Constructing a Critical Political Theory

written by Stephen Eric Bronner | June 12, 2009

CRITICAL THEORY HAS ITS POLITICAL roots in what has been termed “the heroic phase” of the Russian Revolution. This was the period from 1917-1923 in which the radical democratic vision of workers’ councils — or “soviets” — dominated both the communist movement and its radical offshoots. Based on the slogan of “All Power to the Soviets!” that was employed by Lenin to topple the Constituent Assembly, and justify the communist seizure of power, these years were marked by councilist uprisings throughout Europe as a gruesome civil war devastated the Soviet Union.Though workers’ councils never actually ruled Russia,[1] these ill-fated revolutionary attempts and the “offensive strategy” of the Communist International gave the new revolution a certain libertarian and utopian aura. If philosophy is, as Hegel once remarked, “its epoch comprehended in thought” then the most radical intellectual reflection of this turbulent period, wherein the “pre-history” of humanity seemed near its end, lay in the writings of Antonio Gramsci, Karl Korsch, and Georg Lukacs.[2]These three thinkers became the most sophisticated representatives of what came to be known as “Western Marxism.” Unconcerned with the textual exegesis of what Marx “said” about this or that issue, they evidenced a new concern with transforming the “totality” of capitalist social relations and abolishing the cultural “hegemony” of the bourgeoisie. Gramsci, Korsch, and Lukacs had little use for economic determinism or the parliamentary reformism of European social democracy. They despised the ways in which orthodox Marxism shoved the actuality of revolution into the future.[3] These Western Marxists were instead advocates of political voluntarism, or direct action,[4] on the part of the working class without any particular regard for historical stages or structural constraints. All of them highlighted the role of proletarian “consciousness,” and their approach was predicated on the legacy of philosophical idealism rather than the positivism, or the putatively “scientific” character of Marxism. Lukacs liked to quote Vico that “the difference between history and nature is that man has created the one but not the other.” He and his comrades were adamant about the need to understand Marxism as a social theory and break it off from a “dialectics of nature.”[5] Each after his fashion, indeed, saw the dialectic as a critical method capable of dealing with changing conditions while confronting the limits of all previous theories – including Marxism itself.[6] Unshackling the dialectic from the constraints of “orthodox” stage theory produced an interpretation of Marxism as a “theory of practice” and rendered it relevant to new social movements and, ultimately, the once colonized world. Privileging the totality made it possible to emphasize the structure of capitalist social relations, which reformists presuppose, while the preoccupation with bringing pre-history to an end — and the utopian “leap into the realm of freedom” — served an important mobilizing function. Introducing the link between Hegel and Marx, moreover, gave a historical bent to historical materialism. It made clear the dangers in mechanically carrying over any given form of thinking from one period to the next. Western Marxism rested on the belief that theory must confront new problems with new insights. But the new period that followed the “heroic phase” was one of retrenchment. The failures of the councilist uprisings in Europe left the Soviet Union as the one “socialist” state amid an increasingly hostile capitalist world in which fascism was internationally on the rise. There consequently seemed little place in the Communist movement for the philosophical radicalism of Western Marxism. The “revolution” had been achieved; it had become concrete in an economically underdeveloped nation, contrary to the teachings of Marx, and transforming the “totality” now seemed little more than the illusion of “petty bourgeois” intellectuals. Securing the legitimacy of the Soviet Union, especially given the constantly changing “party line,” called for emphasizing the textual legacy of Marx and Lenin amid the need to develop new priorities for transforming an economically underdeveloped nation bearing the scars of war. Economic modernization was already the priority in 1921 with the introduction of capitalist reforms

under the “New Economic Policy” of Lenin.This concern became intensified with the subsequent “inward turn” of Stalin in 1928 and the start of his various “five-year” plans. Retrenchment replaced the cultural experimentalism and loosening of traditional mores associated with the heroic phase of the Russian Revolution. In the name of “materialism,” a degeneration of theory followed the burgeoning authoritarianism of practice.[7] Consciousness would now be directed not toward the coming international revolution, but to recognizing the “revolutionary privilege” and the need for “socialist construction” of what became known as the homeland of the revolution. Remnants of the old revolutionary aura, however, continued to hover over the Soviet Union even after the Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939 that unleashed World War II. Growing disenchantment with communism and liberalism marked the second phase, or “moment,” in the political evolution of critical theory. With the appointment of Max Horkheimer as Director of the Institute for Social Research in 1930 and the ascendancy of his circle, which included Herbert Marcuse, the “Frankfurt School” was born. Not merely the specter of fascism, but the shadow of the revolution hung over these intellectuals. They saw themselves as inheritors of a tradition that reached back over Marx to Hegel and the Enlightenment.[8] If new problems were to be examined, however, then the contributions of thinkers outside this tradition — like Schopenhauer, Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Freud — needed to be integrated into the critical enterprise. Neither the Enlightenment thinkers, nor Hegel, nor Marx could fully analyze the twentieth century set of institutional and cultural forces that inhibited the revolutionary consciousness of the proletariat. The change from laissez-faire to “state capitalism” required further study.[9]That was also the case for the “authoritarian” family, the impact of repressive social and psychological attitudes upon the German working class,[10] and how the organization of culture in capitalist society affected the individual. Questions concerning the empowerment of the proletariat, and of revolutionary agency, needed to be raised anew.[11]Thus, in this second phase of its development, critical theory sought to reinvigorate the radical enterprise of Marx with those utopian values of compassion, happiness, and freedom that were being sacrificed in the Soviet Union. All of this required a new mode of theorizing for a new period of international counterrevolution. Perhaps the formulation that the proletariat constituted the “subject-object” of history, as Lukacs had claimed, was becoming increasingly suspect. But the subject was still seen as capable of transforming social reality. The injunction was clear.The Frankfurt School would confront any sort of “materialism” that did not highlight issues dealing with agency, subjectivity, and the domination of nature — implicitly including the mainstream versions of Marxism, along with any form of “metaphysics” that sundered speculative thinking from the constraints of capitalist society. “Traditional theory,” in short, would become juxtaposed to “critical theory.”[12] From the beginning, however, the enemy was less metaphysics than positivism or the scientific kinds of materialist thinking that reflected “reification.” It is with the overwhelming embrace of this concept that the third political “moment” in the history of critical theory emerges. The stage needs to be set. The era of the councils had ended with the Spanish Civil War. The Soviet Union had effectively become the partner of Nazi Germany in 1939 and, even once they became enemies in 1941, the totalitarian traits they shared in common were impossible to ignore. Liberalism had, for its part, proven incapable of preventing the emergence of fascism in Europe and, even in the United States, it had apparently morphed into forms of managing mass society at the expense of the individual. It now seemed not merely that the liberal political heritage of the bourgeoisie might contain the sources of reaction, but that the triumph of instrumental reason had blurred the difference between communism, fascism, and democracy. A historical situation had thus arisen in which, as Theodor Adorno later put the matter in *Minima Moralia* (1951), “the whole is false.” Each of these systems was predicated on treating working people as costs of production; each had integrated its political opposition; each had its culture industry and — albeit in different and often complex ways — each was intent upon securing conformity on the part of its citizens. It was now necessary to question modernity tout court and its attendant notion of progress. The Enlightenment, once considered the source of liberty and tolerance, had seemingly been betrayed or, better, had betrayed itself. Its commitment to scientific rationality and what Kant termed “pure reason” — once directed against the Church and

all forces of superstition and provincial prejudice — had ultimately turned against everything that sought to temper the march of technological progress. *DIALECTIC OF ENLIGHTENMENT*(1947), the classic work by Horkheimer and Adorno, suggested that everything associated with "practical reason" and emotional experience, conscience, and subjectivity, was being subverted by the demands of instrumental rationality. Enlightenment had engendered what was "totalitarian" and the "totally administered society" had sprung from the liberal political project. Its much- vaunted "individual" was now nothing more than a conscienceless robot seething with rage against the most pitiable and the weakest members of society. Enlightenment, modernity, and a unique form of scientific rationality had taken reification to its ultimate extreme: the subject had become a number tattooed on the arm of an anonymous inmate at Auschwitz.[13] Utopia had, at least in its traditional formulations, been conquered. Political transformation had come up short. Freedom now rested on highlighting the tension between the totally administered system and the individual subject bent on preserving his or her subjectivity. In this vein, the "totality" required confrontation from a "constellation" of fragments or aphorisms constructed to enhance the repressed experience of subjectivity.[14] Modernity rather than any particular system or state formation became the enemy and the purpose of the dialectical reason was now to create a "non-identity" between subject and object.[15] *Dialectic of Enlightenment* left no room for a politically organized transformation of society in terms of traditional liberal and socialist values. It instead insisted on a philosophical and cultural emphasis upon negativity. Happiness would ultimately go the way of all flesh.[16] The result was an inverted utopianism intent upon providing an ongoing critique of the given order in the name of an epiphany or a philosophical burst, akin in the aesthetic realm to the experience of fireworks — that for Theodor Adorno served as the paradigm of the encounter with art — and, in theological terms, to what Horkheimer termed the "longing for the totally other." Philosophical negativity, aesthetic experience, and theological longing fused in a resuscitated metaphysic. Only in its opposition to reification, in its explosion of all claims to a positive and determinate critique of society, would it become possible to provide hope for the hopeless.

Marcuse's Contribution

HERBERT MARCUSE WAS SURELY THE MOST politically "engaged" member of what became known as the "Frankfurt School." His political history reaches back over his activities with the various movements of the 1960s to his time with the Office of Strategic Services during and immediately after World War II, where he played an important role in shaping American policy toward Western Europe, to his participation as a young man in the Spartacus Revolt of 1918-9. But these particular instances of political practice say little about the character of his theory. Marcuse has usually been valorized as a philosopher or a social theorist. Too often ignored, however, is the way in which his thought integrates — for better or worse — the three dominant political "moments" within the history of critical theory. It therby fosters skepticism about substituting metaphysics for politics and helps constructing a critical political theory that meets the concerns of the present. The only member of the Frankfurt School's inner circle *consistently* to place the transformation of advanced industrial society at the center of critical theory was Herbert Marcuse. His interpretation of Marx was profoundly informed by Hegel,[17]and it led him to draw the radical conclusions from Lenin's famous claim that "intelligent idealism is closer to intelligent materialism than stupid materialism."[18] Critical theory would thus differ qualitatively from the "traditional" variants of either materialism or metaphysics.[19] Hegel's belief that "truth lies in the negative" led Marcuse to question the ways in which capitalist society was manipulating individual experience. In contrast to Horkheimer and Adorno, however, Marcuse also took seriously Hegel's insistence that "truth is concrete." This caused him to understand critical theory as theory of political resistance that speaks not merely to the resurrection of a repressed subjectivity but to the exploited and excluded in society. Such a theory would constantly project a happiness that has little in common with license, that few living the life of conformism provided by the "happy consciousness" can judge, and that

remains unfulfilled by reality[20]There is a way in which even the elitism for which the Frankfurt School has so often been criticized has a more political character in the thinking of Marcuse. His critique of the culture industry and its use of "repressive desublimation" were directed not merely at its prefabrication of experience and happiness, its subversion of the critical intellect, but also at its nullification of the utopian imagination. Marcuse's critical analyses of reification and the various forms of "affirmative culture" were always undertaken *both* with reference to the ways in which they perverted subjective experience and also to their impact upon the potential for radical political action. Marcuse also tempers what became the traditional concern of the Frankfurt School with subjectivity by noting the way in which advanced industrial society throws the subject back on itself. This led him to insist upon the importance of developing new forms of solidarity.[21] Indeed, with respect to contesting the domination of nature, Marcuse wished to foster a "pacification" of existence that would integrate ecology and a concern for the environment into a revamped understanding of socialism.[22] Alone among the inner circle of the Frankfurt School, Marcuse was influenced by the philosophy of Martin Heidegger. Some of his earliest work involved attempts to blend the thinking of Marx and his former teacher. Most usually emphasize Marcuse's philosophical desire to "ground" historical materialism within a phenomenological ontology. His more practical concern, however, was directed toward understanding the "historicity" of "history" or, more simply, the way in which society affects the experiential possibilities of individuals, especially with regard to their ability to resist it.[23] This is an issue that has genuine political implications and the theme would remain with Marcuse throughout his life. From Heidegger, no less than from his life-long encounter with Marx,[24]he also learned about the inauthentic character of public life and its deadening effect upon discourse, social relations, and the individual experience of finitude. Marcuse responded to this situation in *Eros and Civilization* (1955). It is the only articulated vision of utopia in the history of the Frankfurt School — a vision so radical that it projected the transformation of speech, a reconstructed notion of sexuality, nature, and the conquest of death. *Eros and Civilization* called for an "anthropological break" with the "totality" of advanced industrial society.[25] But the frame for thinking about this "break," and bringing it about, remained anchored in the past. The utopia envisioned by Marcuse — along with his notion of the "new sensibility" — received its content from a radical reinterpretation of Schiller, Nietzsche, Marx, Heidegger, Breton, and Freud. Ultimately, Marcuse may have envisioned the need for a "new science" beyond positivism and its various offshoots. But, though the contradiction is glaring, he understood the "technological process" as hampering human development only insofar as it is tied to a social apparatus born of scarcity and exploitation. Marcuse also remained convinced that "objective" contradictions between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie remained. He insisted only that the subjective "consciousness" of those contradictions had been suspended by the "culture industry" and the reification process of advanced industrial society. In contrast to Horkeheimer and Adorno, who also lived to witness the revolts of the 1960s, Marcuse did not indulge in a deadening pessimism. *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), which is surely Marcuse's signature work, insists that "catalysts" for sparking revolutionary consciousness continue to exist. "Marginal groups" like women, minorities, intellectuals, bohemians, and third-world movements — or those least integrated into the system — project what Andre Breton, the leading thinker of surrealism, originally called the "great refusal." These groups constituted the new vanguard and, according to Marcuse, the refusal they offered was linked to a new sensibility directed against cruelty, exploitation, and the inhumane values of advanced industrial society. He anticipated somehow that these groups would take center stage, and they did indeed spark action by the working class. They radicalized its consciousness and, in 1968, ignited the largest strike-wave in the history of post-war Europe with a new ideal of *autogestion* that harked back to the workers' council. "The authentic utopia," Marcuse could write, "is grounded in recollection."[26] With the collapse of the radical movements generated by the 1960s, however, the nature of this *political* recollection became increasingly vague. That Marcuse supported the failed presidential candidacy of George McGovern in 1972 says as little about his theoretical convictions concerning representative democracy as the hysterical responses of Adorno and Horkheimer to the

students of 1968 say about the conservative character of their thinking. Already in 1934, Marcuse had made the claim that totalitarianism evidenced an "inner relation" with liberalism,[27] and he noted the way in which new conditions had transformed the once radical meaning of toleration into "repressive tolerance." In short, then, it was not the liberal legacy that required recollection and re-appropriation. Nevertheless, following 1968, there seemed little that *autogestion* still had to offer. Marcuse saw the end of the "movement," forewarned that capitalism was generating a new neo-imperialist enterprise, and that a "counterrevolution" was underway whose partisans were intent upon eradicating everything associated with what neo-conservatives like Norman Podhoretz would call "the adversary culture" of the 1960s.[28]There seemed to remain only what Rudi Dutschke, the great student leader, termed a "long march through the institutions." Marcuse deemed that insufficient. The "great refusal" seemed imperiled, and revivifying it, which required "utopian recollection," could occur only in the aesthetic realm. Marcuse's last work, *The Aesthetic Dimension,* thus evidences a "debt" to the aesthetic theory of Adorno that "does not require any specific acknowledgement." Here, Marcuse emphasizes the way in which art alone can redefine reality for an experiencing subject, and how an inherently critical and liberating "form" always takes primacy over what the "revolutionary" content of any artwork may demonstrate. The "great refusal" continues. Following Adorno, however, Marcuse now insists upon the "uncompromising estrangement" of art from political action.[29] But this does not tell the whole story. There was another thinker whose influence lingered. Friedrich Schiller had been a part of Marcuse's intellectual universe since the beginning of his scholarly career. Schiller played an important role in *Eros and Civilization*, and accompanied him through *One-Dimensional Man* and *An Essay on Liberation.* The parallels between their perspectives on aesthetics and politics have too often been ignored. Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1795) sought to preserve in the aesthetic realm the moment of radical freedom that had been politically extinguished by the French Revolution during its Thermidor of 1793. Schiller had postulated an unrealized aesthetic life-world predicated on the "play impulse" that was less directed towards the unique experience of the individual subject than as an image of resistance or, better, as the utopian alternative to an increasingly repressive reality. It was no different for Marcuse. *The Aesthetic Dimension* was a last desperate attempt to maintain the "great refusal" in the face of the political radicalism that had vanished first with the integration of the social democratic labor movement, then with the failure of the communist revolution, and finally with the collapse of the movements associated with 1968. The subjectivist turn made by Marcuse was, in my opinion, less theoretical than tactical. Even in his last work, written under the cloud of counter-revolution, the "great refusal" retained echoes of what it once was: a cultural endeavor – predicated on solidarity – whose intentions informed the political imagination.

Toward a Critical Political Theory

"TRADITIONAL" POLITICAL THEORY in the United States basically comes in two variants. The most recognizable is *normative* theory. Primarily influenced by students of Karl Jaspers like Hannah Arendt and Leo Strauss, it is preoccupied with the conventional canon that begins with Plato and the basic categories — such as "virtue" or the "citizen" —that re-appear in an ongoing and timeless conversation among classic thinkers. Normative theorists privilege the unique textual interpretation, the plasticity of concepts, and the experience that gives them credence. Even the most cursory glance at the mainstream academic journals demonstrates the extent to which normative theory is separate from social reality. The alternative approach is usually termed *empirical* theory. Important thinkers from this school include "pluralists" such as David Truman, Robert Dahl, and Charles Lindblom. They tend to offer middle range theories that have little use for the more general concepts associated with normative theory. Their aim is to offer "objective" descriptions of how institutions, parties, and factions operate. Neither of these traditional (and hegemonic) approaches provides an insight into the totality — what Marx termed "the ensemble of social relations" — or the contradictions that it generates. Neither is particularly concerned either with critique or resistance

let alone questions of agency or the mobilizing power of ideas. In short, just like the traditional theory criticized by Max Horkheimer, each traditional form of political theory — after its fashion — neatly divides the subject from the object, the metaphysical from the material, and the speculative from the behavioral. Critical theory had always opposed attempts to deal with ideas in trans-historical fashion, leave the totality unquestioned, and ignore its contradictions. It can offer an alternative to the reigning paradigms. But this would mean introducing a new commitment to privileging political action and specifying meaningful forms of institutional resistance. It would also mean coming to terms with how negative dialectics has cast a metaphysical veil over critical theory and how those with a vested interest in maintaining its academic respectability have a vested interest in keeping that veil in place. The need for such a conceptual shift is, therefore, not as self-evident as many would like to think. Purely philosophical and aesthetic practitioners of critical theory constantly laud the radicalism of their intellectual undertakings but rarely put "positive" proposals on the table, identify contradictions with an eye on their resolution, or offer even speculative ways of dealing with the crises of our time. It may be the case that politics is not reducible to the questions raised by Harold Lasswell: "Who gets what, when, where, and how?" But these concerns inform any understanding of meaningful political action. Unless a theory can generate the categories necessary for making such determinations, no willingness to condemn "the system" or "the establishment" will make it political. Marcuse took important steps in lifting the metaphysical veil, but it made little sense calling for a "new science" without bothering to provide criteria for verifying experiments and claims.[30]Such a stance only gets in the way of disentangling the conflation between objectification and reification — about which Marcuse himself evidenced ambivalence — along with what have become completely metaphysical arguments about the commodity form and instrumental rationality. A critical political theory must begin by admitting that the theory of reification has itself become reified. The commodity form often breaks down the walls of the organic community, and it can empower women and other victims of reactionary traditions; it just as easily generates monopolies or reduces the worker to a cost of production. Instrumental rationality is actually nothing more than a mathematical technique for dealing with scarcity by achieving maximum output with minimum input. It is employed in curing malaria or producing a nuclear bomb, organizing for social democracy or organizing for fascism, developing legislative programs for environmental reform or analyzing the possibilities for strip-mining. The issue is not the commodity form or instrumental rationality, let alone "science," but the projects that are being undertaken through their usage. Juxtaposing them and the totality they ideologically reinforce against subjectivity has made it virtually impossible to render any determinate political judgment or deal with questions concerning what is to be done. A new critical political theory must therefore discard the indeterminate notion that "the whole is false" and emerge from what Hegel called "the night in which all cows are black." Entering the political discourse, rather than retreating from it in the name of "critique," requires jettisoning the notion that the abdication of "positive" political judgment is somehow a principle of judgment. It demands the creation of categories for rendering qualitative distinctions between institutions and between movements with an eye to how any one of them might contribute to bringing about a *more* liberated society. Sartre put the matter beautifully when he wrote:

> I know that certain lofty spirits make a name for themselves by illustrious refusals.They say *no.* What about it? These refusals are appearances that hide a shameful but utter submission. I hate the pretense that trammels people's minds and sells us cheap nobility. To refuse is not to say no, but to modify by work. "Change the world," says Marx. "Change life," says Rimbaud. Well and good. Change them if you can. That means you will accept many things in order to modify a few.[31]

A one-dimensional view on the culture industry fits the familiar pattern. There is, admittedly, a trend

within cultural production that speaks to the lowest common denominator and there is too much of what Adorno termed “nonconformist conformity.” But it is mistaken to suggest that every work will necessarily become subject to a form of what Marcuse termed repressive de-sublimation whereby its critical and liberating content is diminished to the extent that it becomes a popular commodity. That is certainly not the case with a host of artists ranging from Charlie Chaplin to Ethel Waters to Bob Dylan. Different works of art, whether representing high or low culture, offer different possibilities: some can provide a better depiction of social reality while others can better spark the imagination.[32] Insisting that art *must* evoke a great refusal or a sense of utopia denied is really a form of provincial nostalgia for the seminar room masquerading as radicalism. Kant recognized that the aesthetic experience has no purpose to serve other than one of purposelessness. There is nothing rarified, or even necessarily “radical” about what he had in mind. In modern terms, in fact, Kant expresses the need for “escape.” That is the appeal of genuine aesthetic experience. It is as real for Emma Bovary reading her trashy novels as it is for Adorno listening to — or, perhaps better, “reading” — the music of Schoenberg. Forgetting this, and framing the analysis of the culture industry in a one-dimensional way, leaves resistance to the “happy consciousness” identified with a completely self-referential experience that also has dogmatic overtones. Adorno and Marcuse, correctly, recognized that even their most beloved modernist works were susceptible to integration by the culture industry and that this very fact demanded unceasing innovation. But that innovation could occur only in terms of ever more esoteric and formalistic works that must ever more fracture the narrative and undercut simple enjoyment in the name of an ever more endangered experience of genuine subjectivity. Of course, many products of the culture industry insult the intelligence of even everyday people. But the judgments of even its best critics become arbitrary when it comes to determining what works actually perform the task of negativity as against those “popular” works that can’t — by definition. These thinkers also ignore the ways in which the culture industry has expanded the public for high as well as popular art and made the world bigger for a broader public.The famous claim made in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that “mass enlightenment is mass deception” goes nowhere.The usual critique of the culture industry is far less radical than self-indulgently conservative and counter-political. It leaves the world as it is. Walter Benjamin was much more circumspect than most members of the Frankfurt School when he noted that that even popular works can foster political reflection and, from a progressive stance, that a positive judgment on the technique employed depends more on what it can teach other artists than whether it evokes a great refusal or an intensification of subjectivity.[33]To believe that the New Left, the Women’s Liberation Movement, the various movements identified with people of color, or even the anti-imperialist movements somehow opposed mass culture is misguided. Every movement must make not merely its message — but also its values — popular. The culture industry should be conceived as what Douglas Kellner termed a contested terrain in which battles are constantly taking place between conflicting ideological forces. Categories for making distinctions, once again, become necessary. To deny this — especially in the name of subjectivity — leads into yet another dead end. None of this translates into abandoning utopia. But it does call for understanding the *best* society as a regulative ideal that is in flux — that is a dream — rather than a realizable vision against which all practical projects are judged essentially worthless. To his credit, Marcuse complemented his more speculative ventures with concrete investigations into the social dynamics of fascism, a fine study of Soviet Marxism,[34] and advanced industrial society. He also stood virtually alone in employing his utopian ideal, his anthropological break with the established order, to inform judgments concerning the new sensibility required by a movement committed to liberation and even the changes in social relations that it might demand. But the old perspective cannot simply be mechanically carried over into new conditions.The New Left is a thing of the past and the matter of solidarity — no less than the ideological values informing it — needs critical reformulation. RADICAL SOCIAL MOVEMENTS STILL EXIST. But they can no longer be seen as existing at the “margins” of the system. Many have crystallized into interest groups that clearly (in political if not always in ideological terms) seek inclusion into mainstream society rather than a new order. Each also competes with others for

resources, loyalty, and publicity in order to privilege its particular demands. There is a general tendency for interest groups to engage in the moral economy of the separate deal, and – from the perspective of progressive forces – the whole has become less than the sum of its parts. These are real issues. But contemporary critical theorists have been notably remiss in tackling them. It is the same with problems concerning the development of links between social movements and the "working class." That is, I think, because — especially after Marcuse — subjectivity has been privileged over solidarity by the "critical" radical enterprise.[35] Solidarity is usually trumpeted by contemporary practitioners of critical theory from the perspective of compassion, guilt, and identity. Even Marcuse does not deal with how social movements and class intersect, their shared interests, and the ideological preconditions for overcoming the disunity between them. A critical political theory must grapple concretely with the problems and preconditions for establishing solidarity among the exploited and the excluded. Articulating programs that might express a "class ideal," or a stance that privileges the interests of working people within the major social movements without privileging one or the other, might be a place to start. [36]Not the great refusal, in any event, but the most basic and unrealized political values of the enlightenment legacy informed the great progressive movements of the past — from the socialist labor movement to the civil rights movement, the women's liberation movement, the anti-Communist uprisings in Eastern Europe, and the most democratic and egalitarian movements in the once colonized world. The implication is clear: critical theory must reorient itself politically and acknowledge its fundamental debt to the liberal political heritage. Harping on the way in which modern critical theory has engaged in a critique of enlightenment from the standpoint of enlightenment itself doesn't help matters. *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* was a metaphysical exercise from the beginning and there is a reason why Horkheimer and Adorno never wrote the "positive" sequel to their masterpiece: they no longer had anything positive to say. They and their followers see the Enlightenment as the source of modern barbarism: the fulfillment of a triumphant instrumental rationality, in their view, is the "totally administered society." But historical reality never entered into their argument. Not *modern* classes like the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, whose partisans embraced liberalism and socialism and identified with anti-fascist political movements, but *pre-modern* classes like the peasantry, the petty bourgeoisie, and the lumpenproletariat have traditionally formed the mass base for racist, xenophobic, and imperialist movements from the Action Francaise to the Ku Klux Klan to the Nazis and beyond. Rarely is it mentioned that the critique of these reactionary ideologies, even when embraced by liberal-enlightenment thinkers, can occur only with liberal-enlightenment assumptions; that the extent to which difference can be practiced depends upon the extent to which the liberal values are in effect; and— finally — that the degree to which authoritarianism is constrained is the degree to which all institutions, including capital, are rendered democratically accountable. While castigating the great representatives of the Enlightenment, critical theory has wasted little time on what the "counter-enlightenment" had to say about the pressing issues of their time and ours. And for good reason: most of their works are so prejudiced, so anachronistic, so blatantly foolish, that they are simply unreadable. The truth is that, from the beginning, critical theory underestimated the enlightenment legacy and parliamentary democracy in a way that the orthodox Marxist representatives of social democracy never did. Repulsed by totalitarianism, in fact, critical theorists became undialectically defined by what they opposed.That is perhaps less true of Marcuse than the others, but it is true of him as well. He may have anticipated that the more liberal developments of advanced industrial society were being threatened by a counter-revolution with provincial and authoritarian intentions. But Marcuse, like his less political friends in the Frankfurt School, never appreciated the way in which Goethe was right and that, from the very beginning, two souls lived in the breast of Europe and perhaps the rest of the world, too. Today, a new generation of critical political theorists must draw the appropriate lessons from this insight from *Faust*. The alternative is no longer reform or revolution, but liberal reform or authoritarian reaction. That is true in the Occident no less than in the Orient. Human rights, scientific experimentation, and eco-nomic justice are under siege by proponents of religious fundamentalism and political provincialism. A modern

critical political theory cannot simply retreat into the philosophical-aesthetic ether. It must dispense with the metaphysical preoccupations of times past and, finally, recognize that there never was a "dialectic" of enlightenment at all: only an ongoing political and cultural conflict between real movements either committed or opposed to constraining the arbitrary exercise of institutional power and expanding the possibilities of individual experience.

Footnotes

1. The primacy of the Communist Party was achieved with its destruction of the Kronstadt Soviet in 1921. For a background, see Samuel Farber, *Before Stalinism: The Rise and Fall of Soviet Democracy* (London: Verso, 1990), pp. 19-88,188-195 and Paul Avrich, *Kronstadt 1921* (New York: Norton, 1970).
2. For a more complete discussion, see Stephen Eric Bronner, *Of Critical Theory and Its Theorists* 2nd Ed. (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 11-67
3. With orthodox Marxism, "the dialectical method was overthrown and with it the methodological supremacy of the totality over the individual aspects; the parts were prevented from finding their definition within the whole and, instead, the whole [namely, capitalism] was dismissed as unscientific or else, it degenerated into the mere 'idea' or 'sum' of the parts. With the totality out of the way, the fetishistic relations of the isolated parts appeared as a timeless law valid for every human society." Georg Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), p. 9.
4. According to the prevailing Marxist wisdom, which saw the revolution as ultimately taking place in the most economically advanced nation, it should not have broken out in an economically underdeveloped country like Imperial Russia. That the communist revolution occurred there was for this new generation not merely a vindication of Lenin but a "revolution against *Das Kapital*." Antonio Gramsci, "The Revolution Against 'Capital'" in *Selections from Political Writings 1910-1920* ed. Quintin Hoare and trans. John Matthews (New York: International Publishers, 1977), pp. 34ff.
5. Lukacs, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 24.
6. The point was to develop a "conception of Marxism that was quite undogmatic and anti-dogmatic, historical and critical, and which was therefore materialist in the strictest sense of the word. This conception involved the application of the materialist conception of history to the materialist conception of history itself." Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy* tr. Fred Halliday (London: New Left Books, 1970), pp. 92ff and 43.
7. Russell Jacoby, *The Dialectics of Defeat: The Contours of Western Marxism* 2nd Ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).
8. In spite of his critical attitude toward the communist movement, and his withering contempt for orthodox Marxism and social democracy, Max Horkheimer thus lauded the idea of workers' councils as late as 1940. See, Rolf Wiggershaus, *Die Frankfurter Schule: Geschichte, Theoretische Entwicklung, Politische Bedeutung* (Frankfurt: DTV, 1988), p. 66.
9. Friedrich Pollock, "State Capitalism: Its Possibilities and Limitations" in *Critical Theory and Society: A Reader*, eds. Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Mack-ay Kellner (New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 95ff.
10. Erich Fromm, *The Working Class in Weimar Germany: A Psychological and Sociological Study* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).
11. Max Horkheimer, "The Authoritarian State" (1940) in *Telos* #15 (Spring, 1973), pp. 3ff.
12. Note the classic essays, "Materialism and Metaphysics" and "Traditional and Critical Theory," by Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, tr. Matthew J. O'Connell et al. (New York: Continuum, 1982), pp. 10ff and 188ff.
13. See, for a critique of this position, Stephen Eric Bronner, "The Limits of Metatheory: Political

Reflections on *Dialectic of Enlightenment*" in *Imagining the Possible: Radical Politics for Conservative Times* (New York: Routledge, 2002), pp. 103ff.

14. "If today the subject is vanishing, aphorisms take upon themselves the duty to consider the evanescent itself as essential. They insist . . . on negativity." The-odor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from a Damaged Life* trans. E.F.N. Jephcott (London: New Left Books, 1974), p. 16. Also note the famous lecture by Theodor Adorno, "The Actuality of Philosophy" (1931) in *Telos* #31 (Spring, 1977), pp. 120ff.
15. "The less identity can be assured between subject and object, the more contradictory are the demands made upon the cognitive subject, upon its unfettered strength and candid self-reflection."Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, tr. E.B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 31.
16. "Happiness is an accidental moment of art, less important than the happiness that attends the knowledge of art. In short, the very idea that enjoyment is of the essence of art deserves to be overthrown." T.W Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretl Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann and tr. C. Lenhardt (London: Routledge, Kegan Paul, 1984), p. 22.
17. Note the classic study by Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1941).
18. V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works* (London: International Publishers, 1963) 38:276.
19. "There are two basic elements linking materialism to correct social theory: concern with human happiness, and the conviction that it can be attained only through a transformation of the material conditions of existence." Herbert Marcuse, "Philosophy and Critical Theory" in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory,* trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon, 1969), p. 135.
20. Marcuse, "On Hedonism" in *Negations*, pp. 191-2.
21. Marcuse, "The Affirmative Character of Culture"(1937) in *Negations*, p. 122.
22. Herbert Marcuse, "Proto-Socialism and Late Capitalism: Toward a Theoretical Synthesis Based on Bahro's Analysis" in *Rudolf Bahro: Critical Responses* (White Plains, New York: M.E. Sharpe, 1980), pp. 25ff.
23. Herbert Marcuse, "Contributions to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism" (1928) in *Telos,* 4 (St. Louis, 1969), pp. 3ff.
24. Bronner, "Utopia, Aesthetics, Revolution: Herbert Marcuse and the Radical Imagination" in *Of Critical Theory and Its Theorists*, pp. 172ff.
25. Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Dialectics* (Boston: Beacon, 1978), p. 73.
26. For a discussion of the "inner relation" between liberal and totalitarian society, see Marcuse,"The Struggle Against Liberalism in the Totalitarian View of the State" (1934) in *Negations*, pp. 3ff.
27. Herbert Marcuse, *Counter-Revolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), pp. 22ff.
28. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, pp. 9, 31 and *passim.*
29. Note the withering critique of Marcuse's stance, which emphasizes the need for an ontological rather than a speculative approach when dealing with nature and science, see Jurgen Habermas, "Technology and Science as 'Ideology:'" in *Toward a Rational Society: Student Protest, Science, and Politics* tr. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Beacon: Boston, 1970), pp. 81ff.
30. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr* (New York: New American Library, 1971), p. 344.
31. Note the more elaborate discussion, which seeks to generate some categories for differentiating the radical possibilities of artistic works, in Stephen Eric Bronner, "Expressionism and Marxism: Towards an Aesthetic of Emancipation" in *Passion and Rebellion: The Expressionist Heritage,* eds. Stephen Eric Bronner and Douglas Kellner (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 411ff.
32. See Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in *Illuminations* ed. Hannah Arendt and trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1969),

pgs. 217ff; Walter Benjamin, “The Author as Producer” in *Understanding Brecht* trans. Anna Bostock (London: New Left Books, 1973), pp. 85ff.

33. Herbert Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism: A Critical Analysis* (New York: Vintage, 1961).
34. Bronner, *Of Critical Theory and Its Theorists*, pp. 241-3.
35. Bronner, *Socialism Unbound*., pp. 164-7.