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One Hundred Years of the Dialectic: Reflections on “Marxism and Philosophy”

Abstract

In a recent article appearing in Spectre Journal, Darren Roso concludes his discussion of “Weimar’s Marxist Heretic: Reading Karl Korsch Today” by stating that “It is, perhaps, a good but dark time to read authors like Korsch who articulated something timeless about revolutionary Marxism.” What Roso finds “timeless” is the importance of “timeliness” in “absolute” commitment to human liberation. One might hesitate before a timeless absolute, yet it is noteworthy that the text that is most central to the intellectual legacy of Karl Korsch (1886-1961) has now reached its centenary and Roso may well be correct to claim that is indeed a good, albeit dark, time to re-read Korsch. This essay will not retread the ground covered by Roso, the reader is strongly encouraged to learn more about the life and work of Karl Korsch by accessing Roso’s timely and excellent contribution. This essay will instead focus on “Marxism and Philosophy,” and consider to what extent it remains timely for our times, mostly but not necessarily only for those who share ongoing progressive and socialist commitments.

Keywords

Marxism, Philosophy, Roso

“Philosophy is not abolished by a mere abolition of its name.”
-Karl Korsch

In a recent article appearing in [Spectre Journal](#), Darren Roso concludes his discussion of “Weimar’s Marxist Heretic: Reading Karl Korsch Today”ⁱ by stating that “It is, perhaps, a good but dark time to read authors like Korsch who articulated something timeless about revolutionary Marxism.” What Roso finds “timeless” is the importance of “timeliness” in “absolute” commitment to human liberation. One might hesitate before a timeless absolute, yet it is noteworthy that the text that is most central to the intellectual legacy of Karl Korsch (1886-1961) has now reached its centenary and Roso may well be correct to claim that is indeed a good, albeit dark, time to re-read Korsch. This essay will not retread the ground covered by Roso, the reader is strongly encouraged to learn more about the life and work of Karl Korsch by accessing Roso’s timely and excellent contribution. This essay will instead focus on “Marxism and Philosophy,” and consider to what extent it remains timely for our times, mostly but not necessarily only for those who share ongoing progressive and socialist commitments.

“Marxism and Philosophy” is a product of the turbulent era of Germany’s failed Weimar Republic, written at a point in time when its author had radicalized, moving from a British Fabian-influenced reformist socialism to active membership in Germany’s newly emergent Communist Party (KPD). In the years to come, Korsch would be purged from the party, the Weimar Republic would collapse in the face of Nazism, and Korsch would lead the latter part of his life in exile and disconnected from active political engagements for the most part. But to focus on the text at hand, Adam Takács reports on historical significance of “the ‘First Marxist Working Week,’ an event organized for leading German and Hungarian left-wing intellectuals by Felix Weil in the summer of 1922 in Thuringia, where a discussion was devoted mostly to the yet unpublished manuscript of Korsch’s Marxism and Philosophy,ⁱⁱ which was subsequently published in the next year.

The title of the work may be regarded as something of a provocation. While academic Marxist theory and philosophy became somewhat commonplace, perhaps even to an extent innocuous, in the century since it was written, the early Weimar period was still a time when Marxism was counter-cultural, unwelcome or ignored by the universities and propounded by intellectuals who, like Korsch, had been associated with the social democratic parties of the Second International (1889-1914), an institution shattered by the failure of its ostensible internationalism in the face of the outbreak of World War I and then divided by splits associated with the subsequent revolutionary upsurges, which it should be remembered not only overthrew Tsarist Russia but shook Germany, Austria, Hungary, and Italy among other countries. When Korsch wrote his book on “Marxism and Philosophy”, revolution was still in the air and on the streets revolutionary theory was, or at least appeared to be, connected to revolutionary practice in a way that had not been experienced for several decades. Why then, how then was a slim tome on this subject pertinent? Had Marx himself not put paid to philosophy long ago in the famous 11th Thesis on Feuerbach, where he had concluded that “Philosophers have hitherto only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it”ⁱⁱⁱ

The point taken by many, if not most, early 20th century socialists was that Marxism neither had nor needed a philosophy. (Or alternatively that it stood in need of supplementation by some form of neo-Kantianism or positivist-empiricist philosophy.) Korsch associates this view with what he refers to as “Orthodox Marxism,” by which he is referring to the prevailing theoretical positions taken and developed by Second International socialist intellectuals, most notably Karl Kautsky (1854-1938), editor of the theoretical journal Neue Zeit of the German SPD. Korsch notes the curious affinity between “Orthodox Marxism” and “bourgeois professors of philosophy” who “reassured each other that Marxism had no philosophical content of its own – and thought they were saying something important against it.” While “in apparent agreement between the two extremes” Orthodox Marxists of the period “thought they were saying something important in favor of it.”^{iv} For the latter, Marxism was a scientific world-view in need of no philosophy, indeed Marx and Engels were understood to have started as students of the philosophy of G.W.F. Hegel (1770-1831), in vogue in German academic circles in the 1830s and 40s and to have been associated with “Left Hegelians” including the radical theologian Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872) against whose work Marx’s theses were directed. But from “1845 onwards, at the latest, Marx and Engels characterized their new materialist and scientific standpoint as no longer philosophical.”^v

Korsch certainly acknowledges what we might describe as the “post-philosophical” position taken up by Marx and Engels. However, he describes how both mainstream “bourgeois” academic philosophy and “Orthodox Marxists” of the period misconstrued the relationship between philosophy, especially the Hegelian legacy, and the emergence of the dialectical materialism of Marx and Engels. In the case of the former, Korsch discusses the sudden decline of Hegelian philosophy in mid-nineteenth century Europe, which he associates with the historical terminus of the era of bourgeois revolution. For Korsch (and in this he sees his position following from Hegel and Marx), philosophy is a reflection of its time in thought, as the bourgeois class after 1848, “ceased to be revolutionary” it “also lost the ability to comprehend in thought” the relationship between philosophy and revolution^{vi} The claim Korsch is making for the historical cohesion between philosophy and history is certainly a strong version of historicism but even if overstated, it is hard to deny that political forces, particularly the influence of the rising Prussian state on German universities contributed to the rapid decline of Hegelian philosophy in that milieu. Marx and the left Hegelians had decreasing and eventually no prospect of finding niches within German academia in the 1840s. With regards to the Hegelian legacy, Korsch’s view is that “in the 1840s” Marx and Engels “deliberately rescued” Hegelian dialectics and “transferred” them “to the materialist concept of history and society.”^{vii} Dialectic, a philosophical concept dating back to the ancient Greeks that emphasizes the clash of opposing viewpoints as the path to knowledge, played a central role in Hegel’s philosophy of history, is then in Korsch’s view taken up by Marx and Engels as central to the logic or method of their materialist conception of history and their revolutionary politics. Indeed, the most fundamental point for Korsch is that the materialist dialectic, that was drawn from philosophy, *cannot be dismissed* (ala’ Second International “orthodoxy”) without also losing Marxism’s commitment to the overthrow of the bourgeois state and the establishment of working-class power through a revolutionary transition to socialism without which philosophy in the form of the dialectic, as Korsch understands the 11th Thesis on Feuerbach, cannot be surpassed.

It is worth noting here that Korsch sees the positions of Marx and Engels as consistent, even identical. On this point he takes issue with the view that the later works of Engels diverge towards the naturalistic-positivist outlook associated with the Second International's Orthodox Marxism,^{viii} and indeed throughout the text of "Marxism and Philosophy" Korsch relies upon works written by Engels in the 1870s and 1880s to explicate his view of the centrality of dialectics to their materialist conception of history. Thus, despite the 11th Thesis, it is Engels who "still wants to preserve the independence of a definite, limited area within "philosophy" – specifically, "the theory of thought and its laws – formal logic and dialectics"^{ix} a view Korsch also finds Marx acknowledging in his relatively few references to logical method in his later works on political economy.

A central question posed by Korsch is how. How is the "abolition of philosophy" accomplished? "Should this abolition be regarded as accomplished so to speak once and for all by a single intellectual deed of Marx and Engels?"^x The question is, of course, rhetorical, to make such a claim would smack of an idealistic view of history and politics more constant with liberalism or anarchism than with the scientific socialism of Marx and Engels.

The central thesis of Korsch's book is that the "abolition of philosophy" is part of a "very long and arduous process which unfolds through the most diverse phases."^{xi} A view of the matter much more in keeping with the logic of dialectical materialism. But the real *tour de force*, the most striking argument Korsch makes is to draw an analogy between philosophy and the State. "Marx and Engels not only combatted one specific historical form of the State, but historically and materialistically they equated the State as such with the bourgeois State and they therefore declared the abolition of the State to be the political aim of communism. Similarly, they were not just combatting specific philosophical systems – they wanted eventually to overcome and supersede philosophy altogether by scientific socialism."^{xii} Here then is the central point for Korsch; just as the Second International had abandoned Marx and Engels's revolutionary commitment to the overthrow of the state, so too had they abandoned the revolutionary implications of their dialectical relationship with Hegelian philosophy.

This argument leads Korsch to his most significant move; the application of a dialectical materialist analysis to Marxism its self. In his view if we "apply Marx's principle of dialectical materialism to the whole history of Marxism, we can distinguish three major stages of development through which Marxist theory has passed."^{xiii} These three stages according to Korsch are as follows:

Phase I: From 1843 up to 1848, beginning with Marx's critique of Hegel's "Philosophy of Right" and "corresponding" to the Communist Manifesto

Phase II: Begins with the failure of the June 1848 working class uprising in Paris and extends "approximately" to the end of the century

Phase III: From the start of the 20th century to the present and "into and indefinite future"

Korsch's analytical technique here is original and intellectually exhilarating but not well grounded. One cannot help but notice the vagueness of the end of phase two and the beginning of phase three in contrast to the specificity of the first phase. One is at a loss to determine of texts or events mark the phases (and what of larger trends in capitalism such as the rise of imperialism?). Engels's early works on communist theory and the English working class are oddly left unmentioned and ultimately, one wonders why their need to be phases at all, why not simply treat the whole period as a dialectical process in which the relationship of Marxism and Philosophy would presumably modulate in correlation with broader historical-material processes and struggles. Indeed, such a modulation is precisely what Korsch does describe in one of the more intriguing sections of the book, he quotes Marx in correspondence with Engels, who describes his cautious approach in writing his 1864 Inaugural Address of the International Workingmen's Association (IWMA or "First International" as it later became known) as well as the new Statutes of the organization. Marx tells Engels that "time was needed for the reawakened movement to permit the old audacity of language."^{xiv} The "old audacity" in question is revolutionary fire of 1848 and their writings and deeds of the period, in contrast to need to stir the embers and reignite the movement in the 1860s after years of failure, suppression, and exile.

Korsch emphasizes the continuity and consistency between Marx's writings of the revolutionary period after the Manifesto (notably 18th Brumaire, Class Struggles in France, and the polemical Poverty of Philosophy) and his subsequent writings on political economy from the late 1850s on, including Capital (published in 1867) plus volumes later published under the editorial control of first Engels, then Kautsky.^{xv} According to Korsch, "the Marxist system never dissolves into a sum of separated branches of knowledge," it remains a coherent whole and the critique of political economy remains fundamentally historical in its character.^{xvi} Korsch makes his strong case for the consistency and coherence of the early and late writings of both Marx and Engels in large part because he wishes to contrast them to the later vulgarization and unrevolutionary quality, as he sees it. His case is well made and yet we can still note some notable modulations in Marx's work and the impact of revolutionary failure and exile. As this author, has recently argued, Marx consistently shows a preference for the direct revolutionary engagement whenever possible, turning to the critique of political economy as the "work of exile" and always ready to return to revolutionary politics when the moment arises, whether it be for the First International, the Paris Commune, or the Gotha Program.^{xvii}

In Korsch's view, Marxism in his era is experiencing crisis and division into three currents; a right, center, and left current which he associates respectively with Karl Renner (1870-1950), a leader of the reformist wing of the Austrian party, Kautsky, and Lenin.^{xviii} Korsch does not analyze any material differences between the right and the center; the center represented by Kautsky tries to maintain its orthodoxy in theory but has long abandoned revolution in practice, while the right pursues "neo-Marxist" strategies of theoretical adjustment to reformist politics, intellectual opportunism and eclecticism. There is a case that can be made for the latter perhaps in some contexts, but it is hardly in Korsch's interest to do so as he presents his work on "Marxism and Philosophy" as a parallel to Lenin's "State and Revolution" as per the analogy between the abolition of the state and of philosophy as discussed earlier in this essay. For Korsch the revolutionary is committed in this period to militantly supporting the development of workers' councils as the means of establishing working class power and self-determination. "Marxism and Philosophy" does not spell Korsch's specific understanding of the revolutionary

strategies of the left-wing current of Marxism as he understood it at the time. However, In the wake of the Bolshevik revolution, Korsch understood the creation of workers' council or soviets to play a central role in the revolutionary process. Korsch's subsequent political trajectory and relationship to council communism is beyond the scope of this essay but well covered by Darren Roso.

What then of Marxism and philosophy in Korsch's indefinite third period and beyond? Would not Korsch have to agree with Theodor Adorno, who would later write, "Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed."^{xix} Adorno's position and that of other "Western Marxists" is one of retreat from political engagement and a kind of monastic focus on the preservation and cultivation of critical theory. But this is certainly not Korsch's orientation when he wrote, "Marxism and Philosophy." For Korsch, philosophy does indeed live on but in the form of ideology. Extending his analysis of the relationship between philosophy and history, Korsch emphasizes the importance of the (a of then) unpublished writings known to him as "The German Ideology" for their importance in a dialectical materialist understanding of philosophy – "no really dialectical materialist conception of history could cease to regard philosophical ideology or ideology in general as a material component of general socio-historical reality – that is a real part of which has to be grasped in materialist theory and overthrown by materialist practice."^{xx} For Korsch then the dialectic of struggle and critique persists so long as the conditions that gave rise to Marxism, that is to say capitalism and the capitalist state, persist. Or put another way by Korsch, ideology, politics, and economy must be understood as forming a "totality" and the task of a Marxist intellectual continues to be the pursuit of the criticism of the ideological forms of capitalist society, so long as it persists.^{xxi}

ⁱ <https://spectrejournal.com/weimars-marxist-heretic/> accessed: 5/1/22

ⁱⁱ Adam Takács. 2015. "Marxism in Revolution: Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* and Karl Korsch's *Marxism and Philosophy*." In *1922: Literature, Culture, Politics*. Jean-Michael Rabaté ed. NY: Cambridge University Press. 222-223.

ⁱⁱⁱ The 11th Thesis was well known in Second International circles due to its publication in English translation by Engels in 1888. The original German text was written in 1845 but not published until 1924.

^{iv} Karl Korsch. 1970 [1923]. *Marxism and Philosophy*. Fred Halliday trans. London: New Left Books. 32.

^v Korsch, 44.

^{vi} Korsch, 40.

^{vii} Korsch, 39.

^{viii} Korsch, 80.

^{ix} Korsch, 47fn.

^x Korsch, 47.

^{xi} Korsch 47.

^{xii} Korsch, 44-45.

^{xiii} Korsch, 51.

^{xiv} Korsch, 53.

^{xv} Plus the massive amounts of unpublished work that Korsch may not have been aware of, some of which is now known as the Grundrisse.

^{xvi} Korsch, 53-54.

^{xvii} Skidmore-Hess, Daniel. 2020. "How the Academy Looks at Marx is all Wrong, the Point However is to Change It," *Class, Race and Corporate Power*: Vol. 8: Iss. 1, Article 7.

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^{xviii} English languages readers may also be surprised to see Renner rather than Eduard Bernstein identified as the intellectual representative of the right wing but this has more to do with the fact that the works of Renner and other Austrian Marxists remain largely untranslated and as a result Renner's importance is underappreciated.

^{xix} Adorno, Theodor W. (1990). *Negative Dialectics*. London: Routledge. 15.

^{xx} Korsch, 68.

^{xxi} Korsch, 84.