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## The Objectivity of Subjectivity: The Dialectics of Marx, Lenin, and Brecht

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The Objectivity of Subjectivity:  
The Dialectics of Marx, Lenin, and Brecht

Senior project Submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

By  
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The Unconquerable Inscription  
Bertolt Brecht

During the war  
In a cell of the Italian prison in San Carlo  
Full of imprisoned soldiers, drunks and thieves  
A socialist soldier, with an indelible pencil, scratched on the wall:  
Long live Lenin!  
High above, in the semi-dark cell, hardly visible, but  
Written in large letters.  
As the warders saw it, they sent for a painter with a bucket of lime.  
And with a long stemmed brush he whitewashed the threatening inscription.  
Since, however, with his lime, he painted over the letters only  
Stood above in the cell, now in chalk:  
Long live Lenin!  
Next another painter daubed over the whole stretch with a broad brush  
So that for hours it disappeared, but towards morning  
As the lime dried, the inscription underneath was again conspicuous:  
Long live Lenin!  
Then dispatched the warder a bricklayer with a chisel against the inscription  
And he scratched out letter by letter, one hour long  
And as he was done, now colourless, but up above in the wall  
But deeply carved, stood the unconquerable inscription:  
Long live Lenin!  
Now, said the soldier, get rid of the wall

## Introduction

“It is not enough that thought should seek to realize itself; reality must also strive towards thought” (Karl Marx *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Introduction* 61)

There is a rather odd relationship between Marxism and academia. One often hears claim by conservatives that Marxists have, for a long time now, taken over academia. As much as I wish this were true, anyone remotely familiar with the state of academia knows that it is not. Still, while we need not worry about a Bolshevik threat in the classroom, it is true that Marx and other Marxists are taught in colleges. After all, Marx and his many followers are simply too important to ignore, no matter how one feels about his politics. But so often, when one does encounter a Marxist theorist they are so often separated from their Marxist convictions. The writings of Italian communist Antonio Gramsci could be found in practically any social science department, yet he is remembered for his contributions to cultural theory, not for his leadership of the Italian Communist Party. Similarly, communist artists and writers, like Picasso, Neruda, Brecht, Breton, etc. are adored for their cultural impact, but are often overlooked when it comes to their revolutionary activities. This is even more true in the case of those who did not have any direct engagement with political class struggle, like those of the Frankfurt School. With this, many seek to recast Marxism, not as a guide to action, but as mere cultural critique. One can criticize society all they want, just don’t talk about revolution.

On the other hand, there is a tendency amongst (political) Marxists to dismiss any academic inquiry as frivolous. These academic investigations can be dismissed as “bourgeois”, as merely “ideological”. At best they are a waste of time, at worst they are misleading and dangerous.

Despite the seeming opposition between these two camps, they actually suffer from the same ailment, a separation of theory and practice. Academics acts as if the struggle is a purely theoretical one. They seem to think that it is enough to challenge capitalist ideology and garner class consciousness amongst the masses. Others, are likely even more cynical, and completely reject the idea of a revolution, instead advocating a reformist platform, despite their “Marxist” beliefs. The anti-academic Marxist do just the opposite, and instead assert that all we need to do to bring about the revolution is act. For them, analysis and strategy become a dogmatic repetition of past leaders, where all relevant philosophical theory can be found in the revolutionary cannon.

So how is this tension to be undone? In many ways this conflict finds its resolution in the image of V.I. Lenin. Lenin firmly understood the importance of philosophy. He saw philosophy not just as idle speculation, as empty postulation, but as vital to making proper analysis and decisions in the political sphere. Unlike some Marxists even today, Lenin had no fear of being lead astray by the study of Hegel, and instead, in 1922, stated that Marxists “must arrange for the systematic study of Hegelian dialectics from a materialist standpoint” (Lenin *On the Significance of Militant Materialism*). In this sense, the task is two-fold: Marxism must be made academic and academia must be made revolutionary.

In short, this investigation arose as an attempt to critique vulgar interpretations of dialectical materialism, which seek to turn into positivism, scientism, or metaphysical materialism, devoid of any meaningful philosophical content. On the other hand, I also hoped, at least implicitly, critique those academic Marxists who have abandon all hope for revolution, and instead resign themselves to ideological critique. This analysis hopes to outline a Marxist understanding of subjectivity (and with it objectivity). In a sense, the specific topic is not all that important. One could easily replace subjectivity with theory, idea, consciousness, etc. and

objectivity with practice, matter, the external world, etc. This project is really about the dialectical method itself, and the choice of topic serves to show the interconnectedness of these concepts and dialectical nature of their (seeming) opposition. I chose the topic of subjectivity/objectivity, precisely because of its abstractness; in one sense because it is a fundamental category, which informs many other philosophical positions, but also to highlight how even the most abstract philosophical concept can be of critical importance to politics.

The first chapter will focus on the conception of subject and object in the work of Marx himself. Through analysis of several of Marx's key works, put in conversation with Karl Korsch and Georg Lukács, I hope to illustrate how subjectivity becomes a central aspect of Marx's revolutionary theory. I also examine the controversy surrounding Lukács' and Korsch's work, and the debates in the Marxist community which it sparked.

The second chapter explores Lenin's philosophical investigations into subjectivity, as well as the importance which subjectivity holds in his political theory. Through analysis of his Hegel notebooks, as well commentary on several pieces of political writings, I will show that the discussion of consciousness and subjective conditions permeate almost all of Lenin's work. With this, there is an attempt to show the direct link between Marx and Lenin (and Hegel), and cast away the misinformed image of Lenin as vulgarizer of Marx.

Finally, the third chapter focuses on *Die Maßnahme* by Bertolt Brecht. This chapter will look at the Brecht play as a kind of literary enactment of this dialectic of subjectivity. It will also highlight the way in which subjectivity is important for anyone organizing for the exploited, and hopes to show that these questions are relevant to everyday political events, even the most mundane.



This is not meant as a comprehensive study on the topic of subjectivity in Marxism. Instead, I hope to show the relevance of subjectivity to political analysis and, more broadly, the significance that philosophical thought has on everyday life, in keeping with a dialectical materialist outlook. This will hopefully serve anyone, from burgeoning activists to hardened cadres, to at the very least, realize the significance of theory, and its inexorably link to practice.

## Chapter 1

### “The Chief Defect”:

#### Subjectivity in the Work of Karl Marx

The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism – that of Feuerbach included – is that things [*Gegenstand*], reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object, or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the active side was developed abstractly by idealism – which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such. - Karl Marx, Theses on Feuerbach

Many Marxists are likely familiar with the quote above. The Theses on Feuerbach represent one of Marx’s most influential and important works which have, since their publication in 1888 by Engels, remained a central piece of the revolutionary canon. Many rightfully associate the text with Marx’s famous axiom “The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it” (9), which is itself reflected by Marx’s emphasis on activity and practice in the quote above. Indeed, we can see this in Marx’s claim that Feuerbach’s materialism falls short because “the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object or of contemplation, but not as sensuousness human activity, practice” (6). Such a claim seems rather uncontroversial for Marxists, acceptable by practically any Marxist tendency, yet there are two words rather curiously attached to the end: “not subjectively”. There has always been a strong tendency in Marxist circles to characterize Marxism as a kind of science. Notably taken up by Engels in his description of Marxism as “Scientific Socialism”<sup>1</sup> in 1880 this tendency was taken up by many in the Second International, and later the Soviet Union, and even Marxist theorists like Louis Althusser. With this, one often (though not necessarily) sees very positivistic interpretations of Marxism which stress the

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<sup>1</sup> This is not meant to imply that Engels necessarily shared the same view as those in the Second International. Instead, this is simply to show what basis the rhetoric of science has within the Marxist movement.

objectivity of its content. It might be very surprising for some to then see Marx emphasize the need to conceive reality subjectively. Yet upon closer examine we can see that subjective analysis forms the revolutionary core of Marxism.

Returning to the “Theses on Feuerbach” we see Marx is quite uninterested in traditional questions of objectivity. He writes:

The question of whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a question of theory but is a practical question. Man must prove truth, that is, the reality and power, the this-sidedness of his thinking in practice. The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking which is isolated from practice is a purely scholastic question. (Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach”, 6)

As Marx makes clear, one can speak about objectivity all they want, but the nature of reality is not decided in academic debate, it is decided by taking root in the world; until then it amounts to little more than an empty statement. Yet Marx’s critique goes even further. Returning to the opening quote Marx states that “The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism ... is that things [*Gegenstand*], reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the object, or of contemplation, but not as sensuous human activity, practice, not subjectively” (6). So what exactly is meant by this? For Marx, Feuerbach’s critical error is that it conceives reality only in the form of objects for consciousness. What Feuerbach ignores is the role which the subject plays in creation of this objective world. As Marx explains, “The materialist doctrine that men are products of circumstances and upbringing, and that, therefore, changed men are products of other circumstances and changed upbringings, forgets that it is men who change circumstances and that it is essential to educate the educator himself” (7). Reality is, then, not simply the arrangement of objects in the external world, but rather a collective social process of human practice. Marx elaborates saying “Social life is essentially practical. All mysteries which mislead theory into mysticism find their rational solution in human practice”(8). Marx centers his critique

on Feuerbach, explaining “Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality it is the ensemble of social relations”(7). He continues, “Feuerbach consequently, does not see that the “religious sentiment” is itself a social product, and that the abstract individual whom he analyses belongs in reality to particular form of society” (8). Now Marx’s criticism of old materialism becomes much more clear. Feuerbach takes his observation about religion and turns it into a claim about an objective universal human essence, failing to see how both human essence, and this religious sentiment itself, are the product of a particular set of social relations. Man’s own essence (and reality in general) is now separated from him, as an eternal and unchangeable object. Marx’s materialism, again, recognizes the subject’s own role in the creation of this essence. It is precisely through this realization by the subject that the subject can begin to change the external world which has shaped them. All this culminates in Marx’s famous aforementioned axiom, that interpretation of the world is not sufficient, but that it must be changed. This, the central revolutionary drive of Marxism, could not be understood without understanding the role of subjectivity.

Of course, this is not to say that Marx does not believe in objectivity. In a dialectical reversal Marx also criticizes Feuerbach by saying “Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from the thought objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as objective activity” (143). Practice then, represents a unity of contradiction, being both action by the part of the subject, but also an external object. It is rather interesting that Marx describes this emphasis on practice originating, not from materialism, but rather idealism. As he explains “Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the active side was developed abstractly by idealism – which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such” (6). Again, this statement might come as a

surprise to many Marxists. No one would deny the influence of Hegel on Marx; to do so would be utterly ignorant. Yet Hegel's influence is often only spoken of in his contribution to the dialectic. Beyond this Hegel is often dismissed as a mystic and obscurantist, as if one need not read Hegel because all of his relevant contributions are contained in Marx's work. Some Marxists, most notably Max Eastman, go so far as to dismiss dialectics entirely as an irrational holdover from Marx's background in German Idealism<sup>2</sup>. While Hegel may be appropriately criticized for his near impenetrable style and complicated vocabulary, this does not justify dispensing with him outright. Indeed, despite criticizing his "mystificatory side" (Marx, *Capital*, 102), Marx, as late as 1873, defended Hegel against critics who characterized him as "dead dog" (102). Furthermore, we see, rather than the traditional formula of Marx turning Hegel's dialectic on its head, Marx writes "With him its standing on its head. It must be inverted, in order to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell" (103). Marx does not turn Hegel on his head so much as he stands him on his feet. It is perhaps not surprising, then, that Hegel finds relevancy in this investigation into subjectivity; there is a seeming opposition built up with Marx, materialism, the external, the objective on one side and Hegel, idealism, the internal, and subjective, on the other side. Yet dialectics don't permit such mutual exclusion and binary opposition, and we shall see that such an opposition does not hold. As Foucault once masterfully put it:

Truly to escape Hegel involves an exact appreciation of the price we have to pay to detach ourselves from him. It assumes that we are aware of the extent to which Hegel, insidiously perhaps, is close to us; it implies a knowledge, in that which permits us to think against Hegel, of that which remains Hegelian. We have to determine the extent to which our anti-Hegelianism is possibly one of his tricks directed against us, at the end of which he stands, motionless, waiting for us. (Foucault *Discourse on Language* 235)

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<sup>2</sup> Fellow American Trotskyist James Burnham would similarly break with dialectics in the mid-to-late 1930s. This was such an issue it prompted Trotsky himself to write a piece defending dialectics in 1939 ("The ABCs of the Materialist Dialectic"). Both Burnham and Eastman would break with Marxism entirely by the 1950s, turning to conservatism and contributing regularly to *National Review*.

This is perhaps more true for Marxism than any other school of thought. Consequently, it is worth going beyond Hegel's contributions to the dialectic method, and instead looking to the content of his philosophy itself.

The Master-Slave dialectic found in *Phenomenology of Spirit* is one of Hegel's most famous and influential concepts. This section gives an account of consciousness attempting to be recognized by another. Here, Hegel makes the rather remarkable claim that "Self consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged" (Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, 111). Each consciousness seeks control over the other, hoping to maintain their independence as self-determined being. What follows is "a life-and-death struggle" (114) in which one emerges as "independent consciousness whose nature is to be for itself, the other is the dependent consciousness whose essential nature is simply to live or to be for another. The former is lord, the other is bondsman" (115). However, this hierarchy is quickly complicated. The master becomes completely dependent on the bondsman, and the bondsman empowers himself through his work. As Hegel explains:

Through work, however, the bondsman becomes conscious of what he truly is. In the moment which corresponds to desire in the lord's consciousness, it did seem that the aspect of unessential relation to the thing fell to the lot of the bondsman, since in that relation the thing retained its independence. Desire has reserved to itself the pure negating of the object and thereby its unalloyed feeling of self. But that is the reason why this satisfaction is itself only a fleeting one, for it lacks the side of objectivity and permanence. Work, on the other hand, is desire held in check, fleetingness staved off; in other words, work shapes the thing. The negative relation to the object becomes its form and something permanent, because it is precisely for the worker that the object has independence. This negative middle term or the formative activity is at the same time the individuality or pure being-for-self of consciousness which now, in the work outside of it, acquires an element of permanence; it is in this way, therefore, that consciousness, qua worker, comes to see in the independent being [of the object] its own independence. (Hegel 116)

Where the lord simply negates the external in favor of absolute being-for-self, the bondsman actually works on what is outside himself. By working on the object he puts himself into it, seeing that the objects being is for him, and realizes his own independence in the independence of this object of work. This section proved to be quite influential on Marx and Engels, most notably in Marx's conception of alienated labor. But here, we may also see many similarities with the Marx of the "Theses on Feuerbach". Hegel here is quite similarly concerned with the role of activity. Fredric Jameson goes so far as to say that Hegelian ethics represent "if not the philosophy of praxis exactly, then at least the philosophy of production: the philosophy of Goethean *Tätigkeit* (or activity), of work, of externalization" (Jameson 56). As noted in the "Theses on Feuerbach" it is in Hegel's idealism that we find this central concept of activity. Just as Marx emphasized the role of the subject changing his condition through activity, we see Hegel's bondsman attain his freedom through work and externalization. Just like in Marx's conception of human practice we see Hegel's description of work as a unity of subject and object.

Still, Hegel's conception of work is lacking, as it speaks rather abstractly about work. There is also the matter of the historical limits of Hegel. In 1807 capitalism was still in its infancy. Large scale production and the rise of the haute-bourgeois would not occur for some years. It makes sense then, that Hegel would frame this struggle in the Feudal/Slave terms of Lordship and Bondage, which would've been far more relevant to him at the time. Regardless, Hegel is unable to perceive/predict the transformation labor would undergo during the rise of capitalism. In short, he is unable to articulate the concept of alienated labor. This correction would, of course, later be taken up by Marx. However, the conception of alienated labor is a rather complicated one within Marx's thought. Despite being taken up by many Marxist thinkers,

especially in the West (notably Guy Debord and other Situationists), Marx would greatly complicate the theory only a year after its conception. The central problem lies in Marx's statement that "Man is a species being" (Marx *Economic and Philosophical Manuscript* 75) and that "Estranged labour turns thus: *Man's species being*...into a being alien to him" (77). Species-being, a term Marx borrows from Feuerbach, represents Marx's closest conception of an idea like "human nature". Yet, as we know, Marx rejects the idea of species-being, and a universal human essence, quite explicitly in the Theses on Feuerbach<sup>3</sup>. But must we then dispense with Marx's conception of alienated labor entirely? Of course not, but it does require careful consideration in order to avoid inconsistencies. Marx explains that alienated labor results in "The relation of worker to the product of labor as alien object exercising power over him" (74). In a sense, one could understand alienated labor as the Master-Slave dialectic gone wrong. Whereas in Hegel work and activity took the form of independence and liberation, here labor itself becomes an object of this power relation itself. "His labour is therefore not voluntary, but coerced; it is forced labour" (74) Marx explains. Under capitalism the worker has no control over the product of their work. They are told how and what to produce, without any ability to produce for themselves. Whereas the bondsman could put himself into the external world by his production, the proletariat does not put themselves into the external world, but instead only produce a foreign alien object. Marx goes on explaining that alienated labor also alienates "The relation of labour to the act of production within the labour process" (74). Not only the product, but now the act of production itself appears as alien to the worker. Marx explains "Here we have *self-estrangement*, as we had previously the estrangement of the *thing*" (75). This is not only

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<sup>3</sup> The rejection of "species-being" by Marx in the "Theses on Feuerbach" is the basis of Louis Althusser's distinction between the young and old-Marx, and with this, the basis of his philosophical anti-humanism. The disagreements between Althusser and his followers and the humanist Marxists would become a central debate amongst communists in the 1960s and 1970s.



compatible but even strengthened by Marx's statements in the "Theses on Feuerbach". If, as implied by the "Theses on Feuerbach", practice represents subjective reality, then alienating the worker from their practice means alienating them from their very subjectivity (rather than from their species-being as producer). Some might respond by saying that this would only be true in the act of production, whereas the worker has control of their activity outside of their work. In a general sense, we Marxists might say that, according to Historical Materialism, the economic mode of production is the main shaper of all social institutions. However, beyond this rather broad, historically minded statement, we can also see very clear ways in which the mode of production influences the "private" life of the worker. Most obviously, there is the fact that this "private life" or "leisure time" is defined by its very opposition to work. Furthermore the workers' ability to lead their private life (or to live at all) is determined by their ability to work and produce. This leisure time is treated as if it is the antidote to this alienating existence. Yet, the true antidote is meaningful activity, or unalienated work, neither of which capitalist leisure can offer. Instead, leisure can only offer a fleeting distraction. To treat leisure time as a moment of freedom for the worker is to accept an illusory freedom, and fall into a bourgeois trap.

Following from *Capital* we can say that the proletariat operates primarily on the exchange of C-M-C, Commodity-Money-Commodity; they sell their labor power as a commodity, in exchange for payment in wages, which they use to buy commodities. Capitalistic leisure, the supposed solution to alienation, can only offer itself in the form of the commodity. In the search for a deeper more meaningful satisfaction, the proletariat is only met with products which are being sold to them. This is not say that these products are absolutely meaningless and unfulfilling. In fact, they may give great joy to the worker. Yet, this temporary fulfillment does not address the underlying lack of control and alienation that the worker faces. Instead, it

perpetuates them, as the worker alienates himself and is turned into a commodity in order to buy commodities to alleviate his alienation.

The ubiquity and universality of the commodity under capitalism was, as we know, a major interest of Marx, and his analysis of the commodity in *Capital* also heavily relies on a dialectic of subject and object, particularly in his conception of commodity fetishism. Marx describes this phenomenon saying:

A commodity is therefore a mysterious thing, simply because in it the social character of men's labour appears to them as an objective character stamped upon the product of that labour; because the relation of the producers to the sum total of their own labour is presented to them as a social relation, existing not between themselves, but between the products of their labour. This is the reason why the products of labour become commodities, social things whose qualities are at the same time perceptible and imperceptible by the senses. In the same way the light from an object is perceived by us not as the subjective excitation of our optic nerve, but as the objective form of something outside the eye itself. But, in the act of seeing, there is at all events, an actual passage of light from one thing to another, from the external object to the eye. There is a physical relation between physical things. But it is different with commodities. There, the existence of the things quâ commodities, and the value relation between the products of labour which stamps them as commodities, have absolutely no connection with their physical properties and with the material relations arising therefrom. There it is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things. In order, therefore, to find an analogy, we must have recourse to the mist-enveloped regions of the religious world. In that world the productions of the human brain appear as independent beings endowed with life, and entering into relation both with one another and the human race. So it is in the world of commodities with the products of men's hands. This I call the Fetishism which attaches itself to the products of labour, so soon as they are produced as commodities, and which is therefore inseparable from the production of commodities. (Marx *Capital* 164-165)

In essence, the fetishism of the commodity is the result of mistaking exchange value for an objective value intrinsic to the commodity, rather than a subjective value assigned by a set of social relations. Again, as Marx explains, these relations between people now become seen as “the fantastic form of a relation between things” (165). Building off the concept of the commodity fetish Hungarian Marxist Georg Lukács introduces the concept of reification. Much like the fetish character of the commodity, reification represents, in a general form, the act of

misinterpreting social relations as a natural law, relations between things, outside of humanity.

As Lukács explains (after quoting the same passage from *Capital*):

What is of central importance is that because of this situation man's own activity, his own labour becomes something objective and independent to him, something that controls him by virtue of an autonomy alien to man. There is both a subjective and objective side to his phenomenon. Objectively a world of objects and relations between things springs into being...Subjectively where the market economy has been fully developed a man's activity becomes estranged from himself, it turns into a commodity which, subject to the non-human objectivity of natural laws of society must go its own way independently off man just like any consumer article. (Lukács 68)

Lukács goes on to clarify that, while labour-power becomes a commodity belonging to the labourer, their product now becomes an alien and general thing. Lukács connects this with what he describes as the “continuous trend towards greater rationalisation, the progressive elimination of the qualitative, human and individual attributes of the worker” (69) seen in the development of capitalism. Lukács notes that “in the first place, the mathematical analysis of work processes denotes a break with the organic, irrational and qualitatively determined unity of the product” (69). In this sense, the capitalist mode of production strips away any idiosyncratic, unique, subjectively determined elements of a product in exchange for uniformity and efficiency in mass production. He elaborates saying “In the second place, this fragmentation of the object of production necessarily entails the fragmentation of its subject” (70), in which the labourer only sees himself as a sort cog-in-a-machine, with no autonomy, subject to unchangeable laws which govern their life.

It's no coincidence that Lukács' concept of reification resembles Marx's theory of alienation from the 1844 manuscript. Reification comes as a kind of heightened form of alienation. What is interesting, however, is not simply that these categories resemble each other, but that they show a great unity in Marx's thought. *Capital* was written over 20 years after Marx

had written the 1844 manuscript. Over this time Marx's thought went through much development. Nevertheless, one can see a clear connection between the theory of alienation, Marx's critique of Feuerbach (and development of a philosophy of praxis), and commodity fetishism (as highlighted by Lukács' contributions). Lukács notes that, just how some see that the whole of Hegel's philosophy can be seen in section of Being, Non-Being, and Becoming, "It might be claimed with perhaps equal justification that the chapter dealing with the fetish character of the commodity contains within itself the whole of historical materialism and the whole of self-knowledge of the proletariat seen as the knowledge of capitalist society" (141). The main source of this unity is seen in the dialectical analysis of subject and object. If we return once more to Marx critique of Feuerbach, we can see that his criticism is essential that Feuerbach is guilty of reifying the human essence. He states "Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the human essence. But the human essence is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In reality it is the ensemble of social relation" (Marx *Theses on Feuerbach* 7). Reification is thus not simply a form of alienation, but also a kind of logical fallacy or fetishitic analysis.

Lukács builds off his theory of reification to arrive at his conclusion that the the proletariat can "function as the identical subject-object of history" , and that "The self understanding of the proletariat is therefore simultaneously the objective understanding of the nature of society"(Lukács 123). However, to fully understand the nature of Lukács' argument it is fundamental to understand the relationship between Marxist philosophy and the consciousness of the working class. This relationship is perhaps best summarized by German Marxist Karl Korsch, who states:

The immense significance of Marx's theoretical achievement for the practice of proletarian class struggle is that he concisely fused together for the first time the total content of those new viewpoints transgressing bourgeois horizons, and that he also formally conceptualized them into a solid unity, into the living totality of a scientific

system. These new ideas arose by necessity in the consciousness of the proletarian class from its social conditions. Karl Marx did not create the proletarian class movement (as some bourgeois devil-worshippers imagine in all seriousness). Nor did he create proletarian class consciousness. Rather, he created the theoretical-scientific expression adequate to the new content of consciousness of the proletarian class, and thereby at the same time elevated this proletarian class consciousness to a higher level of its being. (Korsch "The Marxist Dialectic")

Dialectical/Historical Materialism is then the philosophy of the proletarian consciousness, not insofar as it created this consciousness, but rather insofar as it creates a system and language which allows us to understand society in its totality and thereby elevate the class consciousness of the proletarian. The idea of dialectical analysis leading to an understanding of totality is too central in Lukács's argument. In contrast to the Kantian understanding of reality, in which we can never fully understand the impenetrable noumenal thing-in-itself, Hegel's philosophy "resulted in the establishment of a completely new logic of the concrete concept, the logic of totality-admittedly in a very problematic form which was not seriously continued after him" (Lukács 117). Lukács also emphasizes the role of historical analysis. He criticizes eighteenth century materialists for their inability to understand the "evolution of real contents, i.e. problem of history" (118). Instead, the dialectical conception of history allows us to simultaneously see reality as a process of development (i.e. as part of a historical process) as well as the product of human action. As Lukács explains:

The idea that we have made reality loses its more or less fictitious character: we have- in the prophetic words of Vico already cited- made our own history and if we are able to regard the whole of reality as history (i.e. as our history for there is no other), we shall have raised ourselves in fact to the position from which reality can be understood as our 'action'. The dilemma of the materialists will have lost its meaning for it stands revealed as a rationalistic prejudice, as a dogma of the formalistic understanding. This had recognised as deeds only those actions which were consciously performed whereas the historical environment we have created, the product of the historical process was regarded as a reality which influences us by virtue of laws alien to us. (120)

Thus the thrust of Lukács argument becomes clear. The objectivity of Historical Materialism is not in that it cuts through to an immediate objective reality. Lukács makes it clear that this would be to reaccept the Kantian notion that “objective reality has the character of the thing-in-itself” (124). Indeed, if we accept the “whole of reality as history” then we can understand history as, not distinct from reality, but “the real ultimate ground of [the reality of individual facts] and their factual existence and hence also of their knowability even as individual facts” (126). Thus reality can be mediated, while still retaining its objective character. In contrast, bourgeois historians (and sociologists), argues Lukács, treat various phenomena in isolation and in their immediacy which reduce history to either a history of “Great-Men” or a set of abstract historical laws (131). In keeping with Korsch’s quote, we see that by the process of reification the worker is forced to recognize his activity (labour-power) as commodity. This understanding is only possible by the process of self-recognition. That is to say, so long as they don’t recognize themselves as proletariat, as estranged from their product and exploited by the capitalist class, they are not conscious of themselves. This reveals the activity of the proletariat as both subject and object of the capitalist mode of production, insofar as it is both producer of value, but also product in the form of commodity. In this sense, the proletariat cannot truly understand itself unless it also understands its larger position within the means of production. Lukács emphasizes this unity in this self-knowledge with objective knowledge, explaining “consciousness here is not the knowledge of an opposed object but is the self consciousness of the object, the act of consciousness overthrows the objective form of its object” (148). This necessarily leads to a realization of the significance of human practice, as realized by Marx in the “Theses on Feuerbach”, that this human practice must then be revolutionized.

*History and Class Consciousness* made a major impact on Marxist philosophy, particularly amongst Frankfurt School intellectuals who further developed off Lukács's theory of reification. Lukács, along with Korsch, is often seen as the founder of so-called "Western Marxism"<sup>4</sup>. Yet, the publication of *History and Class Consciousness* in 1924 caused major stirs amongst Marxists. As Korsch notes, both he and Lukács were either denounced or ignored by major figures of the German, Hungarian, and Soviet communist parties, including Zinoviev, head of the Third International (Korsch "The Materialist Dialectic", Korsch "The Present State of Marxism and Philosophy-An Anti-Critique"90-92). As Korsch himself makes clear, the main accusation was of "idealist deviations" (Korsch "The Present State of Marxism and Philosophy-An Anti-Critique" 108). But what then is the basis of this accusation? We have already shown that Lukács's analysis is quite in line with Marx's statements from "The Theses on Feuerbach". Should we then denounce Marx for his "idealist deviations"? While one could point to specific points of divergence between Marx and Lukács/Korsch, to say their philosophy represents a complete corruption or distortion of Marx seems rather odd in the light of this analysis.

To best understand this divide it is important to understand the historical development of working class movement in the years after Marx's death, which is itself the subject of Korsch's work. Korsch sees these developments up to and during the first world war as a critical moment in the Marxist movement, which now was divided amongst groups of reformers, centrist, and revolutionaries. The battle against revisionism, and with it, the question of what constitutes Marxist orthodoxy, became a central debate. As Korsch explains "the only 'materialist and therefore scientific method' (Marx) of pursuing this analysis is to apply it to the further

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<sup>4</sup> Despite being a great influence on the Frankfurt thinkers Lukács had a rather ambivalent relationship to his German counterparts. In 1962, with the republication of his work *Theory of the Novel*, Lukács would famously criticize Adorno and his peers for their lack of concrete political engagement, regarding them as patrons of the "Grand Hotel Abyss" (Lukács "Theory of the Novel")

development of Marxism up to the present” (“Marxism and Philosophy” 50), in other words “the application of the materialist conception of history to the materialist conception of history itself” (Korsch “The Present State of Marxism and Philosophy-An Anti-Critique” 92). Similar to Lukács, Korsch sees the work of Marx and Engels as “a theory of social development seen and comprehended as a living totality; or, more precisely, it is a theory of social revolution comprehended and practiced as a living totality” (Korsch “Marxism and Philosophy” 52). While noting that Marx and Engels’ theory developed over the years this idea of totality would always remain central, and, again like Lukács, stresses the rooting of this totality within a historical process. Korsch notes, however, that “later Marxists came to regard scientific socialism more and more as a set of purely scientific observations, without any immediate connection to the political or other practices of class struggle” (54). This understanding of Marxism, which sees it as observation of value-free, scientific, objective fact, reduces to Marxism to a mere criticism of Bourgeois society. “These criticisms” explains Korsch “no longer necessarily develop by their very nature into revolutionary practice” (57). Korsch sees this decay of the core of Marxist philosophy as reflecting the state of the working class movement at the time, saying:

Revisionism appears as an attempt to express in the form of a coherent theory the reformist character acquired by the economic struggles of the working class parties , under the influence of altered historical conditions. The so-called orthodox Marxism of this period (now a mere vulgar-Marxism) appears as an attempt by theoreticians, weighed down by tradition, to maintain the theory of social revolution which formed the first version of Marxism, in the shape of pure theory. This theory was wholly abstracted and had no practical consequences-it merely sought to reject the new reformist theories, in which the real character of the historical was then emphasized as un-Marxist (58)

Thus Marxism ceased be revolutionary, both for the revisionist and “orthodox” camps. Throughout the text Korsch emphasizes that neither Marx nor Engels accept such a one-sided undialectical understanding of science. In particular he notes that even the late Engels, often



criticized as the chief vulgarizer of Marxism who distorted it into naturalism in his works like the *Anti-Duhring* and *Dialectics of Nature*, still emphasizes a dialectical understanding of nature, wherein “he describes thought and consciousness as products of the human brain and man himself as a product of nature, also unambiguously protests against the wholly ‘naturalistic’ outlook which accepts consciousness and thought as ‘something given straightforwardly opposed to Being and Nature’”(80).

This “scientific” and vulgarized form of Marxism was the trend of the Second International, and in many ways was continued by the Third International. However, we shall suspend this historical discussion for the time being, and instead treat the accusations of Lukács and Korsch’s critics in the context of their theory. Their theories are quite obviously not idealist, but why exactly is this? The answer is, of course, in their relationship to practice. For Lukács and even more explicitly Korsch, Marxism is a product of the practical experience of the working class. It is not as if Marx and Engels discovered a perfect schema which they could then hand off to the working class like some kind of promethean gift. Marx and Engels’ philosophy was born out of concrete observation of and participation in the working class movement, and thus corresponds to a particular point of history in the development of this movement. As Korsch explains “It is claimed that ‘the Marxism of the Second International’ represents an advance on the original Marxist theory. Yet in fact it was a *new historical form of proletarian class theory*, which emerged from the altered practical context of the class struggle in a new historical epoch” (100). Korsch stresses that Marxism is not “a theory that has miraculously anticipated the future development of the workers movement” (101). Such a conception is utterly idealist, asserting that the masses must, somehow or another, catch up to a theory which is beyond them, rather than adapting this theory to particularity of the historical situation. Such thinking is the height of

vulgar, mechanistic Marxism, which divorces itself from practice, viewing the revolution as an inevitable/eventual stage in history. Marxism's relevance is that its method, dialectical materialism, represents the only way of organizing reality/history into a total system. This is precisely why Lukács states "Orthodox Marxism, therefore, does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx's investigations. It is not the 'belief' in this or that thesis, nor the exegesis of a 'sacred' book. On the contrary, orthodoxy refers exclusively to method" (Lukács "What is Orthodox Marxism" 1). As Korsch makes clear, the inability of Marxists to grasp this, and their tendency to uncritically defend Marx as a form of theoretical authority is precisely why the Second International was unable to make major theoretical developments necessary to understand the changing conditions of the time. It wasn't until these developments became so apparent and undeniable (seen most clearly in the outbreak of the first world war and the subsequent breakdown of the Second International and European socialist parties) that theoreticians (namely V.I. Lenin) were now forced to analyze the issues relevant to the time, such as imperialism and the nature of the state. These developments, which do represent major insights in Marxist theory, could never be possible if it weren't for the experience of the working class movement which necessarily brought these questions to consciousness.

There is a sense in which we can see a dialectic in the class consciousness of the proletariat itself. By becoming aware of itself and developing class consciousness, the proletariat reaches a new point of understanding. From this new understanding, this higher stage of consciousness, the proletariat can then reassess its own position and develop an even deeper understanding, in a process that would continue till it reached a complete understanding. Of course, there is a caveat to this; this model remains utterly abstract and theoretical, dare I say, idealist, insofar as we divorce it from practice. As Lukács notes "But it must not be forgotten:

only the practical class consciousness of the proletariat possess the ability to transform things.

Every contemplative, purely cognitive stance leads ultimately to a divided relationship to its

object” (Lukács “Reification and the Class Consciousness of the Proletariat” 171). He goes onto

explain :

The practical character of the thought of the proletariat is born and becomes real as the result of an equally dialectical process. In this thought self-criticism is more than self-criticism of the object, i.e. self criticism of bourgeois society. It is also a critical awareness of how much of its own practical nature has really become manifest, which stage of the genuinely practical is objectively possible and how much of what is objectively possible has been made real (171)

Self-Criticism, then, allows for the proletarian consciousness to develop. In a sense, self-criticism represents nothing more than a deeper, critical form of self-knowledge which Lukács speaks about. In another sense, it resembles Korsch’s own attempt to apply the historical materialist method to working class movement itself. It is only through practical class struggle and critical reflection on this class struggle that proletarian consciousness develops. There will always be moments of mistakes and misstep for the working class movement. There will be moments where the working class is not developed enough to take advantage of a particular situation. There may be times where the working class movement misjudges its own practical limits. Yet, the principle of self-criticism allow for such mistakes to be understood and corrected. Of course, we must be aware that, as Korsch makes clear, the historical development means new phenomena to understand and new problems to deal with. But, it is only through self-criticism and the practical experience of the proletariat that we can even begin to understand where our analysis is lacking.

From this, we can begin to understand the importance of subjectivity within Marxism. Not only do we see that the subjective knowledge of the proletariat corresponds to the objective knowledge of society, but we also see that this subjective knowledge forms the basis of self-

criticism, which is vital for any working class movement which hopes to survive. Even more centrally we see that subjectivity is the very element which binds Marxism to the masses. Again, to treat the content of Marxist investigation as *purely* “objective” means to utterly divorce it from practice. There is no formula for revolution, there is no checklist or set of instructions which we can turn to when we are lost. This is not to say that we can’t learn from those of the past and make use of the same tactics as others did when we deem it useful or worthwhile. However, to act as if the answer to revolutions lies in the purely academic debate over theoretical positions, rather than in a genuine connection to the practical experience, concerns, and demands of the working class, is to completely lose sight of the goal of Marxism.

## Chapter 2

### The Vanguard:

#### Subjectivity and the Politics of V.I. Lenin

For now, we have kept our discussion largely focused on the philosophical significance of subjectivity within Marxism. However, we should not assume, then, that this investigation is irrelevant to the political goals of Marxism. Indeed, it would be an error to assume that philosophical theory has no relation to political practice. The importance of philosophical questioning was understood well by V.I. Lenin. Lenin rightfully saw dialectics as the core of the Marxist method, and dedicated himself to its study. Even in 1914, right at the outbreak of first world war, Lenin dives into a study of Hegel's *Science of Logic*. This study of Hegel, as well as other philosophical projects of Lenin, do not represent mere speculative interests, but important underpinnings which inform, not only Lenin's theoretical breakthroughs, but also his success in leadership. As this analysis hopes to show, Lenin's dialectical understanding of subjectivity was a very important concept which had great influence on Lenin's analysis which is apparent in works such as *The State and Revolution* and *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder*.

Lenin was, of course, not a philosopher by trade. Nevertheless, Lenin was very much concerned with philosophical questions and debates of the time, and there are a few texts where Lenin deals directly with philosophical texts. The most notable of these is his 1914 Hegel Notebooks. These notebooks consist of Lenin study of Hegel's *Science of Logic*, which he had began while in exile in Switzerland to prepare for an article he would be writing on Marx. However, it is quite clear that Lenin's Hegel Studies went far beyond this single article, and would continue till as late as April 1917 (Anderson 109). From these notes, as well as other writings from the time, we can see that *The Science of Logic* made quite the impact on Lenin's

thought, in a way that was not limited to purely philosophical-theoretical positions. With this being said, we shall, for this investigation, avoid discussion of the relationship between Lenin's before and after his study of Hegel's *Logic* (a hotly debated topic amongst Marxist, which warrants its own paper). Similarly, here, we are not concerned with the degree to which Lenin understood Hegel accurately. Instead, our concern with these notebooks is simply to show Lenin working through the topic of subjectivity, and the way in which this informs his later political work.

Lenin's dealing with subjectivity appear throughout the the Hegel Notebooks, with varying degrees of engagement and various focuses. The first discussion of subjectivity occurs rather early, in the introduction to *The Science of Logic*. There Lenin writes "Is it not the thought here that semblance also is objective, for it contains one aspect of the objective world? Not only Wesen but Schein, too, is objective . There is a difference between the subjective and the objective. BUT IT, TOO, HAS ITS LIMITS" (Lenin "Conspectus of *The Science of Logic*" 98). Lenin continues on this point later, in the section on "The Doctrine of Essence". Here, in talking about the relationship between Semblance (*Schein*) and Essence, Lenin gives the example of a river "the foam above and the deep currents below. But even the foam is an expression of essence" (130). He continues with this "You include in Schein all the wealth of the world and you deny the objectivity of Schein!" (131). While the comment here remains rather abstract, one key element is that the division between objective and subjective is not clear or delineated. Instead, there is what Lenin would later describes as "the unity of opposites" (222), a feature which is not only important to subjectivity and objectivity, but rather "embodies the essence of dialectics" (222).

Though not directly related to subjectivity we see another important passage in section on Appearance. Here, Lenin takes note of Hegel's critique of the concept of law. He writes "the concept of law is one of the stages of cognition by man of unity and connection, of reciprocal dependence and totality of the world process. The "treatment" and "twisting" of words and concepts to which Hegel devotes himself here is a struggle against making the concept of law absolute, against simplifying it, against making a fetish of it. NB for modern physics!!!" (150-151). He goes on to say "Law takes the quiescent- and therefore law, every law, is narrow, in complete, approximate" (151). In other words, law is not a universal schema that is the cause or explanation of any particular situation, rather, law is the "reflection of appearances" (151). Anderson duly notes that this is likely an implicit critique of the scientism of the Second Internationale (Anderson 51). However, more broadly, one can see this page, not simply as a critique of scientism, but as a general critique of dogmatism and mechanistic applications of dialectics.

What is likely the most important dealing with subjectivity occurs in section on the Idea. Here, Lenin is confronted with, what he sees, as the concept of practice in Hegel's philosophy. From this Lenin writes "Remarkable: Hegel comes to the "Idea" as the coincidence of the Notion and the object, as truth, through the practical purposive activity of man. A very close approach to the view that man by his practice proves the objective correctness of his ideas, concepts, knowledge, science" (Lenin "Conspectus of The Science of Logic" 191). He later elaborates, saying "Truth is a process. From the subjective idea, man advances towards objective truth through "practice" (and technique)" (201). Anderson notes that, in this section, Lenin "is increasingly translating Hegel's concept of subjectivity as practice" (Anderson 70). While we will discuss the significance of this at greater length, for now we can say that what is profoundly

interesting, here, is the way in which this section resembles Marx's "Theses on Feuerbach", particularly when one reads these in connection with Lenin's notes on the criticism on Kant. There, Lenin criticizes Plekhanov for critiquing Kant "more from a vulgar-materialistic standpoint than from a dialectical-materialist standpoint" (179), and similarly criticises that "Marxists criticised (at the beginning of the twentieth century) the Kantians and Humists more in the manner of Feuerbach (and Büchner) than of Hegel" (179). Anderson points out that "there is the implication that Feuerbach too is a vulgar materialist, or at the least, that his materialism is very far from being full dialectical in the Hegelian manner" (Anderson 65). As Marx pointed out in his criticism of Feuerbach, Feuerbach's materialism (and all other materialism for that matter) lacks subjectivity; he can only think of a realm of objects. Like Lenin, Marx views practice as being either identical to, or at least related to subjectivity, and emphasizes that this concept of practice was developed, not by materialist thought, but by Hegel. Lenin notes this himself, when he writes "Marx, consequently sides with Hegel in introducing the criterion of practice into the theory of knowledge: see the Theses on Feuerbach" (Lenin "Conspectus of The Science of Logic" 211). It is no coincidence, too, that Lenin takes down as a note "HISTORICAL MATERIALISM AS ONE OF THE APPLICATIONS AND DEVELOPMENTS OF THE IDEAS OF GENIUS-SEEDS EXISTING IN EMBRYO IN HEGEL" 190). This all culminates with Lenin stating "Man's consciousness not only reflects the objective world, but creates it" (212). Here, in a manner which quite clearly reflects Marx's call for revolutionary practice in the Theses on Feuerbach, Lenin realizes the power of the subject to change their world.

These notes on Hegel are, once again, a purely philosophical investigation, without much discussion of the practical implications of these insights. Instead, we must turn to Lenin's political writings, where we see that subjectivity becomes a vital concept to many of Lenin's



major theoretical contributions. Broadly speaking, the importance of subjectivity in Lenin's thought is reflected by the centrality of class consciousness in his political philosophy. When discussing the conditions which lead to the success of the Bolsheviks Lenin writes "The first questions to arise are: how is the discipline of the proletariat's revolutionary party maintained? How is it tested? How is it reinforced? First, by the class consciousness of the proletarian vanguard and by its devotion to the revolution, by its tenacity, self sacrifice and heroism" (Lenin *Left-Wing Communism: An Infantile Disorder* 12). Unlike many of his contemporary, who would've likely framed the necessary conditions of revolution in purely economic terms, these are strikingly absent from Lenin's discussion. Indeed, it's no surprise that so many "Marxists" deemed a revolution in Russia impossible due to the lack of industrial development in the country. Instead, Lenin viewed the consciousness and organization of the proletariat as being far more important than the development of productive forces. This is not to say that economics were not at all a concern for Lenin, as they very much were (especially after the revolution). However, it is telling that Lenin did not feel the need to speak of these conditions in their relation to a revolution, a move which was no doubt influenced by his critique of vulgar materialism (and with it, economism) in the Hegel notebooks.

With this being said, it is important to note that this emphasis on class consciousness was not born from Lenin's reading of Hegel. Indeed, the idea of class consciousness is central to Lenin's concept of vanguardism, as outlined in his 1902 pamphlet *What is to be Done?*. In *What is to be Done?* Lenin attacks those amongst the social democrats who emphasized the role of "spontaneity" in the working class movement, arguing that the spontaneous actions of the working class (e.g. strikes, riots), represent the seeds of class consciousness, which Marxists must help continue to develop. Lenin states "Indeed, no one, we think, has up to now doubted

that the strength of the modern movement lies in the awakening of the masses...and that its weakness lies in the lack of consciousness and initiative among the revolutionary leaders” (Lenin

*What is to be Done?* 73). Lenin states:

“Everyone agrees” that it is necessary to develop the political consciousness of the working class. But the question arises, how is that to be done? What must be done to bring this about? The economic struggle merely brings the workers “up against” questions concerning the attitude of the government towards the working class. Consequently, however much we may try to give give the “economic struggle itself a political character” we shall never be able to develop the political consciousness of the workers (to the degree of Social-Democratic consciousness) by confining ourselves to the economic struggles, for the limits of this task are too narrow. (112)

Even now, far from being a vulgar, non dialectical, materialist, Lenin very much sees the limit to a purely economic struggle. Anderson suggests that Lenin’s notes on appearance and essence may be implicit critique of understandings of Marxism “which had emphasized that politics and ideology are mere “superstructure”, whereas economics is the “base” and therefore the real foundation for a Marxist analysis” (Anderson 44). While Anderson might very well be right on this point, Lenin certainly did not learn this from Hegel, as this critique is central to argument made in *What is to be Done?*. Lenin makes it clear that these “ideological” issues of political consciousness are just as, if not more, important than the “material” economic issues.

What’s more is that Lenin understands this relationship between party and class consciousness in a very dialectical way. He states: “But what else is the function of Social-Democracy if not to be a “spirit”, not only hovering over the spontaneous movement, but also *raising* the movement to the love of “its program?” (91). Here, we can begin to correct some common misunderstandings of Lenin’s concept of the vanguard. Vanguardism is not Blanquism; it is not a secretive professional clique which carries out a revolution from above. Instead, the vanguard is the made up of the most active and class conscious elements of the population. They

do not simply guide the working class, but instead simultaneously guide and are guided by the working class. If one things back to the discussion of appearance and essence, one sees a similar relationship; the immediate spontaneous actions of the proletariat represent the inklings of class consciousness. The vanguard must be attentive to these spontaneous moments, and understand what deeper issue they illustrate, and what the correct set of tactics is to help further the working class movement. With this, there is the idea that the immediate/spontaneous (often economic) demands of the working class, reflect a greater underlying political problem, a problem which can only be solved in the political sphere. One might think of the example of a spontaneous strike. This strike has arisen from a number of economic demands, shorter hours, higher wages, better benefits etc. It would be incorrect to imply that such a demand is not legitimate; any self-respecting communist should support this battle for higher wages and better working conditions. However, it is necessary for the vanguard to continue this struggle beyond the economic realm, to illustrate that these economic issue are tied to politics, and thus, that the only permanent solution can be the working class seizing/asserting political power. Alternatively, for a non-economic example, one might think of spontaneous acts of terrorism by the working class. If a working class activist were to assassinate a politician or industrial leader, it might reflect a genuine hostility between the classes. Yet, in most cases, such acts of violent individualistic adventurism inspire little hope amongst the working-class, and often only lead to greater repression on the part of the state.

One might say Lenin's emphasis on consciousness and subjectivity are also reflected in his call that "Social Democrats must go among all classes of the population, must dispatch their army in all directions" (113). Here, Lenin specifically calls for this in order "to bring political knowledge to the workers" (112). He continues

The Social-Democrat's ideal should not be a trade union secretary, but a tribune of the people, able to react to every manifestation of tyranny oppression, no matter where it takes place, no matter what stratum or class of people it affects; he must be able to group all these manifestations into a single picture of police violence and capitalist exploitation; he must be able to take advantage of every petty event in order to explain his socialistic convictions and his Social-Democratic demands to all, in order to explain to all and everyone the world-historic significance of the struggle for the emancipation of the proletariat. (113-115)

For Lenin, Marxist cannot limit themselves to engagement with the proletariat alone. Instead, they must be able to show the relevancy of this class struggle to other classes which it also affects. There will be various factions within different classes that would benefit in working with Marxist, either in the long or short term. It is clear that this does not mean pandering or making compromises to such classes, but it does require, at the very least, demonstrating the importance of the class struggle for all. This is the second feature which Lenin saw as critical to the success of the Bolsheviks. As he puts it "Second, by its ability to link up and maintain the closest contact, and-if you wish- merge, in certain measure, with the broadest masses of the working people-primarily with the proletariat, but also with the non-proletariat masses of working people" (Lenin *Left-Wing Communism* 12). The application of this is most obvious in Lenin's inistancy of winning over the peasantry. In *The State and Revolution* Lenin writes:

In Europe, in 1871, the proletariat did not constitute the majority of the people in any country on the Continent. A "people's" revolution, one actually sweeping the majority into its stream, could be such only if it embraced both the proletariat and the peasants. These two classes then constituted the "people". These two classes are united by the fact that the "bureaucratic-military state machine" oppresses, crushes, exploits them. To smash this machine, to break it up, is truly in the interest of the "people", of their majority, of the workers and most of the peasants, is "the precondition" for a free alliance of the poor peasant and the proletarians, whereas without such an alliance democracy is unstable and socialist transformation is impossible.

As is well known, the Paris Commune was actually working its way toward such an alliance, although it did not reach its goal owing to a number of circumstances, internal and external. (Lenin *The State and Revolution* 299)

Whereas many contemporary Marxists saw the peasantry as little more than a backwards horde of people, one whose way of life would need to be slowly wiped out by industrial growth for a successful revolution, Lenin saw, not only the basis for an alliance between the proletariat and the peasantry, but more fundamentally recognized that the peasantry were too an exploited class of toilers.

The importance of subjectivity can even be seen in Lenin's principle of revolutionary defeatism. The outbreak of the first World War was catastrophic for the international socialist movement. Despite the Second International's claim to a commitment to oppose imperialist war, many "socialists" quickly abandoned this principle for patriotism. This led to a split in the Social-Democratic Party of Germany, when many members voted in favor of war credits. Similar splits would occur throughout European socialist parties. Socialist leaders like Plekhanov and Kautsky came out in favor, if not directly of the war, then of need for "national defence". In response, Lenin, along with fellow Bolshevik Grigory Zinoviev, wrote a pamphlet entitled "Socialism and War". There they write:

The war has undoubtedly created a most acute crisis and has increased the distress of the masses to an incredible degree. The reactionary character of this war, and the shameless lies told by the bourgeoisie of all countries in covering up their predatory aims with "national" ideology, are inevitably creating, on the basis of an objectively revolutionary situation, revolutionary moods among the masses. It is our duty to help the masses to become conscious of these moods, to deepen and formulate them. This task is correctly expressed only by the slogan: convert the imperialist war into civil war; and all consistently waged class struggles during the war, all seriously conducted "mass action" tactics inevitably lead to this. It is impossible to foretell whether a powerful revolutionary movement will flare up during the first or the second war of the great powers, whether during or after it; in any case, our bounden duty is systematically and undeviatingly to work precisely in this direction. (Lenin, Zinoviev "Socialism and War")

Again, Lenin emphasizes that the duty of Marxists is to "help the masses become conscious of these mood, to deepen and formulate them". There is an objective element to this revolutionary

situation; the war does a great deal to create disorder and tension at practically every level of society and politics, and furthermore it arms a large section of the population. Yet, this objective condition is contingent on a subjective condition: the working class must be made aware of the imperialist nature of this war, that this war is in the service of the ruling class, and that it only harms the interest of the proletariat. Instead of characterizing defeat as a disastrous outcome, one which necessitates defence on the part of the working class, defeat should be viewed as a positive, as an opportunity.

Lenin's concept of subjectivity and class consciousness is also central to his understanding of how the working class movement develops. We have already noted that, much like Marx, Lenin sees the idea of practice as being related to subjectivity. With this, it is clear that practice is central to Lenin's theory of knowledge; one cannot develop knowledge without some kind of practice. This theory of knowledge, what one might call the dialectical materialist theory of knowledge, is not simply an "empty fashionable phrase, [a] toy rattle" (Lenin *State and Revolution* 304), as Lenin himself might put it, but instead, is something which must be applied to working class movement, in order to understand how its political knowledge (or even general knowledge) develops. Lenin summarizes the importance of this theory of knowledge when speaking on how Marx investigated the question of how (and in what form) the proletarian state would emerge:

Marx raises this question and answers it in 1852. True to his philosophy of dialectical materialism, Marx takes as his basis the experience of the great years of revolution, 1848 to 1851. Here, as everywhere, his teaching is the *summary of experience*, illuminated by a profound philosophical conception of the world and a rich knowledge of history. (290)

He continues on this point later, saying:

It was not logical reasoning, but the actual development of events, the living experience of 1848-1851, that led to the problem being presented in this way. The extent to which Marx held strictly to the solid ground of historical experience can be seen from the fact

that, in 1852, he did not yet deal concretely with the question of what was to take place of the state machine that was to be destroyed. Experience had not yet provided material for the solution of this problem which history placed on the order of the day later on, in 1871. (292)

The knowledge of the proletariat, then, does not develop out of thin air, instead it develops out of the experience of the proletariat. Theory cannot develop out of sheer speculation, but must actually come from practice and experience. In 1843, Marx wrote a manuscript for his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. In it, Marx offers his critique of Hegel's conception of the state. Yet, Marx could not assert a theory of a proletarian state, or even fully develop a theory about the proletariat's relationship to the bourgeois state. This is because Marx had nothing to base this on; the socialist movement was still in its infancy. This is not peculiar to the question of the state, but to revolution in general; one could write a "comprehensive" manifesto detailing how they think the revolution should/will occur, down to the finest minutia. Yet, this manifesto would prove completely useless when it turns out that the revolution is not happening how one envisioned it. This is precisely why Lenin (and Marx) place so much emphasis on the Paris Commune. It represented the greatest achievement of the working class movement at the time, the closest they had ever come to a successful revolution. To ignore it, to not grasp the importance that it has as lesson for all future revolutions, is to completely miss its significance.

It is likely no surprise, then, that Lenin refers to "experience" throughout, not only *The State and Revolution*, but nearly all of his political writings. What is noteworthy, is that in speaking of experience Lenin necessarily implies a subject of such experience. He does not speak about the "conditions" of the time, and imply that is enough if we simply look at the Paris Commune like it were an assemblage of facts (or even more crudely, simply focus on the economic developments of the period). Instead, Lenin places an importance on the lived experience of people of the time. Studying the Paris Commune means studying the attempts by

conscious subjects to deal with their historical conditions. One must actually understand what they were trying to do, what they hoped to achieve, what information/theory their actions were based off of, etc. From the lessons of the Paris Communes, from its concrete attempt to put socialist principles into practice, through revolutionary experiment, it also raised the consciousness of the proletariat.

With this, is it accurate, as Anderson implies, to say that practice is identical to subjectivity for Lenin? Yes and no. If we look back to the Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach*, Marx makes it clear that practice has twofold nature: both as subject and object. Essentially practice is a subject trying to objectify itself. The subject has an idea of justice, so they enact that idea of justice in the world. This enactment itself becomes an objective material force. On the other hand, experience, one might say, is the dialectical return of this objectified practice, into the consciousness of the subject. In a way, one could see this as the basis of the Marxist principles of criticism and self-criticism; when the results of practice reemerge in consciousness, the subject can critical reflect on them, and understand the success and shortcomings of such practice. This is no different from revolutionary struggle. A party or revolutionary must critically reflect on their own activity, as well as on the history of socialist movement, of which they must realize they are a part. This is reflected time and time again in the work of Marx, Engels, and Lenin.

As Lenin reminds us "Without revolutionary theory there can be no revolutionary movement" (Lenin *What is to be Done?* 69). Philosophy, then, is not simply empty chatter, but is the basis of our analysis and actions. Indeed, Lenin was deeply committed to Marxism not only as a political ideology, but also as a complete philosophical system. It's no surprise, then, that he criticized the vulgar materialism that was so rife in his day (even becoming the first Marxist to use such a term). Much more could be said of the philosophical significance of Lenin's work, yet



this would go well beyond the focus of this study. For now, we can say that just as philosophy was relevant to Lenin, Lenin is relevant to philosophy.

## Chapter 3

Die Partei hat tausend Augen:

### Brecht's Dialectic of Subjectivity

While Bertolt Brecht is well established as a literary figure, and his influence on theater is undeniable, he is often overlooked as a Marxist theorist. Brecht studied under Karl Korsch, and remained an ardent communist throughout his life, even resettling in the German Democratic Republic after the second World War. Brecht's work itself is fundamentally Marxist, being constructed through the Marxist methodology of Dialectical Materialism. Nevertheless, there is often little discussion into the contributions Brecht made to Marxist thought, both in his literary and theoretical work. In order to understand these contributions we may look to Brecht's play *Die Maßnahme*. *Die Maßnahme* is likely Brecht's most overtly Marxist play. It tells the story of five agitators sent to Mukden, China to spread propaganda and organize workers. While some might see the play as an apologia for totalitarian violence and anti-individualist repression under the Soviets (and indeed there are some who see Marxism as nothing more than this), such interpretations fundamentally miss the significance of the play. Instead, I would argue that Brecht is very much concerned with individual subjective experience, while simultaneously understanding the limits of this subjectivity. Brecht shows that it is through the coming together of various subjectivities, combined with practice, that we come to understand the world. Ultimately, Brecht offers us a way to understand subjectivity that highlight its importance in even seemingly mundane political activity.

The play begins with four agitators returning from their mission in Mukden, announcing to the Control Chorus (*Der Kontrollchor*) that they had to kill one of their fellow agitators, the Young Comrade (*Der junge Genosse*). They proceed to recount the story in a performance to the

Control Chorus. Once they arrived in Mukden (with their identities disguised by masks) the Young Comrade repeatedly comes into conflict with his fellow agitators. He is consistently disgusted by the conditions and treatment of the workers and peasants in Mukden and speaks out passionately against the injustices he sees, arguing that they must accelerate their activities and bring about revolution immediately. After distributing propaganda, riots break out in the city. The Young Comrade attempts to use this as an opportunity to get workers to attack the soldier's barracks and start an uprising. When his fellow comrades disagree and attempt to stop him, the Young Comrade rips off his mask and announces to the public that they are Soviet agents. With their identities revealed the five agitators flee the city and attempt to cross the border, only to realize that they will be caught if they bring the Young Comrade with them. As a result they decide that the only option is to shoot the Young Comrade and bury him in a lime pit. The Young Comrade consents to this, and is killed. Upon hearing the report the Control Chorus assures the agitators that they have done the right thing.

The story of the Young Comrade is far from some heroic vindication of the socialist movement. Rather, we see that the Young Comrade consistently makes mistakes and missteps. Likewise, the play does not make the oppressed out to be perfect, nor does it turn the oppressors into evil strawmen. Instead, Brecht very much seeks to capture various different perspectives in order to illustrate the various conflicts and contradictions between them. One instance of this can be seen in the meeting between the Young Comrade and the Merchant (*der Händler*), in which the agitators seek help in order to arm the coolies in the region. In this scene the Merchant sings "The Song of the Commodity" (*Song von der Ware*). He sings "*Was ist eigentlich ein Mensch?/ Weiß ich, was ein Mensch ist?/ Weiß ich wer das weiß?/ Ich weiß nicht, was ein Mensch ist/ Ich kenne nur seinen Preis.*" (Brecht *Die Maßnahme* 287) Here, we see Brecht masterfully restate

Marx's conception of Commodity Fetishism. Through this commodity fetishism, the exchange value of a commodity, itself representing a set of social relations, comes to be understood as inherent to the commodity itself; the price of the commodity then stands as its only indicator of value. Even people themselves become viewed only as a commodity, insofar as labor-power is a commodity. The question of "what man actually is" is of no concern to the Merchant, all he needs to know is how much he costs.

This understandably disgusts the Young Comrade who, upon hearing this, refuses to eat with the Merchant, breaking off any ties with him. However, the Young Comrade fails to realize the common ground he holds with the Merchant and the way in which he can help their cause. At the beginning of the scene the four agitators inform us that "Dann hörten wir, daß die Kaufleute der Zölle wegen einen Streit hatten mit den Engländern, die die Stadt beherrschten." (284) They explain that they wish to turn this conflict between the ruling class, into the conditions that will help serve the movement. What the Young Comrade fails to see is that the Merchant, as a member of the national bourgeoisie, has a vested interest in aiding the struggle against British imperialism. As Mao explains:

Being a bourgeoisie in a colonial and semi-colonial country and oppressed by imperialism, the Chinese national bourgeoisie retains a certain revolutionary quality at certain periods and to a certain degree--even in the era of imperialism--in its opposition to the foreign imperialists and the domestic governments of bureaucrats and warlords (instances of opposition to the latter can be found in the periods of the Revolution of 1911 and the Northern Expedition), and it may ally itself with the proletariat and the petty bourgeoisie against such enemies as it is ready to oppose. (Mao Zedong "On New Democracy")

For the proletariat and peasantry the removal of the imperialist powers represents the removal of the most advanced and exploitative elements of the bourgeoisie within their nation. For the Merchant, this means the removal of tariffs imposed by the English, as well as less competition

with foreign capitalists. Even if their goals are different, even contradictory in the long run, the Young Comrade fails to see how they both stand to benefit from working together in the short term. Of course, is it important that the agitators don't end up simply being used by the Merchant, and dismissed when they are no longer of use, but to never engage with him to begin with is a serious misstep. Indeed, here we see that the Young Comrade is unable to think from the perspective of the coolies themselves. What does it matter to them who they receive their weapons from, so long as they have weapons? As the control chorus asks "Welche Medizin schmeckte zu schlecht/ Dem Sterbenden?" (Brecht *Die Maßnahme* 290) Through his own high and mighty attitude the Young Comrade betrayed and endangered the very people he sought to fight for.

We see something similar occur earlier in the play when the agitators attempt to distribute leaflets to textile workers who have not joined a factory strike. Things quickly turn sour, as a policeman notices and they are forced to strike him down when he discovers they are spreading propaganda. In one version of the play we see the young comrade say to a worker "Wenn ihr in den Betrieb geht, verratet ihr eure Genossen" to which the worker replies "Ich habe eine Frau und drei Kinder, und als ihr herausgingt und streiktet, hat man uns die Löhne erhöht. Hier, ich hatte doppelte Löhnung! Er zeigt das Geld." (282) In a fit of rage the Young Comrade attacks this worker, causing a large commotion, at which "... sofort kamen die Arbeitenden aus dem Betrieb und vertrieben die Streikposten. " (283) Again we see another accidental blow delivered by the Young Comrade to the working class movement. Here, he cannot seem to understand why a worker would turn his back on his fellow worker. The worker has very real concerns about providing for his family. Were he to strike, he and his family might starve. Conversely, we also see that the commodity fetishism and alienation of the Merchant also holds true (at least to a

certain extent) for the worker. To him, other workers represent competition, competition which could replace him or drive down his wages. He remains completely atomized, and fixated on the short term. The Young Comrade could have explained the importance of solidarity with his fellow workers: if everyone in the factory were to strike, the bosses would have no choice but to raise everyone's wages. Instead, the Young Comrade deepens this division amongst the workers, likely poisoning any faith that these other workers might have in a socialist movement.

We see the Young Comrade make somewhat of the opposite mistake in the scene before this. There the agitators attempt to help organize coolies, who are hauling rice barges from the country into Mukden. These coolies are barefoot, and the ground is slippery, making it very difficult for them to haul the barge. The Young Comrade is sent to tell the coolies to demand special shoes, which coolies in the neighboring city of Tientsin have successfully managed to secure through constant demand. The Overseer (*der Aufseher*) has no concern for the coolies, and whips them to go on despite their struggle, insisting that "Aber der Reis muss heute abend in der Stadt sein." (272) The Young Comrade is taken aback, and implores the coolies to demand shoes from their employers. Unable to bear watching them struggle, he comes up with a temporary solution. "Hier nehme ich einen Stein und lege ihn in den Schlamm...und jetzt tritt!" (272-273) he tells the coolies. The Young Comrade continues to place stones beneath the feet of the coolies until he no longer can. The Overseer quickly realizes he is an agitator, and chases him out. The agitators explain that they were chased through the city for a week afterwards, and had to avoid the lower section of the city for fear of being caught, greatly damaging their propaganda efforts.

Here, the mistake of the Young Comrade is one that is faced by many activists; he does not allow for the coolies to fight for themselves and organize around a particular demand.

Instead, he tries to alleviate the problem in the short term by placing the stones. This creates little problem for the Overseer, who even says “Was helfen uns Schuhe in Tientsin? Ich will euch lieber erlauben, dass euer mitleidiger Kamerad mit einem Stein nebenherläuft und ihn jedem hinlegt, der ausrutscht.” (273) The coolies themselves even remark “Das ist ein Narr, über den lacht man.” (274) Were the coolies to demand shoes it would have been much different. In such a case, these workers would gain actual experience in organizing. Through organizing around a particular demand, they can begin to see how such organizing can be applied to address other problems, and to make greater demands. This organizing heightens the conflict between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, raising class consciousness in the process. If the coolies were successful in demanding their shoes, they might begin to understand the power of collective struggle. They begin to see themselves, not simply as individual workers, but as a class, as members of the proletariat. This realization, this movement from being an objective class to a subjective class, is the first critical step in organizing proletarian revolution. Yet, the Young Comrade does not allow for any of this. Instead, he acts as an advocate for the coolies, not actually allowing them to exercise their agency. This also creates a separation between the party and the workers they are trying to organize. The coolies dismiss the Young Comrade as a fool. He treats them as if they are children, incapable of fending for themselves.

Things eventually come to a head in the sixth scene of the play. Hunger riots break out in the city, which the Young Comrade views as an opportunity. He plans to spread propaganda amongst the unemployed and attack soldiers stationed at the nearby barracks. The other agitators disagree with the plan, but are willing to hear the Young Comrade out. When he fails to convince them, the Young Comrade becomes increasingly frustrated at his inability to alleviate the suffering of the people of Mukden, culminating with him ripping off his mask and announcing to

the public “Wir sind gekommen, euch zu helfen. Wir kommen aus Moskau” (299). The agitators are quickly spotted and chased out of the city, and they attempt to flee back to the Soviet Union. This scene is incredibly dense, and close examination should reveal just how significant it is to the study of Marxist political theory. Here, we see Brecht places an emphasis on the role of discussion, debate, and criticism within party organizing. In the revised version of the play, when the Young Comrades tells them of his plans, the agitators reply “Dann hast du ihnen den falschen Weg gezeigt. Aber nenne uns deine Gründe und versuche uns zu überzeugen” (292). Again, despite disagreeing initially, the agitators are perfectly willing to be convinced to support the Young Comrade. They tell the Young Comrade that these riots are the results of the growing class consciousness of the people of Mukden. Nevertheless they warn “Die Erfahrung der Revolution fehlt ihnen. Unsere Verantwortung wird umso größer” (292). Undeterred, the Young Comrade argues that the oppressed cannot wait any longer, and that “Sie wissen alles” (293). Despite pointing out that they have no weapons, nor do they know the strength of the soldiers, the Young Comrade remains unconvinced.

We can begin to see the critical error of the Young Comrade. A revolution cannot be willed out of nothing. While there may be exploitation, oppression, and suffering, “Es genügt nicht, zu leiden.” (293) Again, as we see in scene after scene, the Young Comrade is unable to think past his own perspective. His analysis stops short at what is immediately before him. He lacks both concrete logistical information (e.g. how many soldiers are stationed in the city), but also the ability to consider all sides. As the agitators tell the young comrade “Du siehst nur das Elend der Arbeitslosen, aber nicht das Elend der Arbeitenden. Du siehst nur die Stadt, aber nicht die Bauern des flachen Landes. Du siehst die Soldaten nur als Unterdrückende und nicht als unterdrückte Elende in Uniform” (294). As insignificant as these things may seem, they actually



have a great impact on the success of a revolution. For instance, it is critical that a socialist movement also take into consideration the role of the peasantry. Recalling Lenin's comment on the revolution of the Paris Commune, he explains:

In Europe, in 1871, the proletariat did not constitute the majority of the people in any country on the Continent. A "people's" revolution, one actually sweeping the majority into its stream, could be such only if it embraced both the proletariat and the peasants. These two classes then constituted the "people". These two classes are united by the fact that the "bureaucratic-military state machine" oppresses, crushes, exploits them. To smash this machine, to break it up, is truly in the interest of the "people", of their majority, of the workers and most of the peasants, is "the precondition" for a free alliance of the poor peasant and the proletarians, whereas without such an alliance democracy is unstable and socialist transformation is impossible.

As is well known, the Paris Commune was actually working its way toward such an alliance, although it did not reach its goal owing to a number of circumstances, internal and external. (Lenin *The State and Revolution* 299)

The success of the Bolshevik revolution, as well as the Chinese and Vietnamese revolutions, hinged upon support of the peasantry, which made up the vast section of the population. The situation in Mukden is likely no different, where farmers and agricultural workers likely outnumber the industrial proletariat. Lenin quite similarly understood the important role that soldiers would play in the revolution<sup>5</sup>. Rather than simply seeing them as agents of the Bourgeoisie, Lenin understood that these very soldiers could be turned against the ruling class. By propagandizing and agitating soldiers the class struggle is brought right to the heart of the imperialist war machine, causing it to break down. Had the Bolsheviks not placed such an emphasis on spreading dissent amongst soldiers, and winning them over to the side of socialism, the Russian revolution could have easily failed.

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, this was quite different in Lenin's time, when most armies were manned through mass conscription. The extent to which soldiers today still maintain a revolutionary potential would require its own sociological investigation.

We might ask then, how do we deal with the limits of one's individual perspective? We may look back to Brecht for the answer. When they find the argument of the Young Comrade unconvincing, the agitators say "Du hast uns nicht überzeugt. Geh also zu den Arbeitslosen und überzeuge sie, daß sie sich in die Front der Revolution eingliedern müssen. Dazu fordern wir dich jetzt auf im Namen der Partei" (Brecht *Die Maßnahme* 296). The Young Comrade then asks "Wer aber ist die Partei" (296), to which the agitators explain "Wir sind sie./ Du und ich, und ihr- wir alle" (297). This sentiment is later reiterating in the poem delivered by the control chorus, "Lob der Partei". They say:

Der einzelne hat zwei Augen/ Die Partei hat tausend Augen./ Der einzelne sieht eine Stadt/ Die Partei sieht sieben Staaten/. Der einzelne hat seine Stunde/ Die Partei hat viele Stunden./ Der einzelne kann vernichtet werden/ Die Partei kann nicht vernichtet werden/ Denn sie vertritt die Methoden der Klassiker/ Welche geschöpft sind aus der Kenntnis der Wirklichkeit (Brecht *Die Maßnahme* 298)

We can see that the Party means something very particular to Brecht. The party is not a faceless entity, rather it is made up by a collective of individuals. This amalgamation of various perspectives and subjectivities is what constitutes the Party. The correct party line, or the correct set of tactics, is not preordained, nor is it just the decision of the party leaders. Rather, it is through debate and discussion that we broaden our understanding of the conditions we face, and come to the truth. This need for discussion is central to any party, As Mao explains "

Opposition and struggle between ideas of different kinds constantly occur within the Party; this is a reflection within the Party of contradictions between classes and between the new and the old in society. If there were no contradictions in the Party and no ideological struggles to resolve them, the Party's life would come to an end. (Mao "On Contradiction")

The agitators tell the Young Comrade:

Zeige uns den Weg, den wir gehen sollen, und/ Wir werden ihn gehen wie du, aber/  
Gehe nicht ohne uns den richtigen/ Weg Ohne uns ist er/ Der falscheste./ Trenne dich

nicht von uns!/ Wir können irren und du kannst recht haben, also/ Trenne dich nicht von uns!/ Daß der kurze Weg besser ist als der lange/ Das leugnet keiner. Aber wenn ihn einer weiß/ Und vermag ihn uns nicht zu zeigen/ Was nützt uns seine Weisheit?/ Sei weise bei uns!/ Trenne dich nicht von uns! (Brecht *Die Maßnahme* 297)

Again, the agitators are more than willing to hear what the Young Comrade has to say. They readily admit that they might be wrong, and he might be right. His position may very well be the right one. However, as long as he is unable to put his thoughts into words, to make a convincing argument, to show what this way is, they rightly question what use this “wisdom” has. Ironically, we see that it is perhaps the Young Comrade who is the most dictatorial figure in the play. He is not concerned with discussion, he has little interest in being persuaded by his comrades. Instead, he directly acts against their wishes, and endangers everyone's lives in the process (not to mention destroying much the work that they have been doing).

Still, this discussion then brings up an entirely new set of concerns. As the other agitators admit, they may very well be wrong. Perhaps, if they were able to follow through with their own tactics, they would've been just as unsuccessful as the Young Comrade. This raises the question of how we decide what the right thing to do is. The Young Comrade and the agitators might debate until they're blue in the face and still never arrive at an agreement as to what is to be done. Nevertheless, something must be done. Mao's response to this predicament follows as such “Where do correct ideas come from? Do they drop from the skies? No. Are they innate in the mind? No. They come from social practice, and from it alone” (Mao “Where do Correct Ideas Come From?"). We may think of this in two ways. The first being the basic principle of Dialectical Materialism, i.e. that we must begin with analysis of the material world, rather than an ideological analysis. Secondly, we might say that we can only learn the proper tactics through attempting to put them into practice. It is through the failures and success of this praxis that we

can learn and become better. Outwards analysis of the world should inform praxis, but this analysis must be turned back inward to analyze the shortcomings of said praxis. There may very well be failures, but as the four agitators remind us, referencing Lenin “Klug ist nicht, der keine Fehler macht, sondern/ Klug ist, der sie schnell zu verbessern versteht” (Brecht *Die Maßnahme* 275). It is these principles of criticism and self-criticism which give Marxism its power as a method of investigation and as a way to inform praxis. The failure of the Young Comrade is his inability to reflect upon his mistakes and correct them. Once he finally realizes the error of his ways it is too late, and he pays for his mistakes with his life.

However, it should be clarified that criticism and self criticism are not reserved for the individual. It is something which should be practiced by any party. But even further than that, it is something which must be applied to the entire history of socialism. The agitators tell the Young Comrade “Deine Revolution ist schnell gemacht und dauert einen Tag/ Und ist morgen abgewürgt./ Aber unsere Revolution beginnt morgen/ Siegt und verändert die Welt./ Deine Revolution hört auf, wenn du aufhörst./ Wenn du aufgehört hast./ Geht unsere Revolution weiter” (296). What the Agitators emphasize is that the movement for revolution, the movement to build socialism, is a continuous one. The Young Comrade is quick to rip up the “classics” of socialist theory, as they do not solve the immediate suffering of the world. Today, particularly after the Collapse of the Soviet Union, many deem Marxism a failure and cast it aside as a useless bit of theory. Even some Marxists see fit to dismiss the study of those like Lenin or Mao, claiming that they are irrelevant, or even misleading and authoritarian. The assumption seems to be that these authors will be treated like messiahs, whose texts serves as holy writ which we must follow. Of course, we should avoid making these figures into cults of personality. We must engage with them critically, and understand both their successes and failures. But, if we dismiss

them wholesale and refuse to deal with them in any capacity, we have completely closed ourselves off to a wealth of insight. Indeed, it is important to remember that these revolutionary figures had concrete experience in organizing revolution, and it is this concrete experience that informs their work. While we should not treat these past revolutions as mechanistic models which can be applied to any historical situation, we cannot eschew learning from the conditions they faced, and where they failed and succeeded. If we ignore this history wholesale, we start from scratch without anything to inform our actions. We might say, then, that creating a successful revolutionary strategy is not just an intersubjective project, but also a historic project which deals with the various perspectives of both past and present.

Perhaps this is why Brecht chose to tell the story of an incompetent revolutionary, rather than a celebratory tale of the revolutionary spirit (such as *Die Mutter*). We are confronted with the failure of the Young Comrade in such a way that it invites this radical criticism. We are forced to ask ourselves, what was done wrong, what could've been done differently, and what can we do in our current situation. It is worth remembering that the play is a frame story. Despite his constant presence, the Young Comrade is actually never really there. He has died well before this reenactment and his personage is taken up by the various agitators. In a somewhat anti-Brechtian manner, it can be very easy to lose sight of this, and in this sense Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* is perhaps not as perfect as he may believe (or wants it to be). There are many sections in which the audience members might identify with the Young Comrade as they would with a character of an "Aristotelian" drama. However, there are still constant reminders and moments of breakage which thrust the audience out this emotional stupor, and in some ways this might actually be a strength of the play, rather than a shortcoming. This may be due the similarity between the position of the Young Comrade and that of the Brechtian audience. The

Young Comrade represents the main driver of the story. It is through him and his decisions that the play unfolds as it does. The title *Die Maßnahme*, is most obviously an allusion to the decision of the agitators to kill the Young Comrade, however we should also understand this as an allusion to decisions of the Young Comrade himself. Through identifying with the Young Comrade the audience themselves are confronted with these decisions. This confrontation, combined with a rational, critical distance via *Verfremdung*, then urges the audience to take part in this process of criticism and self-criticism. Although the two eyes of the Young Comrade are absent in the play, the audience takes up the role of these two eyes.

Indeed, from this it is important to understand the exact nature of *Die Maßnahme* within context of Brecht's career. *Die Maßnahme* is one of several of Brecht's *Lehrstücke* or "Learning Plays". These *Lehrstücke* were highly formalized pieces and sometimes even designed in such a way that they could easily be performed by non-actors. They were meant as an organisational tool, which was meant to raise class consciousness and inspire people to change the world and fight for its betterment. As Brecht explains in an article originally published in *The New York Times* (in English) "With the learning play, the stage begins to be didactic" (Brecht "The German Drama: Pre Hitler" 80). While these elements are true of almost any of Brecht's plays, we see their greatest refinement in the *Lehrstücke*, and one might say that *Die Maßnahme* represent the greatest refinement of the *Lehrstück* itself. Indeed, *Die Maßnahme* borrows many element of previous *Lehrstücke*, most notable *Der Jasager* and *Der Neinsager* ( an adapted version of *Der Jasager*). *Der Jasager* (itself is an adaption of a Japanese Nō play named *Taniko*) also centers around a character who is forced to decide whether to commit suicide in order to protect others (in this case a child who becomes sick while on an expedition through the mountains). The inclusion of this sacrificial element is not, as some critics might see, an endorsement of political

repression under socialism, nor is it some kind of message that people must be willing to sacrifice everything, even their lives, for the sake of revolution. Indeed, as this analysis has hopefully shown, Brecht is quite clearly opposed to blind sycophancy and authoritarian tendencies. Instead, Brecht likely uses this theme of self sacrifice in order to emphasize the importance of reflecting on the decisions of the Young Comrade by focusing on one of the most troubling decisions we can be faced with: one of life and death. In a sense, it might be that the actual outcome of this decision is somewhat irrelevant. Again in Brechtian theater the audience is not meant to passively watch a play, and agree with all they see. Instead, they are very much meant to question, and imagine how these events might be different. Brecht even notes that, through *Verfremdung* “it became obvious to him which actions were right actions and which were the wrong ones” (79). The fact that Brecht reworked *Der Jasager* into *Der Neinsager* by reversing the ending, such that the child rejects the idea of committing suicide, would seem to support this.

In this sense, we can start to see a unity in Brecht’s dramaturgical project and his political one; the engagement that one has with politics is not unlike the engagement one should have with theater. It would be inaccurate to claim that Brecht’s plays have a moral. The play should not have some definitive kind of message, revealed to the audience by the director or playwright. Again, such an arrangement would just be a return the traditional models of theater which Brecht rejected. Instead, the audience is forced into a conversation with the play. They are meant to actively engage with it and critically assess it. Brecht did not see the audience as a unitary mass, but as “a collection of individuals, capable of thinking and reasoning” (79). Brecht notes the importance of discussion amongst the audience of the play, stating “I learned from these discussions. I feel myself I must still, must always learn” (80), and notes that these discussion

have often led him to revisit, rewrite, and revise previous plays. Through this dialectical back-and-forth between the audience and the play, the audience, and even the author, gains a more thorough understanding, not just of the play, but of society as a whole. Quite similarly, the “correct” analysis, position, or set of tactics is not simply whatever the leadership says, but rather is understood through debate and discussion. In this case, debate and discussion is even more broad, whether being between a reader and a text, within a party, or between party members and the masses etc. In some ways, we see Brecht almost return to a Platonic understanding of dialectics, in which conversation between interlocuteurs is central to philosophical investigation.

It is worth noting the novelty of Brecht’s insights. Despite the noted similarities with certain writings of Mao, *Die Maßnahme* was written several years before Mao had written any of his major theoretical contributions. Even if this were not the case, Brecht, or perhaps more accurately the study of Brecht, still gives us great insight into the practical everyday role of subjectivity within Marxism. It is through a multiplicity of perspective coming together, forming a greater whole, that we begin to arrive at the truth of the world. Brecht’s work reflects a dialectic of subjectivity, one which echoes Marx and Lenin theory of knowledge, and one which has great implications for both art and politics. What is perhaps most impressive is that Brecht manages to do this in such a way that is still engaging for and accessible to the working class. He does not take the condescending attitude that things must be simplified and made obvious for the masses. Rather, he presents his plays with all their complexities, and acts to raise the consciousness of the audience in doing so.



## Conclusion

With this, we have hopefully seen the importance of subjectivity in Marxist philosophy. As has been shown, Marx saw subjectivity as the key element absent in Feuerbach, yet present in Hegel. The bringing together of these two thinkers, and with them, subjectivity and objectivity, would be a major development in Marx's methodology of Dialectical/Historical Materialism.

From the study of Lenin we can see the centrality of consciousness and of subjective conditions in his political theory. Be it from his study of Hegel, or his keen awareness in the political sphere, or some combination of the two, Lenin distanced himself from the vulgar materialism of his time, which was dominated by one-sided determinism and economism. Instead, he saw the class consciousness of the proletariat as the central condition for a successful revolution, and he saw this class consciousness grow through the practice of the working class. This practice itself, echoing Marx in the "Theses on Feuerbach", takes the form of simultaneous subject and object.

Finally, in Brecht we see a kind of literary enactment of these ideas in his play *Die Maßnahme*. Through this literary enactment, Brecht reaches something which very much resembles Lenin (and Marx's) dialectical materialist theory of knowledge, where we progress from subjectivity to objectivity, in combination with practice. Furthermore, Brecht's play highlights the everyday importance of nuanced philosophical-political analysis for any cadre or organizing socialist. Finally, we see that this dialectic of subjectivity has major implications for Brecht's dramaturgical theory itself, in which the philosophic-political mirrors the literary.

Again, this study is not meant as comprehensive investigation into the role of subjectivity in Marxism; it is simply a starting point, from which we can begin to see its significance. Much more could be said about the topic. If more time were permitted, I would've also included a

chapter dedicated to discussing subjectivity in the political philosophy of Mao Tse-Tung. The importance of subjectivity is, in many ways, even greater for Mao than it is for Lenin.

Nevertheless, the chapter on Brecht at least partially accomplishes this task by bringing Mao into the conversation.

This paper has also hopefully highlighted the unity between the philosophical and political significance of Marxism. Even at its core philosophical roots Marxism is inexorably tied to its revolutionary political program, and a commitment to one does not entail the exclusion of the other. For academics, after the fall of the Soviet Union it seems all too easy to retreat to the ivory towers. If Marxism was defeated in practice it can live on forever in theory. Yet, a revolution can not take place in theory. And if we recall the words of Engels “If, then, we have been beaten, we have nothing else to do but to begin again from the beginning” (Friedrich Engels *Revolution and Counter Revolution in Germany*).

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