materialism quoted above, from being revolutionary. According to Lukács, the absence of a thoroughly mediated concept of subject-object relations is itself an example of the reification that permeates the entirety of capitalist society. Drawing upon the themes of alienation and commodity fetishism in Marx’s *Capital*, he develops a systematic and dialectical account of reification, rooted in the Hegelian dialectic (Lukács 1971: xxii)—an account that profoundly influenced Theodor Adorno’s understanding of social philosophy, which I discuss in the following section.¹¹ In retrospect, Lukács’ analysis was particularly impressive, given that he developed implicit themes in Marx’s later work (on fetishism and the commodity structure) that would only later prove to have been explicitly discussed by Marx in his *1844 Manuscripts*—a text published in 1932, nearly a decade after Lukács’ *History and Class Consciousness*. Fundamental to Lukács’ argument in *History and Class Consciousness* was that reification inhibits the development of class consciousness and must, therefore, be subject to critique and disruption, so the proletariat can become conscious of itself as a class. Only then “will the proletariat become the identical subject-object of history whose

¹¹ In *Capital*, Marx argued that the commodity form produces a kind of fetishism, structurally concealing the origin of the commodity’s value in labor, that is, their social nature. Commodities “do not appear as direct social relations between persons in their work, but rather as material [*dinglich*] relations between persons and social relations between things” (Marx 1982: 166).

praxis will change reality” (Lukács 1971: 197). Lukács, Korsch, and Gramsci all viewed class struggle as being fought on two different types of terrain: the organizational (objective) and the ideological (subjective). Revolutionary class consciousness was neither inevitable nor automatic, but had to be cultivated through sophisticated and multifaceted social critique—a task embraced by the early Frankfurt School.

3.3 CRITICAL THEORY: HEGELIAN MARXIST BEGINNINGS

The Hegelian tendencies of Western Marxism, and its commitment to dialectical critique as integral to class struggle, are central to the programmatic texts of the Institute of Social Research under Horkheimer's directorship.¹² Whereas Grünberg advocated a scientific Marxism of inductive reasoning, Horkheimer began his inaugural address by reconstructing the history of social philosophy and its Hegelian turn. According to Horkheimer, a materialist reading of Hegel's social philosophy rejected atomistic conceptions of autonomy (as in Kant's transcendental idealism), and called for an interdisciplinary and reflexive research program, namely, “the unification of philosophy and science” (Horkheimer 1972: 34).

Although Horkheimer describes neither the tasks nor the methodology of the Institute as Marxist or even materialist in his 1931 address, others publications of the period make it clear that the orientation of the Institute was consistent with the contours of Western Marxism. In the inaugural address, we find, for example: consideration of the totality of social relations; a commitment to dialectical and materialist methods; the theoretical importance of cultural and intellectual life; a focus on group—rather than individual—emancipation; as well as a critique of deterministic (i.e. vulgar) Marxism and Hegelian idealism. In articles published in 1933 in the Institute's newly founded *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* (*Journal of Social Research*), Horkheimer more thoroughly articulates the Institute's project of an interdisciplinary materialism. Particularly distinctive is the integration of psychoanalysis, which distinguished the Institute's work from both Stalinist orthodoxy and other Western Marxists (Dubiel 1985). While only briefly mentioned in Horkheimer's address, this integration—the marriage of Marx and Freud, so to speak (Whitebook 2004)—quickly characterized the new research program of the Institute. In the first publication of the *Zeitschrift* in 1932, 3 of 11 articles were on the topic of psychology—two by social psychologist Erich Fromm and one by Horkheimer (Horkheimer 1980).¹³ In his article “History and Psychology”

¹² Perry Anderson (1979) rejects Hegelianism or Marxist humanism as a defining characteristic of Western Marxism. For a discussion of his argument, see the Introduction to Martin Jay's *Marxism and Totality* (Jay 1984).

¹³ Erich Fromm started working as a researcher at the Frankfurt Psychoanalytic Institute in the Institute's building in 1929 (Wiggershaus 1994). His two articles in the first issue of the new journal were “Über Methode and Aufgabe einer analytischen Sozialpsychologie” and “Die psychoanalytische Charakterologie und ihre Bedeutung für die Sozialpsychologie” (Horkheimer 1980).

(1932), Horkheimer develops a materialist critique of the base-superstructure model—described as a “closed, dogmatic metaphysics” (Horkheimer 1932: 118)—that integrates social psychology as “an indispensable auxiliary science for history” (Horkheimer 1932: 119).

Helmut Dubiel (1985) has divided the work of the Frankfurt School into three periods: Materialism (1930–1937), Critical Theory (1937–1940), and the Critique of Instrumental Reason (1940–1943). My considerations in the following are mostly limited to the first two periods, for they reflect a greater indebtedness to the Western Marxist tradition. This is not to imply that Marx’s influence ceased after the late 1930s. Herbert Marcuse’s *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (1941), for example, was a classic statement of Western Marxism and had a discernable impact on the Left in the United States. However, in the 1940s the theoretical orientation of several Institute members did stray, or clearly break from, the Marxist tradition.¹⁴ Dubiel argues that Horkheimer, Adorno, Pollock, and Löwenthal left the Marxist tradition altogether, for their work was “no longer concerned with capitalism as the contemporary political form of social production” (Dubiel 1985: 103). Martin Jay makes a similar claim. He argues that although Horkheimer and Adorno retained some Marxist rhetoric, “they no longer sought answers to cultural questions in the material substructure of society” (Jay 1973: 259). As evidence of this, Jay notes that Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of instrumental reason, most notably in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), replaces the model of class conflict with the conflict between human beings and nature. While Jay’s general assessment of a move away from Marxism may be true in Horkheimer’s case, later essays by Adorno, such as “Reflections on Class Theory” (1942), “Society” (1965), and “Late Capitalism or Industrial Society?” (1968), as well as his *Negative Dialectics* (1966), render this characterization of Adorno questionable (Jameson 1990; Cook 2004). I return to the topic of the declining influence of Marxism in the Institute’s work after a cursory examination of several influential and programmatic texts of the 1930s that shaped the projects and methodology of the early Frankfurt School.

In the former, Fromm concluded that analytic social psychology “investigates a factor that plays a decisive mediating role between the economic base and the formation of ideologies” (Fromm 1932: 495).

¹⁴ In general, it is difficult to find satisfactory categories to capture the nature of the work of the Institute. Not only did the methodological orientation of their research change over time, as noted already in the transition from Grünberg to Horkheimer, but shortly after Horkheimer became director, the National Socialists came to power, seized the Institute’s building, and instigated a series of emigrations to Geneva, New York, and California. Also, the periodization employed by Dubiel (1985) is not intended to apply to the methodology employed by all of the members. In his inaugural address, for example, Horkheimer notes the difference between the group research program he outlines, and the concurrent “independent research of the individual in the areas of theoretical economics, economic history and the history of the labor movement” (Horkheimer 1931: 35–36). Henryk Grossmann, Franz Borkenau, and Friedrich Pollock, for example, continued to pursue traditional Marxist economic and historical research, which was published in the journal alongside the programmatic texts of critical theory.

In his 1931 address, “The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute of Social Research,” Horkheimer argued that the goal of social philosophy is “the philosophical interpretation of human fate,” which encompasses “all of the material and spiritual culture of humanity.” Social philosophy existed before Hegel, but only with Hegel did it transcend the “the philosophy of the individual [*Einzelpersönlichkeit*]” (Horkheimer 1931: 25). It was Hegel who transformed the study of self-consciousness from a practice of introspection to a topic of social theory, thereby shifting the focus from a supposedly autonomous subject to “the labor of history, in which [the subject] gives itself objective form” (Horkheimer 1931: 26). Going beyond Hegel, social research can investigate, Horkheimer claimed, this objective form of human activity by integrating philosophical questions into the scientific investigation. Given the scope and multifaceted nature of the historical objectification of human activity, such research must be interdisciplinary and able to “pursue philosophical questions directed at the big picture with the finest scientific methods ... to find new methods, and yet never lose sight of the whole” (Horkheimer 1931: 32).

The primary research question, Horkheimer asserts, concerns the connection between “the economic life of society, the psychological development of its individuals and the changes within specific areas of culture” (Horkheimer 1931: 33). Regarding the method for analyzing these relations, Horkheimer advocates assessing the material and cultural dimensions as a dialectically mediated totality open to interdisciplinary scientific inquiry. The Institute’s program could thus be formulated in the following question: “In a definite time frame and in some particular countries, what relations can we delineate between a particular group and the role of this group in the economy, the changes in the psychical structure of its members, and the thoughts and institutions created by it which influence it as a whole through the social totality” (Horkheimer 1931: 34)? In the first research project, Institute members studied “skilled labor and white-collar employees” in Germany using existing statistical data and conducting surveys of their own (Horkheimer 1931: 35). The Institute never published the results of this project (Jay 1973: 117), although research on authoritarianism continued and *Studies in Authority and the Family* appeared a few years later (Horkheimer 1936).

The antifoundationalist concept of materialism Horkheimer promoted at the Institute was articulated in several essays in the early 1930s (1932, 1933a, b).¹⁵ In “Materialism and Metaphysics,” materialism is presented as a negation of both idealism and metaphysics and its truth is said to follow from practice not principle (Abromeit 2011: 237). He rejects the positivist subject–object relation, which informs most scientific research and leads it to reduce

¹⁵ Although Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979) would not officially join the Institute until 1933, his article “The Foundations of Historical Materialism” (Marcuse 1932) was a reassessment of historical materialism in light of Marx’s recently discovered *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*.

all knowledge “to a collection of external data” (Horkheimer 1933a: 38). The presumption of an ontological separation of subject and object is at the root of all positivist thought (Adorno 1969). This separation was the instigator of the world-historical dialectic recounted in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1977), and it is to that dialectic that Horkheimer returns, as Marx had before him and whose content is “the economic theory of society” (Horkheimer 1933a: 45).¹⁶ It was in his “Theses on Feuerbach” that Marx made the distinction between material as *object* of contemplation and material as human *activity* (Marx 1845: 3). Truth was not a question of theory, he argued, but of *practice*. This claim involved a materialist modification of Hegel’s claim: “True is the whole” (Hegel 1977: 11). By the “whole” Hegel meant the totality or identification of the concept and its objectification or actualization in history. Once the concept and its historical actualization are reconciled, “substance shows itself to be essentially subject” (Hegel 1977: 21).

Marx had criticized Feuerbach for not realizing that the material of our senses, that is, *substance*, is indeed “practical human-sensuous activity,” that is, *subject* (Marx 1845: 4).¹⁷ As long as one fails to recognize human activity or labor as the substance of the world, the truth will escape us and the objective world will appear as radically other or alien—such as the reified world Lukács described. In the case of commodity fetishism, it is our inability to recognize human labor as the source of the commodity’s value that produces mystification. Dialectical materialism allows us to see that “in what we call objective, subjective factors are at work; and in what we call subjective, objective factors are at work” (Horkheimer 1933a: 29). Better perception or theoretical insight is not sufficient for this materialism, for the distortions and alienation are structural—they are attributable to the capitalist mode of production. Hence, only human practice guided by theory (i.e. praxis) can change those conditions. “There are two basic elements linking materialism to correct social theory,” writes Marcuse: “concern with human happiness, and the conviction that it can be attained only through a transformation of the material conditions of existence” (Marcuse 1937: 135).

In “Materialism and Metaphysics,” Horkheimer explicitly relates the materialist method to class conflict, first, as an integral component of praxis—“The theory appropriate to the struggle today is materialism” (Horkheimer 1933a: 22)—and, second, as an account of history: “history has never ceased till now to be a record of struggles” (Horkheimer 1933a: 46). The latter echoes the *Communist Manifesto*: “The history of all hitherto existing society is the history of class struggles” (Marx and Engels 1848: 482). According to Horkheimer, this integration of theory and practice *is* the scientific process of materialism.

¹⁶See Marx on the “mystification which the dialectic suffers in Hegel’s hands” (Marx 1982: 103).

¹⁷In *The German Ideology*, Marx writes: “This sum of productive forces, capital funds and social forms in intercourse, which every individual and every generation finds in existence as something given, is the real basis of what the philosophers have conceived as ‘substance’” (Marx and Engels 1846: 54).

Materialist science is not mere observation and categorization, but a practice of transforming both subjective and objective conditions, of “changing the concrete conditions under which men suffer” (Horkheimer 1933a: 32). The motives of materialist science are not, therefore, purely theoretical, but are to understand capitalist society in order to successfully transition into a “better reality” (Ibid: 45). Horkheimer’s position is consistent with Lukács’ claim that the ultimate function of historical materialism lies “in the field of action” rather than the “elucidation of pure knowledge” (Lukács 1971: 224). This materialist science is a social force for overcoming relations of domination and human suffering and thus meets Marx’s challenge to change the world rather than just interpret it (Marx 1845: 5). This fundamental relation of materialist theory to collective, emancipatory practice was at work in Lukács’ notion of the proletariat as the subject–object of history. Its labor was the substance of the world and only its collective action could overthrow the structures of capitalism—including the rule of the capitalist class—necessary to demystify the commodity form and dis-alienate human experience. This materialism is neither neutral in orientation nor grounded in universal principles, but rather takes sides and has an interest in emancipation. It wants to “provide a more comprehensive account of the ability of consciousness to grasp the totality of social being and transform social reality” (Thompson 2011: 5). In “The Rationalism Debate in Contemporary Philosophy,” Horkheimer claims that the significance of theory is its service to the successful struggle of an oppressed group and thus the principles of such theory should reflect the goals of that group (Horkheimer 1934).

The most definitive and explicitly Marxist statement of the Institute’s materialist position is found in Horkheimer’s celebrated essay, “Traditional and Critical Theory” (1937). He sharpens the definition of critical theory through a critique of positivism and the interests that lurk just beneath the surface of its supposed universalism. Horkheimer argues that traditional research takes place within a capitalist division of labor and thus any claim to neutrality only serves to conceal its social function. This function is to advance mechanisms of social domination, mastery over nature, efficiency in production, and increases in capitalist profit. Traditional science employs a “classificatory” way of thinking, which views the world as a “sum-total of facts” (1937: 199). Such facts are supposed to be subsumed under universal concepts. Echoing Marx’s critique of Feuerbach, Horkheimer criticizes positivism through a materialist and dialectical account of perception (1937: 200):

The world which is given to the individual and which he must accept and take into account is ... a product of the activity of society as a whole. The objects we perceive in our surroundings—cities, villages, fields, and woods—bear the mark of having been worked on by man ... Even the way they see and hear is inseparable from the social life-process as it has evolved over the millennia. The facts which our senses present to us are socially preformed in two ways: through the historical character of the object perceived and through the historical character

of the perceiving organ. Both are not simply natural; they are shaped by human activity ...

The way Horkheimer presents the historical and dialectical mediation of subject and object stands in stark contrast to the unidirectional base-superstructure model in the excerpt from Marx's Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* above. Horkheimer is calling for our attentiveness to the subtle interplay of subject and object and in comparison the theoretically insufficient, yet ideologically potent, consequences of positivism. Horkheimer notes that the use of "critical" in his essay should be interpreted in the sense of a "dialectical critique of political economy" (206 fn 14). Since this is an antifoundationalist concept of materialism, there is no universal to turn to or to rely on. Critical theorists must remain within the dialectical movement of experience. By contrast, traditional theory tends toward making a double abstraction: abstract the facts from their concrete relations and abstract the theorist from their division of labor and class function. Traditional theory can then identify contradictions in order to resolve them with the overarching goal of improving the functioning of the system. By contrast, critical theory has "society itself for its object" (Horkheimer, 1937: 206), that is, the social totality and thus capitalism as a system, and is "suspicious of the very categories of better, useful, appropriate, productive, and valuable" (Horkheimer 1937: 207). Critical theorists stand in "conscious opposition" to the "two-sided character of the social totality" revealed to them (Horkheimer 1937: 207). This involves an epistemic shift to the standpoint of the proletariat, which comes with a twofold realization: first, that the world is a product of human activity and, second, that one is alienated from that world insofar as it has been built to serve other interests: "It is their own world. At the same time, however, they experience the fact that society is comparable to nonhuman natural processes, to pure mechanisms ... That world is not their own but the world of capital" (Horkheimer 1937: 207–08).

Marx described a similar experience of alienation in his *1844 Manuscripts*, where the product of the laborer "confronts it as *something alien*, as a *power independent* of the producer" (Marx 1844: 272). This alienation is facilitated by the concepts of political economy, which conceal the relation of labor to its products. The loss of the products of labor is not, however, merely at the level of recognition. It is practical: if my activity is "an alien, a coerced activity, to whom, then, does it belong" (274)? It belongs to capital. In "Traditional and Critical Theory," Horkheimer writes that capitalism produces a contradictory social condition in which the spontaneity and rationality of laborers stands opposed to the institutions structuring their activity. As in Marx's *Capital*, critical theory begins with an analysis of the commodity form and demonstrates how that structure of the commodity is made possible by capitalist social relations, which themselves produce increased "social tensions" (1937: 226). From this anchor in the commodity form, critical theory can assess crisis tendencies and the prospects for a "rationally ordered future society" (1937: 233).

The role of the critical theorist is to work to abolish this contradiction and thus “social injustice” (1937: 242) through critiques of bourgeois positivism—particularly its abstract notion of autonomy—and the identification of a reasonable idea of society that meets the whole community’s needs. This idea, he says, is immanent to social labor, similar to what Marx and Engels claimed about the proletariat’s structurally determined, or true, class interest. It is there, although it might be latent or in some way inhibited. In *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács stated his standpoint theory in the strongest possible terms: “When the proletariat furthers its class-aims it simultaneously achieves the conscious realization of the—objective—aims of society” (Lukács 1971: 149). Horkheimer cannot endorse this absolutist standpoint epistemology, so his version comes with an important caveat: “the situation of the proletariat is, in this society, no guarantee of correct knowledge” (Horkheimer 1937: 213). The Institute was in exile at the time, because fascism had gripped the German proletariat, so it would be difficult to claim that the proletariat *qua* proletariat is necessarily privileged in its claims to knowledge, even about its own interests. Critical theory, Horkheimer adds, should be a “critical, promotive factor in the development of the masses” (215), but remain reflective so as not to “relapse into the darkest barbarism” (241).

Due to the rise of authoritarianism among the working classes—that is, Stalinism in the East and fascism in the West—early Frankfurt School theorists tended to be more cautious than Lukács about grounding their truth of theory in the activity of the proletariat. As Andrew Feenberg writes: “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” (Feenberg 2014: ix). By the early 1930s, there was little of this oppositional consciousness to be found among the German working class, which, together with the rise of fascism, affected both the proletariat’s role and epistemic status in Frankfurt School theory. This resulted in more than an epistemic qualification. Throughout the Institute’s essays on materialism and critical theory in the 1930s, the commodity form rather than class, or the proletariat in particular, stood at the center of their theory. Social struggles are occasionally mentioned, but the dialectical constitution of the groups engaged in struggle and their relation to production is almost never discussed.

Adorno was greatly influenced by Lukács’ analysis of reification, which claimed that the commodity form permeated all forms of capitalist society, including its forms of thought. This application of Marx’s analysis of the commodity form to the entire “superstructure” of capitalist society informed Adorno’s understanding of dialectical critique, from his 1938 essay “On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening” (Adorno 1938) to his 1966 book *Negative Dialectics* (Adorno 1973 [1966]). He did not, however, share Lukács’ commitment to the proletariat as the subject-object of history nor did he rely on the activity of the proletariat to validate his theory (O’Connor 2004). The proletariat simply did not have a unique epistemic

status or standpoint in his work (Jarvis 1998). As Susan Buck-Morss writes: “Adorno thus considered it possible to accept Lukács’ dialectical materialism as a cognitive method only, without embracing his ontological theory of the historical process” (Buck-Morss 1977: 28). Although Adorno developed critical analyses of capitalism and value form into the late 1960s, it is true that his materialism did not fundamentally incorporate a class analysis (Jameson 1990), or attempt to be a “philosophy of praxis.” As Adorno stated shortly before his death: “I am a theoretical human being who views theoretical thinking as lying extraordinarily close to his artistic intentions. It is not as if I had turned away from praxis only recently; my thinking always stood in a rather indirect relationship to praxis” (Adorno and Richter 2002: 15). During the political tumult of the late 1960s, Adorno was at work on his *Aesthetic Theory* (1970).

Reification is a form of rationalization, which reproduces the relation of equivalency or identification at the societal level, which is operative in simple commodity exchange. For Adorno, nonidentity is the core of dialectics and in commodity exchange, qualitative different use values are rendered equivalent through a third moment or mediating relation, abstract human labor. “The barter principle, the reduction of human labor to the abstract universal concept of average working hours,” writes Adorno in *Negative Dialectics*, “is fundamentally akin to the principle of identification” (Adorno 1973 [1966]: 146). The traces of human activity in the production of use values are lost in this relation of equivalency, thus allowing a form of identification to occur, which produces mystification or fetishism.¹⁸ This is the commodity structure as defined by Marx and utilized by Lukács in his theory of reification. Lukács’ solution was, as previously mentioned, another form of identification—namely, the identification of the subjective and objective moments of the proletariat—but Adorno rejected this totality. “The whole is false” (Adorno 2005: 50), he argued.¹⁹ Horkheimer was also opposed to Lukács’ absolute notion of reconciliation and from the beginning his account of materialism eschewed identity thinking. Materialism, he wrote, “maintains the irreducible tension between concept and object and thus has a critical weapon of defense against belief in the infinity of the mind” (Horkheimer 1933a: 28). This rejection of closure or absolute identification of subject and object or history and nature is one of the characteristics that distinguish the early Frankfurt School from other Western Marxists. In the closing sentence of *Marxism and Philosophy* (1923), Korsch quoted the young Marx on a subject–substance form of identity: “Philosophy cannot be abolished [*aufheben*] without realizing it” (Korsch 1970: 97; Marx

¹⁸“Identity is the primal form of ideology,” writes Adorno (1966: 148). See also Adorno’s later essay “On Subject and Object” (Adorno 1969).

¹⁹See also Adorno’s “Dialectics Not a Standpoint” section of *Negative Dialectics*, where he states that dialectics means nothing less than “that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy” (Adorno 1966: 5).

1843: 181). The realization of philosophy would, according to Marx, be accomplished by a revolutionary class, which would overthrow the economic basis of society and thus dissolve the material infrastructure of that particular form of consciousness. After decades of damaged life—in the wake of Stalinism, fascism, and genocide—Adorno would respond to this proposition in the opening line of *Negative Dialectics*: “Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed” (Adorno 1966: 3).

3.4 CONCLUSION: DEFEAT AND DÄMMERUNG

With the exception of Adorno, who did not join the Institute of Social Research until 1938, the self-understanding of Institute members until the late 1930s was that their research activity contributed, however tenuously, to a socialist project (Held 1980; Dubiel 1985). Their commitment to negative dialectics prevented them from subscribing to Lukács’ position, which, in his own words, had attempted to “out-Hegel Hegel” (Lukács 1971: xxiii). Martin Jay has characterized this difference as a break with Western Marxism, rather than an internal critique of it. He argues that the early Frankfurt School, although initially influenced by the likes of Korsch and Lukács, succeeded in “dismantling the theoretical premises of Western Marxism” such that subsequent Marxist theorists would never be able to return to these original foundations (Jay 1984: 198). Seyla Benhabib, following Habermas (1987b), argues that Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse demonstrated “how feeble the philosophy of the subject has become” and that, although “the historical process seems to destroy all hope in the *revolutionary* subject,” they continued to look for one (Benhabib 1986: 143). She was perhaps referring to Marcuse’s theorization and support of the student movement in the 1960s. Although Marcuse’s subsequent work did not often situate the proletariat at the center of his theory, he did retain a materialist methodology that more or less emphasized praxis, if not revolution. In his *Counter-Revolution and Revolt* (1972b), for example, Marcuse discusses revolutionary standpoint theory and the possibility that the “revolution against global monopoly capitalism is more and other than a proletarian revolution” (124).

Although the Institute’s unaffiliated status allowed for pluralist interpretations of Marxism, its independence from political organizations weakened its relations to practical politics and in turn the political and economic content of its theory (Jay 1973; Dubiel 1985). Contemporary Marxists are, therefore, more or less fair in asserting that the early Frankfurt School made significant contributions to the development of dialectical and materialist thought, yet fell short on praxis and cultivating any concrete relations with labor or resistance movements. Perry Anderson has been more sweeping in his criticism: Western Marxism was relegated to philosophy departments; there was too much focus on epistemology and culture; and there was a pervasive pessimism—“Method

as impotence, art as consolation, pessimism as quiescence” (Anderson 1979: 93). Marxism “aspires in principle to be a *universal* science” (94), he adds, so even the label “Western” represents failure.²⁰ Since no one person or even institute chose to create Western Marxism (or bring countries to war, for that matter), the more productive question seems to be why, from a materialist perspective, did Western Marxism take shape the way it did? Anderson himself provides a good first answer. The “hidden hallmark of Western Marxism as a whole,” he wrote, is “that it is a product of defeat” (Anderson 1979: 42), by which he meant the defeat of revolutionary movements in Europe, coupled with the onset of Stalinism and fascism. This is the beginning of a plausible materialist explanation and it draws attention to what Anderson elsewhere calls the Marxist ambition to “compose a self-critical theory capable of explaining its own genesis and metamorphoses” (Anderson 1984: 12). It was in this spirit of self-critique that Korsch’s *Marxism and Philosophy*, one of the founding texts of Western Marxism, provided a materialist analysis of the history of Marxism for the first time (Korsch 1970: 56). The Frankfurt School’s criticisms of others within the Western Marxist tradition, such as Lukács, was also a form of self-critique, given the influence Lukács had on their critical theory. It is also clear, as I have discussed above, that neither the Second International nor Soviet Marxism was equipped to analyze the fascist and capitalist forms of cultural mediation rapidly developing in Western Europe, which had discernable impacts on class consciousness. Thus, we might think of Western Marxism as a concrete and reflective response to specific challenges. “Critical theory is ... critical of itself and of the social forces that make up its own basis,” writes Marcuse (1937: 156). Such self-critiques are essential in the wake of practical setbacks or catastrophic defeats. Marx touted this critical self-awareness as a defining characteristic of proletarian revolutions in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852). Such revolutions, he said, “criticize themselves constantly” and “deride with unmerciful thoroughness the inadequacies, weaknesses and paltrinesses of their first attempts” (Marx 1852: 107–108).

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²⁰ By invoking the ideal of a universal Marxist science to judge the fragmentary social conditions where Western Marxism took root, reminds one of a section in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, titled “The law of the heart and the frenzy of self-conceit.” There, Hegel writes: “This heart is confronted by a real world; for in the heart the law is, in the first place and only for itself, it is not yet realized ...” (Hegel 1977: 221).

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