

## Subjectivity, Nature and Non-identity in the Works of Marcuse and the Frankfurt School

### Introduction:

I will offer an examination of the relationship between the Subject and nature in the works of Herbert Marcuse, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. This paper does not offer a complete or closed argument. Its aim is to simply introduce some of the key facets of their work, read them in relation to some of their most important forbearers—specifically Kant, Hegel and Marx—and offer a number of avenues for contemplating the subject in modernity and its contradictory and crisis-ridden relationship to nature. It is my hope that in exploring these trends, beginning in the earliest stages of human history and tracing them up to the present, we will be able to perceive a hidden space, an opening or opportunity for progressive and transformative political projects.

### The Constitutive Subject and Nature – The Lone Voyager:

Thought begins in the subject coming to grips with the world around it. This should not imply that there exists a prior separation between the human subject and the natural world for the subject is a part of nature, and nature comes to be an object which can be identified as such only through the mediation of the subject. Neither ‘subject’ nor ‘nature’ are to be assumed or taken as ontologically stable categories; the subject is not a ‘thing’ but a process. This constitutive process *is* subjectivity, the endless constitution of itself as over and opposed to a nature that is progressively reduced to the mere stuff of domination. As Horkheimer and Adorno point out in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* the subject reproduces its unity through the continuous posing of the multiplicity of nature as its antithesis or other.<sup>1</sup> This relationship is paradoxical as on one hand the subject strives for unity in thought yet in doing so posits a duality between itself and nature which intensifies. ‘Nature’ does not point to a first principle or original state but instead only has practical content in its relation to definite modes of social organization. Pursuing a similar theme in *Reason and Revolution*, his book on Hegel, Marcuse writes:

The process of life, however, consists in continuously drawing these external conditions into the enduring unity of the subject. The living being maintains itself as a self by mastering and annexing the manifold of determinate conditions it finds, and by bringing all that is opposed to itself into harmony with itself. The unity of life, therefore, is not an immediate and ‘natural’ one, but the result of a constant active overcoming of everything that stands against it. It is a unity that prevails only as the result of a process of ‘mediation’ between the living subject as it is and its objective conditions. The mediation is the proper function of the living self as an actual subject, and at the same time it *makes* the living self and actual subject.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p38

<sup>2</sup> Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, p38

For Hegel, only the most universal and abstract concepts could make sense of this divide.

Freedom presupposes the subject's ability to unify subject and object, to develop the full potentialities of both. Thus in this dialectic with nature, to be free the subject is sovereign. For Hegel 'nature' was simply that which is opposed to the 'Idea'; that which the Idea must vanquish by making it identical with itself. It is unpurified immediacy, givenness, particularity—not yet matured into the 'concept'. In Hegel the potentiality of nature can only be reached by worked on by the subject. In the end nature disappears in the absolute identity of subject and object.<sup>3</sup>

The human subject alone is able to transform objective and external conditions which stand opposed to the subject, into elements which are a medium for the subject's own development; the subject "brings the truth into the world, and with it is able to organize the world in conformity with reason".<sup>4</sup> This means that nature only achieves its truth—the realization of its latent potentialities—once it enters history, once it has been worked on by—and brought into a cognitive identity with—the subject. Marcuse writes:

History, in turn, is the long road of mankind to conceptual and practical domination of nature and society, which comes to pass when man has been brought to reason and to a possession of the world as reason.<sup>5</sup>

'Thinking' is an attribute of the independent subject who has mastered all externality. A subject who is self-sufficient is one who is free; "Freedom is self-sufficiency and independence of all 'externals'".<sup>6</sup>

Marcuse writes:

A subject whose self-activity is thought has no estranged and external object; thinking 'grasps' and holds the object as thought, and reason apprehends reason. The veritable being is veritable movement, and the latter is the activity of perfect unification of the subject with its object. The true Being is therefore thought and reason.<sup>7</sup>

To phrase this in different terms, through a long historical process the subject masters nature by organizing it into concepts.

In Western philosophy the highest form of the subject's self-realization has been the idea. In Plato the 'Idea' had been a critical concept, pushing things toward their potentiality—their true form, not yet actualized—by mediating them in relation to their perfect or 'ideal' metaphysical form. In Aristotle as well, the highest type of being is one in which all potentialities are developed. Marcuse reads Aristotle as arguing that a being which has developed to the highest potentiality would have nothing which stands external to it, nothing which is alien to it. It would be a subject who is "itself at everyday moment of its existence"; a subject who has absorbed all contradictions, all particularity or limited determinations into itself. When we get to Hegel we see that this process of the perpetual negation of existing conditions in the service of potentiality is a self-actualizing process which only a subject can carry out. In short, a subject who has conquered every moment that is 'other'—and in idealism this is all that nature is—and made it identical.

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<sup>3</sup> Schmidt. *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, p23

<sup>4</sup> Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, p39

<sup>5</sup> Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, p168

<sup>6</sup> Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, p118

<sup>7</sup> Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, p41

Among the earliest articulations of this in the Western tradition are the Homeric accounts of Odysseus. The “Homeric discourse creates a universality of language”, Horkheimer and Adorno write, “if it does not already presuppose it”.<sup>8</sup> In mapping and naming each location Odysseus, the adventurer, bestows upon the world a “rational overview”.<sup>9</sup> Odysseus is the prototype of the modern individual, the first to go up against the infinitely greater power of nature and in doing so creates himself as a ‘self’ using his faculties of reason and cunning. ‘Cunning’ steps in and is able to counter the physically superior power of nature by exploiting the ambiguity of the gap between specific things and our concepts of them. Odysseus the lone adventurer, in the act of mapping, labelling, naming, makes the world his own.

Related to this Odysseus’s’ conceptual mapping, in Marcuse’s reading of Hegel, language is the medium for the initial binding of a community. Language gives it an objective sphere through which to relate, necessary as history does not begin as a struggle between the individual and nature as the ‘individual’ is a quite recent development. Yet language is also that which breaks the community as from it springs the inevitable development of individual consciousness though its employment as a tool of appropriation. In other words, language allows for the individual to develop its own consciousness by being able to label an object of the world “mine”.

The antagonisms which result from this split are reintegrated through the medium of labour which binds different types of communities, beginning with the family and moving up into civil society and eventually the state. This is because in the production and exchange of commodities re-established the universality of the community which had been shattered by the emergence of the individual. Though the act of exchange is abstract, Hegel calls it a return to concreteness in that concrete needs are fulfilled in the act of consumption. Thus in Marcuse’s reading of Hegel, modernity is the totality of exchange relationships.<sup>10</sup> In reference to Hegel’s discussion of labour, Marcuse writes:

The institutionalisation of private property signifies, to Hegel, that the ‘objects’ have finally been incorporated into the subjective world: the objects are no longer ‘dead things’, but belong, in their totality, to the sphere of the self-realisation of the subject. Man has toiled and organised them, and has thus made them part and parcel of his personality. Nature thus takes its place in the history of man, and history becomes essentially human history.<sup>11</sup>

Labour is also the ground upon which the encounter between subjects occurs. This is by no means peaceful and ends in the establishment of one subject as master over the other. This intersubjective moment is itself necessary for the full emergence of ‘self-consciousness’. In other words, the subject only comes to self-consciousness though the encounter with the other and this relation is one of mastery, played out through the labour process. Thus the subject comes to know itself through its other.<sup>12</sup> All struggles in history are between property owners. Private property thus gets history going, and becomes a constitutive principle of mind. In order to maintain him or herself as an individual, the individual must accumulate property. The constitutive subject of idealism is also the accumulative subject.

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<sup>8</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p35

<sup>9</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p38

<sup>10</sup> Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, p78

<sup>11</sup> Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, p76

<sup>12</sup> Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, pp116-117

To recap, the world is not what it 'really' is until the self-conscious subject acts on it and transforms it, both conceptually and through the labour process. Hand in hand with this, self-consciousness is never really what *it* 'really' is unless it is actively transforming the world.<sup>13</sup> In short, both the subject and the world need each other (and subjects must also come up against other subjects) to make themselves.

Human beings purchase their power at the cost of estrangement from this nature; a logical unity or *logos* of nature on one side, and the realm of human individuals on the other. The more congealed nature becomes as a concept, the farther removed from it we find ourselves. "Nature, stripped of qualities becomes the chaotic stuff of mere classification, and the all-powerful self becomes a mere having, an abstract identity", Horkheimer and Adorno write.<sup>14</sup> In *One-Dimensional Man* Marcuse writes: The science of nature develops under the technological *a priori* which projects nature as potential instrumentality, stuff of control and organization. And the apprehension of nature as (hypothetical) instrumentality precedes the development of a particular technical organization.<sup>15</sup>

And later, "The scientific method which led to the ever-more-effective domination of nature thus came to provide the pure concepts as well as the instrumentalities for the ever-more-effective domination of man by man through the domination of nature".<sup>16</sup> Reason is a "purely formal entity"; it is neutral with respect to ends, its essence is calculation. Consequently, the individual's understating unfolds on the ground of individual self-preservation and mastery over the object; self-interest underpins epistemology and the bourgeois mentality is framed as logical and natural—powerful over the objects of nature, powerless to alter this arrangement of domination. The mind/body dualism of modernity reproduces this as the material world is one of contradiction, repression and irrationality. From Descartes on, the mind alone is the realm of freedom and certainty while everything external to it is transitory and uncertain.

We react to this precariousness by seeking a unity or harmony in thought when such harmony is not available to us in our material existence. Individuals of the bourgeois era bear witness to misery and suffering but accept these as social facts and retreat into their own private existence, the sole remaining location of happiness. 'Philosophy' is ensconced as a specialized field which explores or comments on present conditions but no longer engages with its own transformative potential. In giving up on sensuousness, embodiment and corporality thought itself becomes frozen, merely a set of abstract calculations aimed at assisting the individual in navigating the cold and cruel external or 'natural' world.

The subject encounters the many terrors of nature as something to be feared, then violated and finally, mastered. Marcuse writes that "Nature is *a priori* experienced by an organism bent to domination and therefore experienced as susceptible to mastery and control. And consequently work is *a priori* power and provocation in the struggle with nature; it is overcoming of resistance". Marcuse traces this back to Plato who, long before Kant's wish for a "self-directed" agent, free of the sway of external forces, argued for the predominance of reason over the "lower appetites", as the sole pursuit of appetite satisfaction, leaves us slaves to nature.<sup>17</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, p113

<sup>14</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, pp4-6

<sup>15</sup> Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p153

<sup>16</sup> Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p158

<sup>17</sup> Although it can't be stressed enough that the concept of 'reason' has a radically different character in Plato than it does in Kant.

According to Marcuse, in Freud's theory of instincts a similar process is at work in that the subject, in the name of progress, has to continuously and repetitiously curb its supposed 'natural' inclinations as the unfettered fulfillment of the basic human instincts is incommensurate with the requirements of civilization. This move occurs because the blind bundle of drives, in Freudian terms the id, organizes an ego, whose job—like a toe testing the bath water—is to explore reality, and ensure the continued existence of the id. The ego protects the id from annihilation by re-orienting the instincts toward different objects, objects in which the conflict between the id and the external world can be minimized. In concrete terms, this means that immediate satisfaction becomes delayed satisfaction, pleasure becomes restraint, receptiveness becomes productiveness and nonrepression becomes security. In "On Hedonism" Marcuse writes that pleasure is a moral problem in that it pertains to a "rightly" ordered life. In maturity, the interests of the general and the particular are meant to be coterminous. When they are not, morality is the expression of this gap for society forbids the gratification of needs which threaten to shatter the whole. In so far as it has brought subjective interests into harmony with the interests of civilization morality serves a progressive function.<sup>18</sup>

In Freudian terms, the pleasure principle, the unsublimated gratification of instinctual needs, is transformed into the reality principle, the principle that governs the normal, progressive functioning of society—doubly so in a society organized around growth, abundance, accumulation and comfort. Marcuse writes:

The scope of man's desires and the instrumentalities for their gratification are thus immeasurably increased, and his ability to alter reality consciously in accordance with "what is useful" seems to promise a gradual removal of extraneous barriers to his gratification.<sup>19</sup>

The reality principle, although it may appear opposed to the pleasure principle, emerges out of it as the instinctually constituted individual learns to renounce immediate gratification—which can be destructive in that it is unproductive—in exchange for delayed but perhaps further secured gratification.<sup>20</sup> Marcuse suggests that the reality principle is largely economic. Where resources are scarce and planning is required, immediate gratification can be destructive. 'Civilization' requires work and toil to ensure continued existence of the subject.<sup>21</sup> In order for the subject to survive in reality a degree of instinctual repression is required.

Marcuse adds a historical dimension to Freud. Where Freud resigned himself to this schematic, Marcuse, taking a cue from Marx, argued that there is a 'surplus repression', over and above the basic amount required for the propagation of human society which takes over in class society enshrining one class as master over another. Marcuse writes:

...various modes of domination (of man and nature) result in various historical forms of the reality principle...These differences affect the very content of the reality principle, for every form of the reality principle must be embodied in a system of societal institutions and relations, laws and values which transmit and enforce the required 'modifications' of the instincts.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Herbert Marcuse. "On Hedonism", in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1968, pp177-178

<sup>19</sup> Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, p14

<sup>20</sup> Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, p13

<sup>21</sup> Marcuse. *Eros and Civilization*, p17

<sup>22</sup> Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 37

In Marx, classes arise who have antagonistic material interests and culture is the expression of both the dominant economic interests—the specific mode of domination—and also as the expression of the desire of the underclass to transform the world into a shape that will allow the intellectual and material interests to be better managed. In other words, we are not stuck in a particular configuration of the reality principle as Freud would have us believe. Collective political action could establish a changed reality principle, one without this surplus of repression.

To recap, Human society historically organizes itself with regards to its dialectical relationship with nature. It thus comes to dominate nature by its imposition of a principle of identity which in its most recent incarnation seeks to make all equivalent to all.<sup>23</sup> But this dialectic never comes to a close; thought as “an act of negation, of resistance to that which is forced upon it”<sup>24</sup> continuously transforms nature, yet nature also negates thought in its refusal to ever be entirely inscribed by it. In a sense our concept of ‘nature’ shifts historically as in every era it is what we call that which falls outside of our concepts.

Yet it is this which pushes us to formulate concepts; “The cry of terror called forth by the unknown”, write Horkheimer and Adorno, “becomes its name”<sup>25</sup> —thus in the social relations of production, just as in thought (and I am even hesitant to name these separately as Marx himself would point out that the mind/body separation is merely an ideological product of the bourgeois era) each movement is primed by the dialectical oscillation between nature and history which never ceases, never can become a synthesis or unity.<sup>26</sup> History is ‘natural’ in the sense that it is not the product of an extraneous or perhaps divinely ordained process, yet it is not entirely ‘natural’ as there is no one, solid definition which we can fall back on as ‘natural’.<sup>27</sup> ‘Nature’ as a concept is historicized, yet not wholly in history as it has aspects which are found in all historical epochs.<sup>28</sup> Marx is able to avoid either trap by seeing the truth in both Hegel’s idealism, the historical mediation of thought, and in Feuerbach’s materialism, the important of sensuous experience which falls outside Hegel’s historical juggernaut. It is this dialectic which is central to the thought of both Marx and the Frankfurt School.<sup>29</sup> In the mind’s of the Frankfurt School Marx’s *Capital* is an exposition of the interplay of both natural and historical assumptions and the manner they come to be the dominant bourgeois cultural forms.

## Capital and Commodity; One-dimensional Thought

On that note, the most recent manifestation of the dialectic with nature is the commodity form which masquerades as a totalizing concept, a universal under which virtually any content can be positioned. The market reduces the multiplicity of use-values to quantitative exchange values; “The

<sup>23</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno . *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, pp5-6

<sup>24</sup> Adorno. *Negative Dialectics*. p19;

The rest of the quotation says “this is what thought has inherited from its archetype, the relation between labour and material” (Adorno. *Negative Dialectic*, p19).

<sup>25</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, p10

<sup>26</sup> Jarvis. *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*, p184; Buck-Morss. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics*, p62

<sup>27</sup> As we see, for example, in early liberal thinkers such as Hobbes or Locke who attempt to posit a normative notion of society based on observed natural premises (C.B. MacPherson. *Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>28</sup> Marx. “The German Ideology”, p165

<sup>29</sup> Schmidt. *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, p28

multiplicity of forms is reduced to position and arrangement, history to fact, things to matter”, write Horkheimer and Adorno.<sup>30</sup> In modernity there is an overwhelming drive to bring all objects into a flattened conceptual unity in that all can be compared to, related to, reduced to all. The latest recurrence of these patterns varies in that its repression is nearly total; its mode marks the almost perfect confluence, the near absolute identity of the individual and the whole as in this latest turn the repressive order has been depersonalized and elevated to the level of objective law. Since exchange-value expresses a common ‘thing’ found within all commodities, the specific commodities themselves matter little and we can simply speak of them abstractly; exchange-value can only be understood once one abstracts totally from use-value. In other words, when dealing with commodities in their purely quantitative form, one use-value is as good as another, the particulars of the case make no difference.<sup>31</sup>

This distinction also corresponds to the dual character of labour. Each commodity is the result of a particular or ‘concrete’ form of labour and all commodities also embody human labour in general. This shared embodiment of labour in its general or ‘abstract’ form is the common denominator which allows for commodities to be compared and exchanged. In a sense, concrete labour produces use-values, while abstract labour allows for exchange-value. Marx writes:

On the one hand all labour is, speaking physiologically, an expenditure of human labour power, and in its character of identical abstract human labour, it creates and forms the value of commodities. On the other hand, all labour is the expenditure of human labour power in a special form and with a definite aim, and in this, its character of concrete useful labour, it produces use values.<sup>32</sup>

In order to see what is actually at work in the process of exchange one must abstract from particular use-values and see commodities in their ‘economic’ form, or as Marx puts it, “The value of a commodity represents human labour in the abstract, the expenditure of human labour in general”.<sup>33</sup> As Diane Elson argues, ‘value’ only takes on any sort of status as a concept when commodities are brought together thus value is necessarily social<sup>34</sup> meaning, abstract human labour is the source of exchange-value measured by necessary labour time—not the time required by an individual labourer to produce a product but a social average, the main point being that exchange-value is completely social, portraying no ‘natural’ properties of the commodity.<sup>35</sup> Nature can supply us with use-value, but exchange-value is an entirely social performance constituted by nothing natural. In our analysis of value we must instead look to the interaction between commodities and not assign them as singular, discrete monads which are derived from nature.

Marx tells us that “The circulation of commodities is the starting-point of capital”.<sup>36</sup> He does not give us anything in the way of a methodological framework, nor does he attempt any sort of all-encompassing formula for capitalism. He merely begins by telling us that an abundance of commodities is the most obvious appearance of capitalist production and then begins an almost phenomenological description of this mysterious thing called the commodity. In *Capital* Marx is engaged in an exploration

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<sup>30</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, pp4-6

<sup>31</sup> Marx. *Capital*, p45

<sup>32</sup> Marx. *Capital*, p53

<sup>33</sup> Marx. *Capital*, p51

<sup>34</sup> Diane Elson. “The Value Theory of Labour”. *Value: The Representation of Labour in Capitalism*. Diane Elson, ed. London: CSE Books, 1979, p165

<sup>35</sup> Marx. *Capital*, p48, p52

<sup>36</sup> Karl Marx. *Capital*, p145

of the dominant categories of social and cultural life as they present themselves and an uncovering of the contradictions which arise internally as a result of their own logic. To quote someone whose nuanced, dialectical thought has been under-appreciated, French President Nicholas Sarkozy, referring to the recent recession said after a recent G20 meeting “We must reform capitalism so that the most efficient system ever created doesn’t destroy its own foundations”.<sup>37</sup> For Marx the categories or concepts which arise in a given society (e.g., exchange, wage, surplus) are never able to fully account for or satisfy the phenomena which they purport to represent. Their inadequacy is exposed when the logic of the concept is followed to its conclusion and its internal contradictions are realized in thought and in practice.

The market is just one manifestation of this tendency as even thought gets reduced to a coherent set of interlocking nodes and formulas where every object can be made relatable or comparable to every other; a systematic unity whose denominator—in keeping with Kant’s claim of the individual’s awakening to its own self-directed existence—is the self-preservation of the human subject; the conveyor of meaning, emerging to proclaim power over the object, but in doing so becomes alienated from it as the essence of the object is always the name, it is the ‘stuff’ of domination.

Adorno’s exposition of the affirmative character of thought in *Negative Dialectics* and Marcuse’s discussion of advanced industrial society’s ability to reshape experience, language and thought in *One-Dimensional Man* both describe a society in which thought is structured along the lines of a logic which strives for unity and totality. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Horkheimer and Adorno write:

For the enlightenment, anything which cannot be resolved into numbers, and ultimately into one, is illusion; modern positivism consigns it to poetry. Unity remains the watchword from Parmenides to Russell. All gods and qualities must be destroyed.<sup>38</sup>

What is different is made the same, thus limiting the boundaries of possible experience, and all that falls outside of these bounds, all that violates this law of ‘sameness’, in other words, all concepts which “transcend immediate experience” —the ultimate sin for the positivists in particular—are cast off as ghosts, spectres.

## Crisis and Cunning

None of this is to suggest that use-values are no longer relevant under capitalism. Quite the opposite, as commodities are always in a sense embodied; there must be a ‘something’ which is being consumed.<sup>39</sup> This is especially so for the special commodity of labour in that its use-value, its special ability is the production of more value, beyond which it gets compensated in wages. In other words, the irreducibility of use-value to exchange-value is the constitutive feature of the accumulation of greater values. As much as capital attempts to reduce everything to its pure exchange-value, if this ever were to pass capital would be eliminating the use-value side of the equation, the human labour power which is the very source of the accumulation of new value. The key point here being that as much as capital aims at the quantification of everything it continuously relies on something outside of itself, something not yet quantified (and never to become fully quantified) as its fuel. By pursuing its own internal logic capital

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<sup>37</sup> In reference to the current financial turmoil  
(<http://www.bloomberg.com/apps/news?pid=20601085&sid=atSRSuGEmCUA&refer=europe>)

<sup>38</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, pp4-5

<sup>39</sup> Marx. *Capital*, p44



negates itself. The end result of this is that use-value and exchange-value, although constitutive of each other are never reducible to each other. This non-identity between use-value and exchange-value is a key constitutive feature of our material existence.

The formal equality of the bourgeois era never lives up to its word in that there is a moment of inequality in every moment of supposed equal exchange. For Odysseus this was his cunning trick of exploiting the difference between words and the things they designate in order to fool the gods in the act of sacrifice. The moment of cunning in Marx, the location where equality is both satisfied and violated is that labour never gets its due despite the fact the contract is respected. Horkheimer and Adorno write:

Cunning as a means of exchange, in which everything is done correctly, the contract is fulfilled yet the other party is cheated...The lone voyageur armed with cunning is already *homo oeconomicus*, whom all reasonable people will one day resemble.<sup>40</sup>

Marx's analysis of economic categories demonstrates that the non-identity of use-value and exchange-value is the motor which drives capitalist production. Marx is explicit about the fact that the general law of accumulation, despite amassing ever greater quantities of capital, always requires an increasing pool of labour.<sup>41</sup> Capitalist accumulation was not a one-time event which simply set it on its course, accumulation is continuous; it constantly needs new 'stuff' to feed off of, colonize, render into itself and it accomplishes this through the extraction of surplus value.<sup>42</sup>

It is only when this formal equality is at its most advanced does its failure come into focus. Labour is always cheated because capital can never really reduce everything to exchange-value as it needs to keep something outside of itself which it can cheat. Capitalism can be internally critiqued by the manner in which it doesn't even live up to its own promise; its rhetoric of fair exchange between equally valued goods comes into direct contradiction with its central drive to exploit workers and turn less value into more. In Marx, the remainder of this asymmetry coalesces into a revolutionary subject gradually becoming more cognizant of these very trends on one hand, and the shifting organic composition of capital and the diminishing returns of surplus on the other. I would read crisis as an integral part of the system not a state of exception. As Marcuse writes in *Reason and Revolution*:

For, what does the unity of identity and contradiction mean in the context of social forms and forces? In its ontological term, it means that the state of negativity is not a distortion of a thing's true essence, but its very essence itself. In socio-historic terms, it means that as a rule crisis and collapse are not accidents and external disturbances, but manifest the very nature of things and hence provide the basis on which the essences of the existing social system can be understood.<sup>43</sup>

For this reason the metaphor of incompleteness is misleading as it is not as if capital simply needs to work harder to complete its task. Incompleteness is necessary; 'victory' in a truer sense is capital's own self-perpetuation; expansion is what capitalism *is*. If capital were to entirely eliminate use-value it would be eliminating the very labour which sustains it. Economic crises, in other words, demonstrates the non-identity centred in Marx's economic analysis which serves as a template for the later works of

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<sup>40</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p48.

<sup>41</sup> Marx. *Capital*, p574.

<sup>42</sup> See especially Parts VII and VIII of *Capital I*

<sup>43</sup> Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, p190

Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse. 'Use-value' and 'exchange-value' are two concepts which depend on each other, move in and out of each other and their relationship is part of the dynamo of capital.

### Non-Identity: The Sensuous, the Subterranean and the 'End of Philosophy':

This schematic in which use is reduced to or made identical with exchange, the dominion of the concept over nature, cannot simply be unthought. Adorno explicitly tells us "To think is to identity".<sup>44</sup> In other words, the particular objects of the world, of nature, must be conceptually organized. The mistake, according to Adorno, lies in taking this too far and believing that our concepts can fully explain the world in a manner which leaves nothing outside of the concept. Of course as we saw above, this is not the case. Whether it be the contradictions in Marx's economic analysis or the continuous need for repression employed against nature, there are always gaps and spaces between objects and our concepts of them. This space is actually the dynamo of conceptual thought which pushes it forward. The release of the nonconceptual occurs as a function of the logic of the concept itself; the nonconceptual unfolds immanently from the conceptual.

What the Frankfurt School are suggesting is a new philosophic approach or disposition which emphasizes fragmentation over totality, particularity and experience over lifeless categories. Adorno is explicit about this; early in *Negative Dialectics* he tells us that:

The name dialectics says no more, to begin with, than that objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder, that they come to contradict the traditional norm of adequacy... It indicates the untruth of identity, the fact that the concept does not exhaust the thing conceived.<sup>45</sup>

But a new philosophic disposition is fruitless if not attached to social practice. When Adorno writes that the concept will unleash the nonconceptual it would be an error to read him as saying that it is just a matter of biding our time, that this logic will unfold and we are nothing but spectators, outside of the flow of history which will gradually re-constitute itself into a higher rationality. A second fallacy is in doing the opposite of the first and placing the burden of social change on a subject whose duty it is to simply look at things in a new way. Both of these fallacies are themselves renewed versions of identity thinking, the first places all under a universal historical unfolding, the second passively accepts a radical separation of subject and object, the mind-body dualism characteristic of post-Cartesian idealist thought. In either case the principle of identity is upheld in that progress is separated from social practice.

Were philosophy to step beyond mere thought and into social practice it would cease to be philosophy proper. Marcuse writes:

As long as philosophy does not adopt the idea of a real transformation, the critique of reason stops at the status quo and becomes a critique of pure thought. The uncertainty and unfreedom of the external world is countered by the certainty and freedom of thought as the individual's only remaining power base.<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p5

<sup>45</sup> Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p5

<sup>46</sup> Marcuse, "Concept of Essence", *Negations*, p50

Critical thought instead retains what is really critical by being more than mere thought but sensuous, lived, social practice whose aim is not just cognitive and ontological but transformative and ethical.<sup>47</sup> Historical materialism is therefore not a theory of history or a model of understanding which induces certain ethical implications, but is itself an ethical commitment to practice and sociability; to always return to and be reconstituted by our encounter with the object; to approach our responsibility to that which is radically other with openness and sensuousness.

Yet in the history of philosophy sensuousness has been constantly debased. In “On Hedonism” Marcuse argues that pleasure and progress have been consistently posed as mutually exclusive—to paraphrase Hegel, the periods of happiness in history have been its empty pages. As the above brief detour into Freud showed, under present conditions progress must ignore pleasure for its own sake as pleasure is constituted as the opposite of mediation and reflection; its attainment is available to us solely through objects, products and conditions which are available today, and always through the marketplace.

Hedonism arose in slave societies when there was a recognized division between slaves and free people. It was plainly obvious that there was a distinction between labour and happiness as each concept was embodied by a different social class. However, the modern middle class is simultaneously slave and patrician, producer and consumer, obscuring the boundary between toil and happiness. In modern democratic societies equal civil and political rights means that we are all functional equivalents, we all engage in exchange, all trade our labour power for goods and services whose price is dictated by the objectivity of the market. And yet, real substantive equality continues to elude us. As ‘happiness’ became more attainable for larger and larger numbers, it also became far more limited in its outlook and has resigned itself to supporting the established order; we seek happiness but do not question its content.<sup>48</sup> Yet Marcuse is hopeful in suggesting that this growth of happiness has happened in conjunction with shifts in labour processes, freeing more and more people from toil could come to a boiling point where the continued demand for happiness can no longer be met by the market, forging a demand for something beyond its constraints.

As Marcuse tells us in *Eros and Civilization* the trauma of the replacement of the pleasure principle by the reality principle occurs again and again, suggesting that perhaps reality’s victory over the pleasure principle is never complete; what is heteronomous about pleasure can never be made fully identical to the reality principle. The pleasure principle in fact survives as the “tabooed and subterranean history of civilization”—fantasy, dreams, memory.<sup>49</sup> In each successive stage of repression, its promise is unfulfilled and true progress is forever deferred. The “subterranean” history is the remainder of the incomplete identification of the individual and the whole. The unconsciousness is the drive for “integral gratification”; it is the immediate identity of necessity and freedom. Marcuse writes that “its truth...continues to haunt the mind”; it preserves the memory of past stages when gratification was more readily or immediately available, and it generates a wish for a time when this paradise will be resurrected.<sup>50</sup> “The memory of gratification”, as Marcuse describes it, “is at the origin of all thinking, and the impulse to recapture past gratification is the hidden driving power behind the process of thought”.<sup>51</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, p28

<sup>48</sup> Marcuse, “On Hedonism”, *Negations*, pp169-172

<sup>49</sup> Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, p15

<sup>50</sup> Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, p18

<sup>51</sup> Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, p31

The past is never entirely forgotten; memory explodes the rationality of the reality principle. “The ‘*recherche du temps perdu*’” writes Marcuse, “becomes the vehicle of future liberation”.<sup>52</sup>

This reformulated notion of ‘hedonism’ championed by Marcuse is instead the ultimate critique of bourgeois society as it directly confronts the constitutive, accumulative subject of modernity, and it is able to do so only when modernity has pushed its identarian principle to its limit. Hedonism is able to rear its head because reason, stretched to its maximum, exposes its weakness. Happiness, for the first time could participate politically and imagine a form of labour which is non-alienated, but more than just non-alienated.

When Marx turned Hegel on his head is what not that he replaced an idealist ontology with a materialist one but that he was the first to suggest that the dialectic might never be fully resolved. Instead of Hegel’s principle of absolute identity Marx shows that it is actually non-identity which perpetuates us historically. The flaw in Hegel’s understanding of nature was to hypothesize the eventual unity of the subject and nature from the very beginning. In stripping nature of its dynamos Hegel at the outset puts in motion a dialect that will close when the mediating subject is absolute. In other words, Hegel’s system presupposes a universal and could therefore only end in one. This is, in a sense, the central project of modernity in that the self-preservation of the human subject over and above nature is the constituent or performative principle of science. Just as historical materialism ascribes to history no general principle by which it is governed, nor a teleological imperative with regards to the direction of its unfolding, the materialist approach to history as found in Marx also does not conceive of ‘nature’ as a new metaphysical or ontological first principle.<sup>53</sup>

In the “Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach”<sup>54</sup> Marx is telling us much the same thing, that thought can never reside purely in itself, it always necessitates a practical and social aspect. Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse demonstrate how thought wholly in-itself comes apart when its concepts are followed to their logical conclusion just as Marx highlights the crises and contradictions which result from economic concepts are matured to their fullest extent. And it is out of their failure and these gaps that we get the faintest glimmer, the “mirror-image of its opposite” of utopia.<sup>55</sup>

It should also be noted that I speak in terms of potential as I do not read any of these theorists as historical determinists. Contrary to Aristotelian notions of essence or potential the Frankfurt School reads these negatively. Things strive for what they are by constantly and consistently rejecting their current state; never resting in immediacy, nor moving toward a pre-conceived or fixed end-point. ‘Essence’, for Marcuse in particular, is not to be grasped as a metaphysical certainty or finality but must be understood as a process. Marcuse is giving back to ‘essence’ its critical function by allowing it to remain open. This re-orientation is one which seeks to grasp objects as they are freed of the shackles of coercive thought—in other words a form of thought which is always conscious of its own inadequacy. Such a philosophy would rescue those things which traditional philosophy has considered to be secondary, transitory or fragmentary.

“We are not to philosophize about concrete things;” writes Adorno, “we are to philosophize, rather, out of these things”.<sup>56</sup> Truth, for Adorno, is in grasping the particularity and fragmentedness of

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<sup>52</sup> Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, p19

<sup>53</sup> Schmidt. *The Concept of Nature in Marx*, p29

<sup>54</sup> “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it (Karl Marx. “Theses on Feuerbach”).

<sup>55</sup> Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, p247

<sup>56</sup> Adorno. *Negative Dialectics*. p33

social life; it is practical, sensuous, transformative and transitory, continually negating that which comes before it. In Marx, the job is not to reorient thought toward recapturing a privileged use-value and thus reject exchange as “mere appearance”; it is instead to recognize the violence done by the principle of identity to its other, yet also recognize that the non-identical as irreducible—both in the sense that under capitalism use-value is never entirely overcome, and also in the sense that to bear witness to suffering in history means to recognize it can never be redeemed even in a hypothetical reconciled future; writes Adorno, “The need to lend a voice to suffering is the precondition of all truth”.<sup>57</sup>

## Conclusion:

Marcuse wrote, “Today, we have the capacity to turn the world into hell, and we are well on the way to doing so. We also have the capacity to turn it into the opposite of hell”<sup>58</sup>, and it is in this spirit of indeterminacy which I would like to close. At the end of my previous section my thoughts on crisis may have come across as overly mechanical, deterministic. After all, if crisis is taken as an inevitable result of present conditions, is one not simply falling back into a teleological or identarian notion of history? In other words, if ‘crisis’ is simply fulfilling some sort of negational role with respect to the current order—in a sense balancing an equation—how would that be any different than Hegel’s absolute in that the very notion through which we glean the non-identical takes on an affirmative character? We must read crisis, not as the culmination of a teleological historical unfolding, but as the persistent sense of negation which pervades identity and opens a space for alternatives. We must understand ‘crisis’ and ‘non-identity’ negatively, not as definitive ontological states but as a negative ontology of the present and contradictory state of things. These brief examples articulate the central paradox of the principle of identity in that the subject’s drive to make all identical with itself is premised on continuously upholding a nature which is non-identical and outside of the self.

Just as we saw in Marx, where nature was not an ontological category but a practical one, where the essence of human labour was essentially negative in that it constantly and consistently negates all positive determinations. Nature can never be made wholly identical, thus identity is already and always infused with non-identity. Social life which continuously revolutionizes and reshapes nature—and reshapes itself in the process since it is not a being separate from nature—is the mediating factor between these two poles. As Adorno writes in “The Idea of Natural-History”, ‘history’ and ‘nature’ are two poles which interact with and transform each other, yet neither can be wholly reduced to the other.<sup>59</sup>

Thus reconciliation comes across as counter-intuitive, ironically requiring us to let go of this will to dominate in order to truly free us as subjects from this totalizing logic. This particularity, this irreducibility which we find in nature tells us that Hegel was right insofar as he conceived of nature as the Idea in its ‘other-being’; that which is not yet wholly conceptualized, that which “exceeds the concept”, but he erred in postulating its eventual disappearance in the victory of the Absolute over all particularity. Instead of this principle of absolute identity which one finds in Hegel, Marx shows that it is actually non-identity which perpetuates us historically. And instead of branching out to all of Marx’s works which deal with the concepts of nature and history—although they definitely help illuminate the

<sup>57</sup> Adorno. *Negative Dialectics*. p17

<sup>58</sup> Marcuse, “The End of Utopia”, p62

<sup>59</sup> Theodor Adorno, “The Idea of Natural-History”. *Things Beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno*. Robert Hullot-Kentnor. New York: Columbia University Press,

discussion—we can find the template for non-identity thinking right in *Capital*, in the necessary irreducibility of use and exchange-value for Marx’s discussion of commodity fetishism and the various contradictions it entails is simultaneously an account of identification and misidentification; “Non-identical and unequal relations between people are thus misrecognized as though they were identical and equal relations between things”.<sup>60</sup> Marx only starts us down the road, it is Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse which more fully elaborate a reconstituted, non-identical dialectic with nature.

Although Marx shows how economic concepts break down and the Frankfurt School elaborates on the related break down of traditional metaphysics, rather than reading them as an end to economics or end to philosophy I would read them as a new beginning of history rather than its end. For the first time we could freely experiment in thought and in practice in ways not bound to the general or universal but open to multiplicity and diversity and allowing us to experience a version of human essence which could be endlessly transformed and not tied to fixed notions of ‘human nature’. We could witness the emergence of political relationships not based on domination a relationship with nature not founded on mastery. This would also be an experience of pleasure which is more than simply subjective gratification by way of objects produced within antagonistic society. In short, a notion of politics which is not tied to one logic or principle of identity and a version of progress which understands that the “empty pages in history” are not ones where nothing is written, but where anything can be written.

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<sup>60</sup> Jarvis. *Adorno: A Critical Introduction*, p52

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