Critical Theory Revisited

'The weapon of criticism cannot…replace criticism of weapons; material force must be overthrown by material force; but theory also becomes a material force as soon as it is gripped by the masses.' So wrote the young Marx in 1843. But how will this happen? Will it happen spontaneously? From time to time, the masses will be forced into big struggles against the bourgeoisie and its state. The Greek crisis which began in 2011-12 is the most recent example. The EU's decision to impose a draconian version of the austerity strategy on the people led to a spontaneous revolt by hundreds of thousands of ordinary Greeks. (Whereas elsewhere in Europe, the fightback has been very limited.) Capitalism has clearly broken down in Greece, which calls for a revolutionary solution. But the Greek working class needs to achieve adequate consciousness quickly. Otherwise the leftwing Syriza Party will become the next government, and try to seek a reformist solution, which will fail. Once again, the working class will be defeated.

The problem is that Marx fails to explain how the working class can acquire adequate consciousness: of ' the necessity for a fundamental revolution', 'the full consciousness of their historic mission', including a revolutionary programme to achieve this; as opposed to its existing or 'actual' consciousness. On the other hand, he has much to say about the impediments to the former. In the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844), he points out that, under modern capitalism, there are four basic impediments to be overcome: private property relations, alienated labour, division of labour, the commodity form/commodity fetishism.

They underpin the various ideological forms which develop, from which false consciousness springs (religion, bourgeois philosophy, law, politics, etc.). The latter are not part of the foundation; rather they are in a state of flux, linked to regular crises within the system. Anti-semitism is one example: It was largely eradicated in Europe after the Second World War; but since the financial crisis of 2008, it is now on the increase again.

Yet all of these impediments - along with bourgeois ideology - have to be overcome so that the consciousness which Marx ascribes to the proletariat can be achieved. Only on this basis can the 'criticism of weapons' achieve their goal. Otherwise, if we wish to remain marxists, all we have is the 'weapons of criticism'. But that exposes us to the curse of revisionism, as the history of the last 100 years shows.

In 1917, the Bolsheviks, of course, were the next in line to exercise this kind of criticism. It took the form of Lenin's strategy of the vanguard party, as the 'material mediation' between actual and adequate consciousness. Lenin outlines this strategy as early as What Is To Be Done? (1903). But this was never going to be easy, especially in underdeveloped Russia, the 'weakest link' in the imperialist chain.

Even before Lenin's death in 1924, the revolution found itself isolated. The Bolsheviks, in turn, were isolated from the masses; who were themselves exhausted by a terrible civil war. In 1921, for practical reasons, Lenin was forced

to restore elements of capitalism - the N.E.P. - in order to revive the economy. Albeit both he and Trotsky believed that this was a temporary measure. But the tide of world revolution had receded. Therefore the revolution degenerated further into a form of bureaucratic centralism. This opened the door to the counter-revolution and the Stalinist interregnum.

Following the final defeat of the German revolution in 1933, erstwhile marxists, such as Lukacs, Benjamin, Adorno, et al, were forced back to the 'weapons of criticism'. This centred on two things: Firstly, like Marx, once again, they had to consider the problem of the impediments within modern capitalism (above). Secondly, given the failure of the party, was there some other form of material mediation which could be deployed to achieve the desired goal?

But during this period, the critical theorists were confronted by the horrors of Stalinism, on the one hand, and fascism on the other. The communist parties had failed to stop the latter, which was an excrescence of capitalism. This led to another destructive world war and the Holocaust (the attempt to wipe out all European Jews by means of industrialised killing).

Furthermore the defeat of fascism in 1945 did not lead to another upsurge in the world revolution, as Trotsky had hoped. Rather it led to the rise of the United States as the world's first super power; not just economically and militarily; but also in terms of technology and culture. On the one hand, as the chief defender of the capitalist world, US imperialism reached unprecedented levels of domination

and repression, by means of new weapons of mass destruction; on the other it established the mass consumerist/mass media society. For Adorno, not only did Marx's impediments continue to be an obstacle to adequate consciousness; but now another should be added, i.e. the culture industry. The latter became the means for 'the growth of administered society', within which 'instrumental reason' asserts itself, in opposition to the Enlightenment dream; without which there would be no Marx.

Thus, for Adorno and the critical theorists, the history of the 20th century corresponds to 'forms of unfreedom'. Instead of Marx's rational optimism about the future, Adorno offers rational pessimism. Only the future can prove who is right!

The Gaps in Marx

According to Istvan Meszaros (a student of Lukacs, no less), the main problem for marxism, is that there are gaps in Marx's account of historical materialism; viz the mechanics of the social revolution and the transition to socialism and communism. But so far, neither the criticism of weapons or the weapons of criticism has come up with an answer.

The gaps in Marx are clearly apparent in The Civil war in France (1871); basically a defence of the Communards. On the one hand, Marx is forced to confront the

question of the first proletarian revolution in history; on the other, he therefore has to contemplate what should happen after the capitalist class and its state have been overthrown; i.e. post-revolutionary society. But he fails to fill in the gaps. This omission may be partly explained by the fact that, first of all, Marx is obliged to show solidarity with the Communards. So he chooses to ascribe to the working class the 'full consciousness of its historic mission; beginning each sentence with: 'the working class knows' . (But maybe that is also because it would take a great deal more thought to fill in the gaps ?)

Clearly for Meszaros, the greatest impediment to adequate consciousness (on a mass scale) is the bourgeois hierarchal division of labour. This is clearly evident in the following extracts. (Note: All those statements enclosed by single commas belong to The Civil war in France; otherwise the text is written by Meszaros.):

First of all, as a rational optimist, and since he did not have a crystal ball, Marx characterises the Paris Commune as a 'revolution against the state itself'; therefore the Bonapartist Second Empire is the last expression of that state power'. Secondly, the 'political superstructures', and the determinate 'social bodies' which sustain them, are 'withering away'; because they are a historical anachronism. "In another passage, he stressed that the social soil that corresponds to the 'superstructure of a centralised state power' is the 'systematic and hierarchic division of labour'." But, as Meszaros argues, the social soil for the latter will not be abolished overnight. Indeed, unless this problem is addressed, the division of labour "successfully renews and strengthens itself in conjunction with the ongoing

transformation of the relevant social bodies of 'civil society' on an ever-extending scale, in the direction of ultimate global integration". 1. It corresponds to the continuance of class rule after the revolution.

Apropos the Commune, the state stubbornly refused to wither away. But any delay in tackling the problem of division of labour is a danger to the revolution. (The revolution, of course, can only be realised on a global scale.) It increases the contradiction between the task of working out the 'economic emancipation of labour' through the 'political form at last discovered', so "that 'free and associated labour' should assume the form of 'united co-operative societies', in order 'to regulate national production to a common plan'. (N.B. Given the isolation of Soviet Russia, combined with its backwardness, is this not why the Bolsheviks had to smash the Workers Opposition in 1920-21; albeit reluctantly?)

Marx says as much himself. "[He] 'insists that the working class 'will have to pass through long struggles, through a series of historic processes, transforming circumstances and men'. Yet he has to resort to equivocation in order to reconcile the contradiction between the fact that [this task] is far from accomplished, and the assumption that the communist consciousness of the working class is already given." Marx defines the latter in The German Ideology as 'the consciousness of the necessity of a fundamental revolution'. " The same ideas appear in his evaluation of the Commune, but this time ascribing to the working class in the present 'the full consciousness of their historic mission'….[He] also claimed that the working class possesses a practical determination to act in accordance with that

consciousness - as well as the ability to do so without state-interference, 'in self-working and self-governing communes'. Thus beginning each sentence with: 'the working class knows',… Marx is able to turn some vital historical imperatives (whose realisation depends on the full articulation of 'communist consciousness on a mass scale') into the affirmatives of already developed and…self-asserting social forces. 2.

"In reality the state can only be laboriously 'dismantled' (in the process of the political 'de-alienation' and 'communalisation' of society) to the extent [that] the inherited division of labour itself is correspondingly changed, and thus the [whole of society] is effectively restructured. 3. 'There is no hint in Marx [either] that in addition to the fragmentation between 'capital and labour', [e.g. intellectual and practical labour; an appreciation of autonomous art, as opposed to commercialised entertainment, whose degrading values can now be replicated directly by the masses, via their iphones, etc. Therefore], one must also face the fragmentation within labour itself as a major problem for the proletariat both before and after the conquest of power. 4.

"…it is impossible to disagree with Marx that the proletariat, on the one hand, 'cannot emancipate itself without abolishing the conditions of its life', and that, on the other hand, 'it cannot abolish the conditions of its own life without abolishing all the inhuman conditions of its life in society today, which are summed up in its own situation'. However, saying this, we can only define the necessary conditions of a successful 'social revolution', but not the specific way in which this…vicious circle…can be broken.

"[The necessity of class consciousness] is only postulated [by Marx] instead of being established as a social force adequate to its historic task." 5.

Lukacs

Lukacs is the right individual to start with, because, uniquely, his life embodies the criticism of weapons, on the one hand, and the weapons of criticism, on the other. He started out as a marxist intellectual, author of The Theory of the Novel, written just before the Bolshevik Revolution. But in 1919, riding on what he believed was a wave of world revolution, he became a member of Bela Kun's short-lived Hungarian Soviet Republic. Then in 1921, as a reaction to what he would later describe as Bela Kun's bureaucratic adventurism, Lukacs put his intellectual cap back on and wrote History and Class Consciousness, including his influential essay, Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat. Later, he would argue that the latter was a misguided attack on the Leninist strategy of the vanguard party, and its raison d' etre, What Is To Be Done?

This is what Lukacs says in his Preface to a new publication of H.C.C. in 1967. By now, of course, he is a famous marxist theoretician of literature, critic of modernism, and a defender of the Soviet bureaucracy (reluctantly or otherwise). Thus he now argues that his famous 1921 work errs on the side of idealist materialism (cf. Feuerbach); because, essentially, it asserts that the individual can arrive at adequate consciousness via contemplative reason; not via the material mediation of the party. It is therefore anti-marxist from the standpoint of

dialectical materialism; if not in spirit.

In H.C.C, Lukacs writes: for the bourgeois individual,
'The transformation of all objects into commodities, their quantification into fetishistic exchange-values,….[can go no further] than an increased aspiration towards the increased rationalisation, mechanisation and quantification of the world confronting him….Interrupted abruptly now and again by 'irrational catastrophies', the way is opened up for…the thorough-going capitalist rationalisation of society as a whole. But then he adds, 'For the proletariat, however, the same process means its emergence as a class….the process by which a man's achievement is split off from his total personality and becomes a commodity leads to revolutionary consciousness.' 6.

In other words, according to what he says in H.C.C., the vanguard party substituted itself for the masses. But, in order to hold onto power, the March action of 1919 led to the violent excesses of the 'Lenin boys', followed by bloody counter-revolution. But was Lukacs right to criticise the March action? Bela Kun et al did not have a crystal ball. They believed that they were part of a wave of world revolution. But like the Bolsheviks, the Hungarian Republic soon found isolated; in fact it was even less able to defend itself than Soviet Russia.

We should also consider Lukacs' motives for writing his 1967 Preface. They are somewhat mixed!): (i) He wrote it, because there was an opportunity for the book to be republished in English. Perhaps he still stands by much of what he said? (ii)

He wrote the Preface in order to protect his privileged position as an intellectual within the Soviet bureaucracy. This required him to try and square the circle, by going back to a defence of What Is To Be Done? Thus he hoped to stay on side with his bosses in the CPSU. (iii) By so doing, he is defending the indefensible: i.e. a self-interested bureaucratic party, which has betrayed the revolution and has much blood on its hands. (iv) The Preface - which is, essentially, a defence of the vanguard party - is also aimed as an attack on the 'infantile leftism' of the period: on the one hand, Che Guevarra's attempt to spread the revolution in South America by means of guerrilla warfare, based on the poor peasants; on the other, a growing student revolutionary movement in the developed countries.

Benjamin and Adorno

Following the defeat of the German revolution in 1933 (despite the existence of the KPD, which was, after all, a mass communist party) - just as Lukacs had done in 1921, with History and Class Consciousness - Benjamin and Adorno also reject the Leninist strategy of the vanguard party. For them, such a model for political praxis can only lead to bureaucratic cerntralism; therefore it must be abandoned. Thus they shifted the focus of the class struggle from the politico-economic to the cultural sphere. In theoretical terms, they invert the Marxist model of base/ superstructure: Henceforth the superstructure of society - philosophy, ideology, law, politics, etc. - is no longer 'determined' by the economic base of society - the mode of production (albeit Marx insists that there is always an interaction between

the two). Rather, in the age of advanced capitalism, the superstructure can assume a more independent and influential role.

I shall start with Benjamin. There is much to admire about this man: He was an original Jewish leftwing thinker, who never finished his doctorate (because his supervisors said it was too difficult!) But this did not stop him from going on to write some important essays about modernity, centred around the poet, Baudelaire, on the one hand, and the new technologies of reproducibility (upon which the radio, photographic magazines, films and ultimately TV are based), on the other. His writings were criticised by his younger friend, Adorno; some were rejected or altered by the latter's Institute of Social Research. But in the end, Benjamin failed at a personal level to shake off the curse of rational pessimism (cf. Adorno). This is despite the fact that in his final work, The remarkable Theses on the Philosophy of History, he tries to fuse marxism with the messianic ideas of Jewish theology. (At the same time, vis-a-vis the future, his image of the angelus novus is a warning to us all,) Already ill, he committed suicide on the French-Spanish border in 1940, whilst fleeing the gestapo.

Benjamin visited the Soviet Union in 1926. but he was soon disillusioned with the communist party, which now exercised bureaucratic control over the masses. On the other hand, he was impressed with the achievements of the Soviet avant garde Therefore, for Benjamin 'leftwing political praxis - as a form of direct participation in the class struggle - offered a better way forward; particularly in the cultural sphere, based on the new technologies of mass reproducibility. Yet a few years

hence, the Russian avant garde would be crushed by Stalin's cultural commissars. Thus the role which technology can play in the class struggle is always a question of who controls the means of production; changes in technology, whereby it can play a direct role in the struggle, are insufficient in themselves.

Essentially Benjamin argues that a new cultural vanguard of leftwing artists/ producers can play a revolutionary role, independently of the party; i.e. contribute to a new communist consciousness. In this regard, he reveals a tendency to err on the side of technological utopianism.

This ambiguity is evident in two key essays, The Author as Producer (1934) and The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (1936). In the 1934 essay, Benjamin focuses on the subjective factor, i.e. the role of the leftwing avant garde, vis-a-vis the process whereby adequate consciousness replaces actual consciousness: Firstly, he chooses the example of the writer/journalist. He argues that 'the correct political tendency of a work includes its literary quality' (But who decides what the correct political tendency is?) Next he argues that every leftwing artist/intellectual must see himself as worker or 'producer' for the struggle, e.g. a radio commentator, photojournalist or film maker. Therefore he should try to transform his means of production along collective lines. (But how?)

Here Benjamin cites the soviet avant gardiste, Sergei Tretyakov, as an 'operating writer': 'In 1928, at the time of total collectivisation of agriculture [!], the slogan 'Writers to the Kolhkoz' was proclaimed. Tretyakov went to the 'communist

lighthouse' commune and there, during two lengthy stays,…calling mass meetings; …immersed himself in persuading independent peasants to [join];…creating wall newspapers and editing the Kolhkoz newspaper; [etc; as well as writing a book] Commanders of the field,…Tretyakov is said to have had considerable influence on the further development of collective agriculture.' 7.

If only Benjamin had had known that, a) avant gardistes like Tretyakov were in the process of being subordinated to the Party; b) the truth about the brutal nature of enforced collectivisation! c) Finally Benjamin omits to explain how this can be done under private property relations in the west; let alone under the Nazi dictatorship. For this to happen, the proletariat would have to engage in big spontaneous struggles, despite the defeat of 1933; if only because history demands it!

In his 1936 essay Benjamin focuses on the objective factor within the process, as a means whereby adequate consciousness replaces actual consciousness; i.e. the new technologies of mass reproducibility (text, image, sound). But, like the Russian avant-garde before him, his argument is both mechanical and prescriptive. The former welcomed there new age of photography and film (in particular the montage effect), which offers a new 'language' of seeing for the masses; on this basis, they espoused the false notion of a new proletarian culture. Thus they called for 'death' to all bourgeois art, because it was/is individually produced and consumed; therefore it is socially useless. Unfortunately this stance led them down a road that would end with their own destruction at the hands of

Stalin's cultural commissars. (Tretyakov disappeared into the gulag.)

Benjamin begins this essay by arguing that the 'superstructure', although it has developed 'more slowly than that of the substructure', is now able 'to manifest in all areas of culture the change in the conditions of production'. Therefore 'theses about the art of the proletariat after the assumption of power' are less important than 'theses about the developmental tendencies of art under present conditions of production. It would be wrong to underestimate the value of such theses as a weapon. They brush aside…outmoded concepts, such as creativity and genius, eternal value and mystery -concepts whose uncontrolled…application would lead to a processing of data in the fascist sense.' 8.

The 'developmental tendencies in art' (the new technologies of mass reproducibility, which make the mechanisation of art possible), free art from its traditional, ritualistic function - the role of aura - the latter should now be cast off as a reactionary relic of a bygone age. Henceforth the way is clear for art to assume a political function in the service of the proletariat.

But in the 'Epilogue' to his art essay, obviously added later, Benjamin undergoes a volte face; i.e. rational pessimism replaces rational optimism. (Maybe it was added after he saw newsreels of Mussolini's invasion of Ethiopia?). Yet his observations here are chillingly correct: 'The horrible features of imperialistic warfare are attributable to the discrepancy between the tremendous forces of production and their inadequate utilisation in the process of production - in other words to

unemployment and the lack of markets. Imperialistic war is a rebellion of technology [to the detriment of human beings. Moreover, mankind's] self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order.' But at the very end, Benjamin returns to the old defiant optimism: 'This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicising art'. 9. But to what avail?

Arguably, here Benjamin is echoing Marx's position in his defence of the Paris Commune. When the hour demands it, one must stand by the idea of the revolutionary proletariat, regardless of reality. Therefore both elide the necessary distinction between:
'the ascribed' and actual consciousness of the proletariat. The latter is out of step with the ascribed consciousness that should be able to grasp a total vision of its role in [over-throwing] capitalist society'; whereas, for Lenin, 'the higher ascribed consciousness is embodied in the revolutionary party, whose every action is justified by its historic mission'. 10.

But in his first Baudelaire essay (1935), Benjamin adopts an even more historicist approach. At the same time, he more or less turns Marx's notion of commodity fetishism on its head: On the one hand, he argues, the novelty of modern consumerism is ' 'the quintessence of false consciousness', 'of which fashion is the tireless agent'; on the other, 'there is a collective desire to transcend the 'deficiencies of the social order of production'; because 'this desire takes the form of 'images of the collective unconsciousness' in which memory of the ancient past

releases hope for a utopian future'.' 11. The new dialectic of change could then be augmented by artistically induced montages or what he calls 'flashlike appearances' (cf. those evoked by Baudelaire in his poetry), via the mechanised arts (e.g. the surrealist, political-photomontages of John Heartfield, the films of Charlie Chaplin). He compares these 'correspondences' to those of the literary 'putschist', the counterpart to a Blanqui who perpetrates political shocks. 12.

Adorno criticises the Baudelaire essay via an exchange of letters with Benjamin (reproduced in Aesthetics and Politics, Verso Books, 1986.) His own comments suggest that he has a better grasp of dialectical materialism than his older friend. Adorno points out that such transcendent utopian possibilities are not possible in present society (the 1930s), because they are thwarted by the existing class relations in the west. Therefore he 'insisted on negation all along the line....the [bourgeois] individual is a dialectical instrument of transition who cannot be mythicised away, but can only be superseded.' 13

Adorno was even more critical of Benjamin's next essay, The Paris of the Second Empire in Baudelaire (1938); because he relates 'the pragmatic contents of Baudelaire's work directly to adjacent [economic] features in the social history of his time….[As his 'supervisor' within the Institute, Adorno] urges Benjamin to [revise this work so that] the cultural traits would be materialistically determined only by being mediated through the TOTAL SOCIAL PROCESS.' Although, this is not spelt out, Adorno means that his friend should acknowledge the reality of recent events in the politico-economic sphere, such as the rise of the Nazi regime,

the Popular front in France, the New Deal in the United States, etc. For Adorno, Benjamin had not only surrendered to the myths of [technologism and an idealised] proletariat, but had underpinned this abdication by eliminating 'the role of the active, critically reflective subject in the cognitive process'. 14. But there's the rub!

Dialectic of Enlightenment

Unlike Lukacs, Adorno (along with Benjamin) never got involved in revolutionary politics. He remains a German philosopher, cultural critic and musicologist; lastly he was, of course, the leading member of the Institute of Social research (later reincarnated as the Frankfurt School), the very heart of the critical theory movement. His thinking was also influenced by his own personal experience of American society, the world's 'first completely commercial society'. (On the one hand, the USA had no tradition of parish relief, such as England, for example, which dates back to the Middle Ages. On the other, Roosevelt's New Deal was an example of Keynesian economics, sans the welfare state. It's provisions were intended to be short-term, e.g. the Civil Works Administration or the Farm Security Administration, etc. It stopped a long way short of introducing unemployment benefit and old age pensions, etc. Then - as now - the USA was the example, par excellence, of free market capitalism.)

On the other hand, Adorno was well ware of the role of popular music, as well as Hollywood in American life. The title of his 1938 Essay speaks for itself: On the Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Hearing. (It is elitist in character; but it also has a grain of truth or should we simply dismiss the music of the First and Second Viennese School?) In 1944 he and Horkheimer co-wrote Dialectic of Enlightenment. At its centre is the notion of instrumental reason, which, they argue, predates the Enlightenment. Whereas the philosopher of the Enlightenment 'looks forward to the establishment of a social order based on reason and natural law', for the sake of 'a universal humanity', the bourgeoisie rely on instrumental reason for its own ends - ' to increase the accumulation of capital'. Instrumental reason 'permits the domination of nature and induces an alienation born of that very domination'. Thus the Enlightenment ideal can only really succeed in a communist organisation of society, wherein: Together with the abolition of classes and the gradual disappearance of the contradiction between physical and spiritual labour, comes the all-sided development of the whole individual….in which 'the associated producers regulate their interchange with nature rationally, bring it under their common control, instead of being ruled by it as by some blind power', and therefore establish the material basis for 'the development of human power which is its own end, the true realm of freedom'. 15

Two questions arise from the Dialectic: Firstly, is it incompatible with marxism? Yet it provides the framework for his theory of the 'culture industry'. Secondly, should marxists take this seriously?. Our answer to the first question should be: maybe? Because if humanity destroys civilisation as we know it, then Adorno will

be proved right. Marx himself says, ‘socialism or barbarism’! As for the second question, the answer should be: Yes! The culture industry is a real or material force; not an illusion (cf. religion). It stupefies us all, especially the masses, who already suffer from the bourgeoisie's 'mind-crippling' division of labour. Mass entertainment creates false needs; at the same time it suppresses critical thought. As a product of the market, it also suffocates authentic art (i.e. art which cannot be reconciled with the injustice of bourgeois reality; cf. commercialised art).

The culture industry is an example of instrumental reason at the disposal of the bourgeoisie in the sphere of mass consumption: The bourgeoisie own the corporations upon which mass consumerism/the mass media/advertising/mass entertainment are based. They employ experts who rely on market research as a means to standardise the products they sell. They do this in order to sell as many of these commodities as possible. The emphasis should be on the second word: culture INDUSTRY. Like fashion industry, it is designed to cultivate mass taste, ranging from pop music, to feature films and TV shows. (Cf. the folk tradition, which has deep cultural roots.) Therefore we are not talking about a capitalist conspiracy to render the class struggle impotent. As Marx says, production produces consumption and vice versa. But in this case, it functions, not just as entertainment; it is also a distraction. (See next section.)

Does this not characterise how capitalist society has evolved since 1945; the period of late capitalism? Of course, there are those who would argue that the age of the internet and the personal computer has changed everything. It has returned man’s

creative powers to the individual. Just look at all the amazing stuff people put online! But despite the fact that the new mass media empowers the individual (to communicate what ever they like), it is only a reflection of society itself; albeit one which shows alarming signs of the sort of self-alienation (cf. Benjamin's comments in the Epilogue to his Art essay). As for the decline of a corporate-led popular culture (e.g. now pop music can be downloaded for free), the typical Hollywood violent thriller or degrading comedy, etc. are still popular; as a result the same themes and images are copied by individual producers.

Therefore, Adorno's work is worthy of re-examination. This holds true, even if he failed to understand the causal connection between events in the political sphere and the rise of the culture industry: Concretely the the world revolution suffered a historical defeat in the 1930s at the hands of a Stalinised comintern. If one could imagine, for a moment, not just the victory of the former, but also what a socialist society might be like: Firstly, the existing division of labour would be abolished; secondly, as a result, human creativity would be able to develop on a much broader and higher basis - thanks to the new technologies of mass reproducibility. As Adorno himself wrote in a letter to Benjamin: 'In a communist society work will be organised in such a way that people will no longer need to be so tired and stultified that they need distraction.

Theory of the Culture industry

For Adorno, the 'culture industry' constitutes a NEW impediment to class consciousness within late capitalism, in addition to those which Marx has already outlined in his EPM: private property relations, alienated labour, division of labour; the commodity form, commodity fetishism. :

1) Commercial entertainment in capitalist society is the correlate of the mechanised and rationalised labour process.

2) It is a reflection of the hierarchical division of labour - and its 'mind-crippling' effects for the masses. N.B. 'the process of labour is progressively broken down into abstract, rational, specialised functions so that the worker loses contact with the finished product and the work is reduced to a mechanical repetition of a specialised set of actions'. 16. The fragmentation of the psyche in society is replicated in the cultural sphere; e.g. the music of the First and second Viennese Schools, on the one hand; pop music, on the other, etc.

3) 'The culture industry is not another version of folk art. Rather, we are dealing with industrially produced and careful calculated artefacts [in the interests of profit]…. not works of art…; they must be seen as commodities calculated to fill the present needs of the masses. These needs…are not genuine but are themselves products of the culture industry. The audience is meant to amuse itself, but this amusement is nothing but the elimination of critical thought…amusement means agreement.'

Contrary to Benjamin's idea that distracted consumption is 'the only appropriate perception of art', Adorno argues that, 'Distracted viewing or listening no longer

allows for a sense of totality of the work to develop. Instead the focus of attention turns to disjointed individual stimuli…. Such shortening of the attention span and the inability to mentally construct a whole leads to infantalisation.' 17.

Thus the industrialised products of the culture industry, in the form of calculated artefacts, reconcile the masses with bourgeois reality, e.g. injustice, violence, etc. (Cf. The Situationist , Debord's book, The Society of the Spectacle, first published in 1967. Whether intended or not, it complements Adorno's theory of the culture industry: According to Debord, the spectacle is not a 'decorative element'. 'On the contrary, it is the very heart of society's real unreality'; it is not just the news/ propaganda, advertising or the consumption of entertainment themselves. 'In form as in content, the spectacle serves as total justification for the conditions and aims of the system,….it governs almost all time spent outside the production process itself. I.6.)

Thus Marx's concept of commodity fetishism goes beyond the need for money in order to live; it includes the creation of false needs in a commodified form.

4) At the same, in the absence of any successful class resistance, modern industrial/post-industrial society ensures the decline of working class as a collectivity: community, trades unions, working class parties, including reformist ones). Thus we now see the relentless atomisation of bourgeois society; albeit under the commodity form, as reified consciousness. Man becomes more and more unsocial, inhuman man; he moves further away from his potential to become social, human man (as Marx says in his EPM).

5) This leads to a crisis of individuality. For the educated middle classes/ bourgeoisie, this crisis may be alleviated by the experience of 'advanced art', such

as the music of the First Viennese School, because a Haydn or Beethoven quartet is characterised by 'the principle of construction over the [melody, and creates a] dynamic unity; whereas the music of the Second Viennese School, i.e. that of Schoenberg and Webern gives voice to the terror felt in the face of the crisis of individuality,…' But for the masses, the only way to deal with this crisis is via the culture industry:

'With 'nothing left for the consciousness but to capitulate before the superior power of the advertised stuff', the audience seeks to 'purchase spiritual peace by making the imposed goods literally its own thing'. This is then called individual 'taste' ….The behavioural outline of the culture consumer combines the masochist features of one who 'loves his own cell, …the sacrifice of individuality', a dedicated follower of fashions, who is never satisfied. 18. (Consider the mobile phone industry: It is a reflection of, a) the drive for a new fashion statement, linked to alleged technological improvements, can be seen at work here. b) It is also an example of technological fetishism.

Art as Antidote?

Whereas marxists should be deeply concerned about the erosion of the working class as a collectivity, Adorno is more concerned with how the culture industry, which 'disables the the development of autonomous, judicious individuals', able to make informed decisions. Consumer culture therefore erodes the basis of bourgeois democracy. Hence, despite the fact that we live in a constitutional democracy, we

see the decline of real choice, between social democracy, on the one hand, and conservative parties, on the other. This is because their traditional class base is being eroded, commensurate with the fragmentation and atomisation of society. Therefore today bourgeois politicians are reduced to calculating how to win the floating voter, in addition to their core vote. All the major parties agree with the bourgeoisie's strategy of austerity. Any differences between them is marginal; i.e. on the one hand, they argue about the degree to which benefits will be cut in order to reduce the national debt (i.e. the masses must pay for the financial crisis which was brought about by a few investment bankers). On the other, they offer tax cuts for the very poor and the very rich.

Adorno's approach to art is more problematical; not because of the way in which he defines art; but because he over-estimates art's potential to 'surpass the truth-claims of theory'; therefore it cannot serve as an antidote to the culture industry.

For Adorno, the work of art is a reflection of society, but not identical to it. In this sense it is (semi) autonomous. But this depends on whether it embodies a unity of form and content. Form is expressed via the coherence of the artwork; but it can also be a manifestation of new forms which are struggling to emerge (Cf. the rise of modernism). Along with technique, form enables the artists to express a point of view, how they feel about life and society. (Such subjectivity is not required either by philosophy or science, because the latter are based on objective criteria alone; there is no place for the author's point of view.) By means of form, art is able to distance itself from life, both as a means to reflect it, as well as critique it.

At the same time, art must resist 'all attempts to be co-opted by society; it negates the present state of affairs and keeps alive the hope for a better life in a better world. It does so, not by painting a utopia that is to be achieved: rather art's utopia consists in its 'No' to the present. With Stendhal, Adorno terms this feature of art its promesse de bonheur, its promise of happiness.' 19. Finally, art 'carries part of the guilt of society characterised by injustice. Yet it is powerless to change it. In this sense, art is 'amoral'.

This definition of art raises another problem: Adorno opens himself up to the charge of elitism. He puts his argument in black and white terms - high art = good; low art = bad - but in reality, there are grey areas: There is such a thing called serious entertainment, which is part of the culture industry' albeit Adorno ignores this. For example, it is possible for a feature film; as well as a pop song, to say 'No' to the present, and even hold up a promise of happiness in a better world.

But this is not all. In Negative Dialectics (1966), Adorno criticises philosophy, because of its attempt to subsume everything into a totalising theory; whereas art is free to select things from the existing totality or bourgeois society; therefore it is able to celebrate the moment. But if art is to remain 'true', i.e. offer a new, better reality (even if only a glimpse), it cannot be reconciled with the existing totality or society. Such a 'reconciliation could only occur within a society that has abolished injustice. But art can also achieve reconciliation with, as yet, non-permanent things, by means of appearance (schein); even if they are mere fragments or ephemeral in character. They are an expression of wish fulfilment = the promise of

happiness. But these things can only be achieved aesthetically, by means of a unity of form and content. In this way art transcends the transitory nature of life; it endures through time. (e.g. Rembrandt's famous self-portrait, painted when he was an old man). All this is part of art's 'truth content' . The opposite to schein is mimesis: This is the artistic reproduction of reality, the opposite of utopia, because it is reconciled with reality in its totality, i.e. bourgeois society = injustice, cruelty, ugliness. Yet art must also 'be mimetic to remind us that the violence we exert against each other and the object [the rest of nature?] shall be overcome.' Thus art can become 'the anticipation of a society reconciled with itself and with nature' 20. i.e. communism.

Adorno's aesthetic theory is flawed for two reasons: Firstly, the 'truth content' of authentic art is of benefit only the educated classes; not the poor, benighted masses. Secondly, contrary to Adorno's aesthetic is not only an idealised one; without a revolution, sooner or later authentic art falls victim to instrumental reason, which seeks reduce everything to a commodity, including artistic labour. As Marx puts it in his Labour Theory of Value, the artist starts out as an 'unproductive labourer' He cites the example of Milton: The latter produced Paradise Lost, because it was 'an activity of his nature…. Later he sold it for £5.' But if things remain the same, the artist will also be transformed into a 'productive labourer'; just like 'the literary proletarian of Leipzig, who fabricates books…under the direction of his publisher, is a productive labourer, because his product is from the outset subsumed under capital and comes into being only for the purpose of increasing that capital.' 21.

As for the artworks themselves works, including those which embody Adorno's idea of art's 'truth content' (see above), they are appropriated by the art industry, wherein such works are seen as mere assets for an individual's private wealth. As a commodity, it is quantified and therefore becomes the equivalent of an anti-art work (e.g. objects taken from everyday life or are produced by order, etc.)

But according to the theory of postmodernism, anything can be art, as long as the artist says it is. But the opposite is not true, i.e. this does not mean that anyone can be an artist. One needs the art industry to decide that: Today the student enters art school, where he - or she - learns about the theory of postmodernism. A body of work is produced. If it is considered shocking enough by the mass media or if the artist behaves badly, he acquires a degree of notoriety. The work begins to sell and its value increases as a commodity. It will probably end up as part of the art collection of a rich patron. (Consider, for example, the work of Jeff Koons, e.g. the photographs he had taken of himself whilst in sexual congress with his porn-star wife, etc. This might make good soft-porn; but it is not art!)

As Hegel observed two centuries earlier: 'The paralysing effects of the division of labour, the increasing mechanisation of wall forms of activity; the engulfing of quality in quantity - all these typical characteristics of bourgeois society, Hegel recognised as inimical to [art], even after he acknowledged capitalism to be the essential foundation of progress.' 22.

Both Hegel and Marx share the 'doctrine of the inevitable decadence of art in

modern times'. As the classical marxist aesthetician, Lifshitz explains: Under modern capitalism, all patriarchal relations have disappeared, for bargaining, purchase and sale are the only bonds between men, and monetary transactions are the only relationships between employer and worker….Similarly, all the…higher forms of labour - intellectual, artistic, etc. - have been transformed into commodities and thus have lost their former sacredness.' [Cf. Benjamin. Hence we have the] degradation of art as a special form of culture. But the communist revolution of the working class lays the necessary basis for a new renaissance of the arts on a much broader and higher basis.' 23.

The Postwar World

The defeat of the postwar revolutions between 1944-45, ranging from Italy and Greece to China and Indo-China - jointly at the hands of Stalinism, on the one side, and imperialism, on the other - opened the door to the postwar boom, led by the USA, as the world's first super power. This was Stalin's quid pro quo for a free hand in Eastern Europe (already occupied by the Red Army). He need the latter, not to extend the world revolution, but to provide additional resources to rebuild the Soviet Union; also as a buffer zone against the possibility of another attack by a reconstituted Germany. (Only Tito in Yugoslavia escaped Stalin's grip; but at what cost?)

The longest boom in capitalist history began with the need to reconstruct a war-

torn world; but it was sustained by the creation of the societe de consummation: Henceforth in the USA, economic growth would be based on the manufacturing sector and service industries; driven by new corporations, a revolution in production methods, the availability of new lighter materials, etc. Over time, the older corporations would be free to outsource heavy industry, to other countries, in the search for cheaper cheaper. This meant that the masses at home were placated/distracted by the spread of mass consumerism, including the rise of the entertainment industry; not just the cinema and the radio, but the spread of television as well. The latter greatly expanded the opportunities for advertising consumerist commodities in general.

The Frankfurt School

As a result of the postwar defeats for the revolution, combined with the rise of the societe de consommation, the 'weapon of criticism' received a new lease of life in the west. The Institute of Social Research was revived in the new West Germany as the Frankfurt School. In the face of the 'culture industry', Adorno and Horkheimer retreated further into the shell of critical theory. By so doing, they eschewed the messy reality of political praxis; unlike Althusser, who remained a member of the French Communist Party. But this did not prevent him from producing his own brand of sterile marxism, aka 'structuralism', i.e. he established a dichotomy between what he called 'scientific marxism' and political practice. Thus structuralism provided a somewhat skimpy intellectual fig leaf for the counter-revolutionary role played by the PCF in the May events of 1968.

1968 and After

The May Events of 1968 were the nearest thing to a social revolution in France since the Paris Commune of 1871: They began with a student protest against capitalism itself, aimed at consumerism, traditional values and institutions. This quickly spread to the working class. There were spontaneous strikes and factory occupations, involving 11,000,000 workers. As a result of the biggest general strike in history, President de Gaulle lost his nerve and fled to a French military base in Germany, where he sought the support of the armed forces in the event of a full-blown revolution. But he returned a few hours later, dissolved the National Assembly and called for new elections. Overnight the strikes and increasingly violent protests evaporated. In the elections the Gaullists won an even bigger majority.

The main reason for the abrupt end to the uprising was the counter-revolutionary role played by the French Communist party (PCF). The Stalinists never wavered from their position of 'a peaceful road to socialism'. They also succeeded split the working class from its vanguard by negotiating substantial wage increases with the bosses; thereby leaving the students isolated. But the main reason why the events of 1968 did not go on to become a full-scale revolution was the absence of a revolutionary leadership and programme.

The Move to Intersubjectivity

The defeat of May 1968 hastened a movement within philosophy, which had already begun. Marxist critic, Peter Dews, describes this as 'the logics of disintegration' (See his book of the same name, published in 1989.) The term itself is borrowed from a passage in Adorno's Negative Dialectics. (It is as if he were the instrument of the death of critical theory, of which he was the architect; as a self-fulfilling prophecy!)

Adorno had always claimed to uphold the idea that 'truth points beyond philosophy, towards political practice, however despairing [he] himself may [have been] about the possibility of such practice'. 24. But after his death in 1969, critical theory degenerated from cultural marxism - centred around its concern for the fate of the subject - to the obscurantism of post-structuralism - or the 'subjectless subject' - a trajectory that would be achieved by the second generation Frankfurt School itself in the 1970s and 80s. This was a contradictory movement:

Whereas Hegel saw reality as 'a temporal movement towards ever more complex and differentiated forms of integration and resolution, Adorno argues that the historical process is 'advancing towards less and less mediated forms of unity, and towards increasing antagonism and incoherence, because of the abstractions built into the instrumental use of concepts, which idealist philosophy overlooks. The

more society becomes integrated through the abstract principle of identity, which structures both conceptual thought and an economy based upon market exchange, the more intense becomes the conflict between the individuals of whom society is composed and the functioning of society as a while. The culmination of this process is a social world of which every aspect has become inherently contradictory, and therefore resistant to univocal interpretation.

'At the psychological level, the process of disintegration is manifested in the decline of the bourgeois individual, the breaking down of the autonomous ego….during the high bourgeois epoch, individuals were at least able to experience themselves as constituting their own society through the market-mediated pursuit of private interest. However, through the continuing process of instrumentalisation, the significance of the individual initiative has been reduced to almost zero. [Cf. the marxist notion of the transformation of the professional classes into proletarians under late capitalism, whereupon everything, including the teaching professions and research, is subordinated to the needs of the market.] Society now confronted the individual as something cold and inhuman, as a system to which one is obliged to adapt in order to survive….In the administered world,…the antagonism between the individual and society which Freud theorised, and which - in its very difficulty and painfulness - testified to a measure of autonomy, is replaced by socialising agencies such as the mass media. Obliged to conform to an overwhelming social reality in order to survive, the individual retreats into narcissism, into illusions of total self containment or total fusion….[But] to pursue one's own pleasure against society requires…a strong ego. [So] the id and the socialised superego enter into collaboration, the result being what…Adorno terms

a ‘subjectless subject’, lacking the reflective coherence and continuity which make possible genuine experience, and reacting in a purely passive and disconnected way to every new stimulus and social demand.’ 25.

But the fact that Adorno is able to analyse the effects of these tensions between the individual and society under late capitalism, suggests that this is not the fate of everybody! Nevertheles, he opens the door to the notion of ‘the prison house of language’:

‘Trapped within the philosophy of consciousness, Adorno sees language as directly dissecting and deforming reality, rather than being the means whereby subjects communicate to each other about…reality.’ At the same time:

‘Adorno’s conception of a ‘totally administered society’, [whereby he] assumes that instrumental reason annexes more and more of nature, society, and - eventually - inner nature, until it becomes…freed from any goal which it would be instrumental in achieving, and rather now an end in itself.’ But his pupil, Habermas, sensibly refuses to go that far. He prefers:

‘to articulate democratic aspirations in terms of a conception of condensed centres of communication, rooted in the life-world, which can bring the dynamic of systems under democratic control,…’ 26.

Thus the stage is set for the introduction of the theory of intersubjectivity: One can escape only at the psychological level from the dynamic of disintegration which is built into the human subject. but under late capitalism, this comes ‘at the cost of submission to a repressive authority’. Post-structuralist thought latches onto this

notion of consciousness in its search for a way out of administered capitalism. But it conceives a form of 'emancipation' that 'can only take the form of a breaking open of the coercive unity of the subject in order to release the diffuseness and heterogeneity of the repressed'. But this is not a form of emancipation that Marx would have recognised. if we take Lyotard as an example:
'[His] libidinal economy, far from from preserving the singularity of each moment of experience, a preservation which could only be achieved within a discriminating continuity of experience, ends by embracing the punctuality, anonymity and indifference of the commodity form.' 27.

Conclusion

The wheel has turned full circle: Back in the 1930s, Adorno criticised Benjamin for arguing that the working class, as a collective, revolutionary subject, by means of 'flashlike appearances', facilitated by a marxist cultural avant garde (e.g. a Benjamin as radio host, John Heartfield, or a Charlie Chaplin-like film), albeit not the vanguard party(which had been found wanting), would be able to transcend commodity fetishism, and go on to defeat fascism. Whereas 'Adorno insisted upon critical negation all along the line….the individual is a dialectical instrument of transition that must not be mythicised away, but only superseded'. But for his part, Adorno did not make clear how this supersession would be achieved. Rather he could already see it taking a 'totalitarian form' [not just in Nazi Germany, but also in America, the home of the culture industry] bemoaned in Dialectic of Enlightenment'. (See earlier section.)

The jury of history is still out on the question of Marx. As a rational optimist, who gave Enlightenment ideas material form; i.e. his totalising theory of human emancipation; albeit by means of 'criticism of weapons' (despite the 'gaps'!) There are only two things we can say with certainty: One is that the failure of this idea - in its material form, namely the strategy of the vanguard party of revolution - led to the rise of its negation: Firstly, we had Stalinism and Fascism in the first half of the 20th century; secondly the rise of American imperialism after 1945; including its economic and cultural forms (centred on the culture industry). As a result, capitalism was allowed to enter the epoch of decline; i.e. late capitalism, the present (although the May events of 1968 were 'a damn close-run thing'!) Meanwhile the 'weapons of criticism' came into their own. Thus - via Adorno and the Frankfurt School - philosophy began its long slide down a slippery slope, from the totalising theories of Hegel, Marx and Freud, to the 'logics of disintegration', the mirror of the commodity form. Not only do we have a crisis of revolutionary leadership; we also have a crisis of the intelligentsia in general.

The second certainty is that this state of affairs can only be overturned by another May 1968; otherwise critical theory and its offspring will stand as a self-fulling prophecy.

Notes

1. Istvan Meszaros, The Power of Ideology, p 272.
2. ibid, pp 273-4.
3. p 275.
4. p 277.

5. p 278

6. Georg Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness, p 171.

7. Walter Benjamin, The Author as Producer, in Walter Benjamin, Essays (etc.), Ed. Peter Demetz, p 223.

8. Walter Benjamin, The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction, in Walter Benjamin, Essays, etc. Ed. Hannah Arendt, p 218.

9. ibid, p 242

10. Lukacs, Georg, Penguin Dictionary of Critical Theory.

11. Eugene Lunn, Marxism and Modernism, p162).

12. Walter Benjamin, Charles Baudelaire, 1935, quoted by Lunn in Marxism and Modernism, p 164.

13. Aesthetics and Politics, quoted by Lunn, pp 166-167.

14. Susan Buck-Morss, Origin of Negative Dialectics, quoted by Lunn, p 167.

15. Mikhail Lifshitz, The Philosophy of Art of Karl Marx, p 115.

16. Lukacs, History and Class Consciousness, p 88.

17. ibid, p 200.

18. Lunn, pp 159-60.

19. p 201.

20. p 203-4.

21. I. I. Rubin, Essays on Marx's Theory of Value, p 262-3.

22. Lifshitz, 14.

23. p 101.

24. Dews, 44.

25. pp 225, 226-7.

26. pp 227, 228, 229.

27. p 231.

Rex Dunn/January 2015.