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Theses on Cultural Marxism

JOHN BRENKMAN

1.

The theory and interpretation of culture is today embroiled in the institutional crisis afflicting the humanities. No single political or intellectual response is adequate, for the causes of this situation are multiple and develop unevenly. These causes include the national and international economy, the ideological and political tendencies now predominant in American society, and the transformations of the cultural sphere itself which have completely altered during the past century the context and significance of the intellectual undertaking called the humanities.

Every intellectual project within the contemporary university bends to pressures coming from the society as a whole. These pressures tend to manifest themselves as external, unreflected necessity. The more these pressures intensify the more illusory academic freedom becomes, for the real freedom of thought is felt only when thought erupts against unreflected necessity, whether the imperatives of the economic and moral order or the routines of everyday life within the educational and public institutions themselves. The retreat of intellectuals from political and social conflict exacerbates the power that the prevailing conditions of politics and society hold over them.

Of all the social pressures affecting intellectual work, the economic crisis of contemporary capitalism most completely assumes the guise of pure necessity. The managers of the national and world economy have lost their ability to control the surplus wealth of society; expressing itself as the "fiscal crisis of the state," this unmastered economic trend has ripped through educational institutions, destroying critical and even traditional intellectual work. Such destructiveness continues to appear eminently rational, a simple calculation of budgetary constraints.

The vicissitudes of the economy will not, on the other hand, alone explain the crisis in education. An essential feature of the 1970s was a massive *cultural counterrevolution* which has had extraordinary consequences within academic institutions and among youth. There has followed in the 1980s an attempted *ideological restoration* as masses of people, particularly young people, have been forced to adapt to reality by lowering their expectations rather than recognizing that the prevailing order cannot meet their legitimate needs. During these same years there has been a recoil within universities themselves against everything that recalls the 60s — which just happens to include for our generation of intellectuals in the humanities and the qualitative social sciences virtually every important intellectual movement of the past thirty years. Administrators and establishment faculty have been eager to wipe out the memory and reminders of student revolt, of the call for critical consciousness

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through education, of the demand that the learning process organize society's ability to adapt to the real needs and interests of people, rather than organizing people's ability to adapt their needs and wishes to social reality.

The humanities have been particularly vulnerable to these economic and ideological trends, but they have also proved largely defenseless against the attack — for the reason that the most compelling problems *within* the humanities have not been reflectively comprehended and resolved: namely, the crisis in identifying the object of cultural interpretation and the accompanying loss of the social value and vision of the humanities.

2.

The most general name for the work that goes on in the humanities — or *sciences humaines* or *Geisteswissenschaften* — is hermeneutics, in the sense that interpretation is the act required by the documents of civilization insofar as they are neither opaque nor transparent to the understanding. Traditional hermeneutics assumed that culture or the cultural tradition comprises a universe of discourse, a universe of meaning; an interpretive understanding of the tradition thus constituted an appropriation of a meaningful totality, indeed, the totality of meaning. The humanities were the institutional framework within which the cultural tradition was understood and appropriated, and were, to that extent, the very site of bourgeois society's self-understanding. If society's coherence ultimately depended upon its consciousness of the universe of meaning, then the humanities were the bearer of that consciousness, and their legitimacy lay in their power to authoritatively reveal the supposed cement of the social order.

Such a self-conception on the part of the traditional humanities has become demonstrably anachronistic, even when adequately though belatedly expressed, as in the theoretical work of Hans-Georg Gadamer. The humanities are no longer central to the cultural cohesion of capitalist society; they have been displaced by mass culture, whose aesthetic and communicative norms cannot be comprehended in categories derived from bourgeois artistic traditions. Moreover, the humanities are no longer central to the production of dominant ideologies and moral norms; they have been displaced by behavioral and managerial sciences and by an achievement ethic that has dispensed with the bourgeois ideal of personality formation (*Bildung*). The interpretive procedures that accompanied the traditional theory of culture still dominate the humanities in the academic world, but these procedures are socially moribund.

The most powerful heirs of traditional hermeneutics — I am thinking of Heidegger, Ricoeur, and Derrida — have registered the displacements of cultural self-understanding, and they have attempted to adjust traditional theory to the transformations of culture in the modern world. They have abandoned the humanism that underlay bourgeois hermeneutics; the interpretive situation was experienced in a particular way: the texts of the tradition, especially literary texts, speak to us, presenting themselves as meaningful, and yet are not immediately comprehensible. Interpretation discloses or recovers meaning by overcoming the historical distance between work and interpreter. In this experience, the work acquired the appearance of universality, a validity and meaning that seemed to derive from the work's power to detach itself from the empirical circumstances in which it arose. By the same token, the interpreters of the tradition experienced their own access to this meaning as a movement beyond their own empirical (social-historical, individual) existence.

So long as the general project of the humanities was able to presume that the meanings it constructed from the tradition formed a universe of discourse, bourgeois humanism held sway. The voice that speaks through the cultural tradition from beyond any empirical-historical situation was heard as the voice of Man, a human essence or spirit that realizes itself apart from historical forms of society and above all merely empirical individualities. For Heidegger and Ricoeur, this voice has ceased to be that of Man. For Derrida, it ceases to be a single voice at all. In each case, the postulate of humanism disappears.

3.

Marx's critique of bourgeois humanism had an altogether different starting-point. Marx comprehended humanity materialistically, but with a materialism that he sharply distinguished from its antecedents: "The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism . . . is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object* or of *contemplation*, but not as *human sensuous activity, practice*, not subjectively." Subjectivity is not spirit as opposed to matter, nor is it identical with consciousness, for it is grounded in human sensuous activity or praxis. Humanity produces and reproduces itself through the totality of activities by which it transforms nature into human reality.

There are thus three moments in praxis. The transformation of nature includes: (1) the production of material goods for the satisfaction of human needs; (2) the production and reproduction of social relations; and (3) the production of symbolic interactions and expressive forms. Culture is this third moment or aspect of praxis. How to construe the relative autonomy of culture with respect to the other two moments of praxis — this is the core of critical theory's dispute with traditional theory. Traditional theory considers culture to be a realm apart from society, a spiritual realm standing above material necessity, a transcendent sphere of meanings and values unaffected by the divisions and conflicts of society. For critical theory, humanity does not achieve self-realization in a separated realm of culture, spiritually and without overcoming the social division of labor. A free and universal humanity can only emerge when self-activity extends to all members of society in the whole of their endeavors and interactions. Marx and Engels: "A complete and no longer restricted self-activity . . . consists in the appropriation of a totality of productive forces and is the thus postulated development of a totality of capacities. Modern universal intercourse can be controlled by individuals, therefore, only when controlled by all."

Cultural Marxism is the theoretical and interpretive project that approaches culture in its dialectic relation to the social totality. This totality, however, is not an achieved unity, but rather an unfulfilled promise or possibility latent within human history. Totality remains obstructed so long as the cultural realm of freedom, as well as the material realm of necessity, is founded upon unfreedom in the relations among human beings.

Unfreedom is a historical not a metaphysical condition of human existence. That all human satisfactions require the mediation of the labor and desires of others — this belongs to the essence of social life, and contains the promise of real freedom not a barrier to it. That individuals or classes, however, are made to serve as wealth, as the source of satisfaction, for others without controlling the products of their own labor and without enjoying the recognition of their own desires — this is the inessential, massively real condition of all class societies. Domination is the result of the social division of labor — among classes, among races and peoples, between men and women.

Domination thus always has both an economic and an ethical aspect, for it exists wherever the capacity of human beings to serve as wealth for one another is subject to coercion and nonreciprocity. When interhuman relations are not at the same time grasped as social relations of production, the problematic of domination becomes *merely ethical*. When the social relations are not at the same time grasped as interhuman relations, the problematic of domination becomes *merely economic*. The one-sidedness of either view bankrupts the philosophy and politics it generates. The first tendency advances alibis for social injustice, and characteristically obstructs real movements of resistance, protest, and revolt which Marxism must relentlessly seek to clarify. The second tendency, which banishes the questions of morality and justice from the critique of society, has tragically been a heritage within Marxism itself, engendering a Marxist political economy which falls behind Marx's *critique* of political economy, and has furnished justifications for the abolition of human liberties in "really existing socialism," from the most basic freedoms of speech and association to the historically most advanced form of freedom: the self-organization of the working class.

Hence the philosophical and political stakes in cultural Marxism's insistence on the dialectical connection of the social relations and the symbolic. Culture is not independent of material production for the reason that material production itself — the satisfaction of human needs through the interchange with nature — is at the same time a set of interhuman relations. "The satisfaction of human desire is only possible when mediated by the labor and desire of another" (Lacan). All symbolic practices arise from the experience of just these mediations. Culture is the lived symbolization of interhuman relations and of the relation to nature. These symbolizations veil and unveil the forms of domination that organize the uses one human being or class makes of another for the satisfaction of its own needs. Cultural Marxism thus extends the project that critical theory undertook against traditional theory; interpretation responds to the demands for self-understanding, and the risks of self-misunderstanding, imposed by symbolic practices and expressive forms as they veil and unveil domination.

4.

For the past half century critical Marxism has had to evolve from the realization that the proletariat and the intellectuals attached to its historic role had lost the capacity for self-organization which could unite the social, moral, and aesthetic aspects of collective experience into a revolutionary project. The recognition that ours is an age in which there is no single, identifiable subject of history also renews the demand that theory revive its moral and political responsibility to join self-reflection and partisanship. Theory develops the intellectual side of those movements in which the experience of domination and exploitation produces the demand for justice and the hope for social transformation. The multiple, fragmented character of these movements and the often latent character of this demand and hope in contemporary history compel theory to restore not abandon the task that Marx gave to "critical philosophy": *the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age*.

It is in this context that cultural Marxism undertakes its theoretical project: to revamp the social, psychoanalytic, and aesthetic elements of theory. These three theoretical fields do not come ready-made in the form of partial inquiries that need only to be combined. Nor does cultural Marxism embrace the intellectual ideal of some unified set of concepts that would

subsume these distinct inquiries and their objects. The elements of theory must be developed in their relation and in their difference, for the social, moral, and aesthetic elements of collective experience do not fall into a unity that could in turn be the object of a science in the sense of a system of self-consistent propositions.

Beneath the epistemological problem lies the historical-ontological problem — namely, that the social conditions of prehistory do not permit human beings to live the unity of experience and reflection. Nowhere does cognition, whether scientific or interpretive, yield the unity of the social, the moral, and the aesthetic. The difficult insight of Horkheimer remains true: “In a society which is untransparent and without self-awareness the ego, whether active simply as thinker or active in other ways as well, is unsure of itself too. In reflection on [humanity], subject and object are sundered; their identity lies in the future, not in the present.” When theory strives for absolute intellectual synthesis, it falsifies its own task; it distances itself from the real, relative synthesis of the social, moral, and aesthetic elements of experience which flashes up in every genuine political struggle.

Recent debates in social and cultural theory have turned to the question of a separation of realms in the modern world. The continued vitality of critical theory will depend on how this diagnosis is made. Jürgen Habermas has construed the question in categories derived from Max Weber. Enlightenment, according to this view, reconstituted science, morality, and aesthetics as distinct realms each with its own inner norms and conditions of validity; by means of this process, Enlightenment succeeded in dissolving myth and religion, which had interwoven the scientific-technical, moral, and artistic practices of premodern societies. According to Habermas’s thesis, these achievements of Enlightenment — which originally set for itself the ideal of organizing everyday life rationally — were in fact accompanied by the tendency to so specialize and rationalize the intellectual disciplines that science, ethics and jurisprudence, and aesthetics and criticism increasingly cut themselves off from the everyday life-world. As a consequence, the life-world — within which people must after all live the social, moral, and aesthetic moments of their experience all at once — has been gradually depleted of the very cognitive or self-reflective capacities that it requires.

Habermas’s compelling diagnosis can be sharpened by stressing the dialectic — the conflict, the contradiction — that becomes apparent as soon as rationalization is grasped in relation to its *raw material* and its *ground*. Specialized-rationalized thought never wholly masters or absorbs the raw material it subjugates. Labor power, nature, the body, the unconscious, speech — these raw materials maintain their nonidentity, difference, heterogeneity with respect to even the most thoroughly rationalized forms of science, morality, and aesthetics, and therefore remain points of origination for political struggles in the modern world. Secondly, Habermas’s theme of the “separation” of specialized knowledges from everyday life is counterbalanced by the recognition that rationalization at the same time *penetrates* everyday life. Weber’s concept of rationalization addresses but one side of the process through which capitalism reorganizes practical and cognitive experiences. Henri Lefebvre has for this reason supplanted the Weberian term with the concept of concrete abstraction, restoring to this problematic a fundamental discovery of Marxism. The material act of exchange in capitalist society achieves its rational appearance by making invisible the violence on which it is founded; the act of exchange forcibly equalizes the unequal, beginning with the wage, and subjugates contents (uses) to a form (exchange). This concrete abstraction, in order to function at all, must have a ground on which it imprints itself, and this ground is everyday life. In order for the capitalist social relations to be reproduced every

day, they must be produced in the everyday. Concrete abstraction (“rationalization”) organizes everyday experience as routine — the routines of work and leisure, factory and office, home and neighborhood, consumption and spectacle.

Just as the everyday is the ground of the reproduction of the social relations, so too it is the site of social conflict. Every movement of protest and revolt erupts against the everyday, against the routines of production and consumption. It reclaims uses — capacities, needs and desires, satisfactions — against exchange. Only within movements of protest and revolt is the interrelation of the social, the moral, and the aesthetic transformed, because integrated into people’s experience of self-organization and self-activity. The revolutionary project as a whole intends the innovation of new sciences, new moralities, new aesthetics. It is the task of cultural Marxism to construct and preserve the heritage of revolt by making this revolutionary horizon visible within the actual struggles and wishes of the age. Every movement of opposition within the modern world — among workers, among oppressed peoples and races, among women, among youth, among gays, among popular masses in struggle over rights and freedoms, the environment, living conditions, militarism — produces a real, relative synthesis of the social, the moral, and the aesthetic, and reconstructs their interrelation.

5.

Revolt and opposition create new connections among these usually separated spheres by illuminating them as sites of conflict between the real and the possible. The objective and subjective structures of the present contain both the sedimented results of past social struggles and the latency or potentiality of the struggles whose outcome will determine the future. Specialized-rationalized thought aims at decomposing the collective and individual experience of just this multileveled temporality. This mission has in fact animated bourgeois thought since the Enlightenment. Let us suggest an alternative to the Weberian account of science, morality, and aesthetics.

The natural and social sciences, insofar as capitalism regulates their researches and controls their results, are founded upon the *disavowal of the future*. These sciences respond to the imperative to reproduce the social relations of capitalism. They must establish knowledges of nature and of existing society while at the same time providing the instruments and means of regulating the conflicts that arise from nature and society. Those tendencies in society and in matter which hold the possibility of transforming the social relations must be reduced, intellectually and practically, to undesirable though predictable effects of the rationalized system itself. When sciences are rationalized in this way, they obliterate from their cognitions the future as rupture with the present; the temporality coiled up in science’s objects is reduced to an effect of the system itself, an element to be brought back into equilibrium with the present.

Bourgeois morality, from its original and most powerful articulation in the ethics of Kant, is founded upon the *disavowal of the past*. It casts an amnesia over the catastrophes and violences, the injuries and wounds, that belong to the historical formation of the bourgeois class: through its subjugation of whole populations, women, New World slaves, and finally the worker; and to the historical formation of the bourgeois individual: through the subjugation of the body. Moral life has contents: the complex relations that derive from the uses that human beings make of one another in the satisfaction of their own needs, and the history of violence and injury embedded in those relations. Bourgeois morality suppresses these *contents* by imprinting them with a *form*; the moral maxim, in applying equally

to all individuals without regard for their differences and inequalities, equalizes individuals without disturbing their socially established relations. The utopian reference to universal individuality is glimpsed and then extinguished in the bourgeois appeal to a universal morality. The transindividual subject appears only in the abstract form of (imaginary) universality and not in the sensuous form of (potential) collectivity.

Traditional hermeneutics and bourgeois aesthetics are founded upon the *disavowal of the present*. The experience and cognition of art are removed from the politically relevant contexts of present social struggles. Gadamer goes so far as to exclude the interpretation of contemporary art altogether. This extreme position within traditional hermeneutics reveals more than it contradicts the more moderate variants. Interpretation is called upon to obscure the social conflicts manifested in cultural difference, that is, in the varying ways that antagonistic collectivities establish solidarity and symbolize their relation to nature and to the social relations. Difference and conflict are subordinated to bourgeois universality. In traditional hermeneutics, value and meaning are granted only to those significations which do not disturb the interpreters' relation to their own society, in particular the institutions which designate their own roles as purveyors and guardians of culture. Aesthetic practices, those of the past as well as the present, are abstracted from their historical inherence in forms of social domination. From this abstraction there results the universe of values and meanings which appears to transcend social reality without being in conflict with it. The cultural tradition thus acquires its illusory transcendence, illusory universality, and illusory continuity.

The specialized disavowal of the future in science, of the past in ethics, of the present in interpretation and aesthetics, unifies these disciplines by imparting to knowledge the imperative of reproducing the social relations of capitalism. Unified by their separation, these knowledges realize the strategic aim of decomposing the complex temporality of the real and the possible, and continually dissolving the negativity and the potentiality of contemporary history. These knowledges organize the culture of capitalist society. "Culture is the general sphere of the knowledge and the representations of lived experience in the historical society divided into classes; which is to say that culture is the power of generalization existing *apart*, as a division of intellectual labor and as the intellectual labor of division" (Debord). For Marxism, culture cannot, therefore, itself be reduced to a specialized object of knowledge. Culture is the very terrain of the political struggle over the reproduction or the transformation of the social relations of capitalism.

6.

Marx approached the question of culture in his attempts to connect the theme of necessity and freedom to the concept of surplus wealth and surplus labor. The material conditions for culture lie in a society's capacity to create free time for the development of those intellectual and aesthetic activities which are in excess of what is required to satisfy immediate, life-sustaining needs. In class societies, those who produce this surplus do not control the activities they themselves make possible: "The course of social development is by no means that because one individual has satisfied his need he then proceeds to create a superfluity for himself; but rather because one individual or class of individuals is forced to work more than is required for the satisfaction of its needs — because surplus labor is on one side, therefore not-labor and surplus wealth are posited on the other." The actual development of wealth has existed and continues to exist in these opposites [Gegensätze], that is, in the opposition

of surplus labor and surplus wealth, an opposition which grounds the relation of necessity and freedom in a social relation of unfreedom or domination. Locked up within this real development of wealth in the history of class societies, Marx saw another possibility: "In potentiality, its development is the possibility of the suspension of these opposites."

How do the cultural practices of prehistory — that is, of class societies, including our own — manifest and develop this contradiction between the actuality and the potentiality of the relation of surplus wealth and surplus labor? This question had no particular urgency for Marx since he saw the tendencies toward historical rupture manifesting themselves in the capitalist economy itself and in the formation of the urban working class as an historical actor. Cultural transformation would come in the wake of proletarian revolution. But ours is the era in which revolution in capitalist society — though objectively possible — has not occurred. The consciousness of the failure of revolution easily reverts to the nonconsciousness of the possibility and necessity of revolution. And, indeed, so long as the undecidability of the historical process dominates our social life, critical intellectuals will vacillate between these two opposing stances.

Our theoretical responsibility to the heritage of Marx's thought is to recover and reconstruct its most original insights in relation to the contemporary world. There is in Marx the two-sided movement of critical and utopian thinking. Critical thought condemns the actual development of wealth in class society, while utopian thought discloses the concrete potentialities of the development of wealth. This dialectic of critique and hope has come to center on the question of culture itself. The struggle for the cultural heritage of the classless society is at the same time a struggle over the meaning and practice of culture in the class society.

The guidance to be recovered from Marx is indispensable. Marx never wavered from the assertion that the "true realm of freedom" would only come when the producers of society's wealth, through self-determined forms of association, controlled the surplus wealth. And, secondly, Marx's writings frequently express the expectation that the project of communism would foster new arts and new sciences, new forms of interaction and new forms of knowledge. Under the historical conditions in which the meaning of "possibility and necessity" of revolution has been completely altered, the struggle over culture is no longer secondary to the struggle over society.

The most difficult lesson that Marxism has had to learn in the 20th century is that social transformation and liberation can no longer follow the quantitative increase of the productive forces. Marx derived the dialectic of quantity and quality from the process of industrialization which made the economic development of capitalism in the 19th century appear to be the driving force for the overthrow of the very social relations of capitalism. But the moment has been missed in which the quantitative growth of the economy and the progressive destitution of the worker could dialectically turn into a qualitative transformation of society as a whole. The law of historical inevitability is no longer compatible with the critical power of Marxism. Utopian thought, not scientific dictum, has become the vital support of the critical theory of society. Another sense of historical necessity alone has relevance for contemporary Marxism, a sense which is persistent though latent in Marx's writings, as in the statement from *The German Ideology*: "Modern universal intercourse can be controlled by individuals, therefore, only when controlled by all." Here Marx and Engels evoke historical necessity in the sense of a condition or requirement: *if* humanity is to achieve the autonomy and freedom, the self-activity, that bourgeois society abstractly attributes to individuals, there *must be* a revolutionary reorganization of society which frees all individuals to control

the whole of their interrelations and interactions. Indeed, this expresses the utopian moment in communist consciousness, the recognition that every human being will become an existence *for itself* only when he or she can freely develop as an existence *for others*.

Culture — the continuum of knowledges and representations, interactions and symbolizations — contains this consciousness as its obstructed horizon and its historically denied possibility. The conflict of interpretations, that is, the struggle over the self-understanding of cultural practices, is therefore a political struggle to redeem what is possible from what is real, our reality being but the systematic obstruction of the possible.

7.

If the historical lessons of the past century call for a sharpened sense of the utopian element of Marxism, they also should lead us to reanchor Marx's critique of political economy in its most radical moment: namely, the dialectic of reification and self-activity.

The uniqueness or originality of capitalism, in contrast to previous forms of class society, lies in its tendency to distill the economic truth of domination and exploitation. Capitalism extracts from the surplus wealth of society its purely economic form: capital. In order for surplus wealth to be reconstituted as capital (surplus value), labor has to be reconstituted as a commodity (exchange value) in the form of a time-quantity bought and sold in the marketplace for a designated value that is less than the value of the commodity it produces.

This twofold process institutes the economy as an autonomous, self-moving power within society. The more completely that the autonomous economy rules society, the more culture or the symbolic acquires the appearance of a separate realm. It is this tendency of capitalism to separate the economy from the symbolic that gave rise to the illusion in the bourgeois theory of culture that the symbolic is a self-determined universe of meaning, a realm in which the meaningful representation of experience is detached from material production and from the conflicts in the social relations.

This illusion found support in the patterns of bourgeois existence itself. Bourgeois life divides into the sphere of instrumental activities required by entrepreneurial, administrative, or commercial life, and the sphere of activities apparently determined by their own ends and intrinsic principles, such as music and philosophy, art and criticism. In the bourgeois representation of this divided existence, an outer realm of necessity is counterposed to an inner realm of freedom. Freedom, massively denied by the vicissitudes of the marketplace even to the agent of "free enterprise," is bequeathed to the individual's "inner life." Hence, too, then, the illusion that the symbolic is contemplative and spiritual not active and bodily. This experience Marcuse called the "affirmative character of culture" to underscore the fact that the obligation to criticize and transform outer reality wanes as authentic meanings and values are granted a purely inner reality. Cultural experience becomes the alibi of social domination.

The Marxist critique of the traditional theory of culture has always remained incomplete. Exemplary is the work of Lukács in the 1920s. Lukács grasped the point of departure for a Marxist theory of culture: "Liberation from capitalism means liberation from the rule of the economy." But he then construed the parallelism between necessity/freedom and surplus labor/surplus wealth in too literal a way. In his view, culture, in being the product of free time, has always been nothing other than the organic bonds that ruling classes develop

through their intellectual representations and artistic expressions. Culture then embodies the universal but still symbolic tradition of self-activity, of freedom in the restrictive conditions of privilege. The modern worker, reduced by commodification or reification to a mere thing, could only participate in the symbolic wealth of previous societies after the revolution. The cultural heritage of the classless society is, for Lukács, the same tradition that bourgeois hermeneutics itself constructs. The fraction of the bourgeois intelligentsia that allied itself with the aims of proletarian revolution thus had the task of preserving this bourgeois cultural tradition.

Against both traditional theory and its adaptation to Marxist theory, it is necessary to recover the root of Marx's problematic, which is subjectivity, that is, human sensuous activity. For the separation of the economy and the symbolic manifests itself in subjectivity at all levels of society and within mental as well as manual labor. The opposition of reification and self-activity designates a contradictory process going on within proletarian as well as bourgeois experience and indeed across the whole fabric of social life.

Whole layers of activity, manual and mental, practical and theoretical, are segmented and organized in conformity with the imperative of producing goods within the material framework of capitalist social relations and of reproducing these same relations. The rule of the economy detaches these activities from the very subjects who perform them. Reification — this process of converting human sensuous activity into a thing governed by economic categories — does not destroy activity, but displaces it; the capacity or potentiality for human beings to engage in self-forming, self-transforming activity manifests itself in *symbolic* forms. In these symbolic forms are preserved and developed relations to language and the body, to needs and desires, to nature and others, which cannot be totally subjected to the instrumentalities of the economy.

When Marx surveyed the historical effects of capitalism's emergence and development, he saw in the global reach of the capitalist economy a progressive force that provided, for the first time in human history, the preconditions for making the social relations that arise from production and consumption an object of human consciousness and therefore an object of transformation. Humanity did not seize the day. As a consequence, we confront advanced capitalism's power to perpetually renew the rule of the economy and thwart impulses toward self-activity. The utopian prospect of universal self-activity in which material production itself would be taken up into the consciousness of free human beings can only come about through a struggle whose givens are the *economy* and the *symbolic*. The economy segments and organizes human activity according to the logic of commodification or reification; the symbolic is the entire set of practices and interactions which produce, as a moment, the anticipatory horizon of self-activity in its unrestricted form.

Culture is not the exclusive province of ruling classes, nor is the cultural heritage of the classless society the contemplative unity and continuity of tradition. It is rather the discontinuous heritage of symbolic practices which are fragments of self-activity, anticipatory demands for universal self-activity. These experiences lie threatened or abandoned or shattered throughout human history and in every individual's history. They are benchmarks of self-activity, not its realization, since that requires what Marx understood as revolution: overcoming the subordination of consciousness to the economy through the transformation of the economy and of consciousness.

8.

The opposition of the economy and the symbolic frames the question of art in capitalist society. Traditional hermeneutics and bourgeois aesthetics adapt this framework without comprehending it historically or reflectively. They seek to resolve the lived conflict between self-activity and reification by placing art within the symbolic as a spiritual realm opposed to the material realm of the economy. Now, it is true that the symbolic and the economy stand as opposites in the historically actual development of wealth in capitalist society. But the historical process *also* contains the potentiality of overcoming this opposition. It is here in this open, still undecided movement of history that art finds its true vocation. The aim of interpretation is to disclose the bearing that art has on the contradictions within present society between actuality and potentiality, the real and the possible. Aesthetic experiences occur within, not above, the opposition of the symbolic and the economy, and within the lived conflict between self-activity and reification. Aesthetic practices enter into the historical process — in their production and in every distinct context of their reception — by giving meaningful form to the contradiction between the actual and the potential relation of the symbolic and the economy.

Praxis involves not only the satisfaction of human needs but also their production and development. In any social formation, cultural practices — from myth, ritual, and religion to art — produce the symbolic figurations of desires that exceed the satisfactions which society, at the historical level of its technical development, actually provides. Bourgeois aesthetics rightly sensed that works of art produce satisfactions and symbols that are not reducible to the prevailing organization of social needs and satisfactions. Traditional theory proceeded, in keeping with the logic of its self-misunderstanding, to construe this surplus or difference as the sign that aesthetic experience transcends material, social, bodily existence.

There is indeed a gap (difference) between the desires engendered in social experience and the satisfactions that a given society actually provides. Such a gap is an essential aspect of social, that is, human life. But its *structure* and *significance* are historically variable. In the contemporary world, they have become a terrain of political struggle. It is our task to develop the role that aesthetic experiences and the conflict of interpretations have to play in this struggle.

This task is a historically emergent one. It did not exist in its present form for either Hegel or Marx. Hegel conceived the difference between needs and desires in accordance with the level of historical development capitalism had achieved in his time. Recognizing that the satisfaction of needs requires the mediation of labor, that matter or objects must be worked on in order to satisfy human needs, Hegel postulated a system of social labor and a system of social needs (*Philosophy of Right*, 189–208). These systems reflect and mutually determine one another, dividing the techniques of labor and multiplying specific needs in such a way that the entire social process of providing satisfactions brings individuals into ever more concrete, ever more universal relations with one another. In contrast to needs, whose satisfaction is mediated by work and effort, desires and pleasures, according to Hegel, are transitory, effervescent, idiosyncratic; they require the mediation not of work but of merely interpersonal recognitions and reciprocities. Desire, in the Hegelian model, arises and is extinguished in a relentless rhythm that has no fruition at this higher level of real

social existence where human beings are bound to one another in their objective practice.

Marx's dispute with Hegel over the nature of civil society did not lead him to question the Hegelian conception of needs, means and labor, satisfaction. The dispute presupposed this conception. The theoretical standpoint that Hegel had found in the rise of the modern state was replaced in Marx by the theoretical standpoint of class struggles. For Hegel, the division of techniques and the multiplication of needs engendered the capitalist division of labor as a set of relations among estates (classes) whose differences and conflicts were unified and resolved at a yet higher level of social organization, namely, the state. The unity embodied in the state was at once logical, functional and administrative, legal and military. Marx contested, politically and philosophically, the state as a unity transcending the social relations deriving from the capitalist division of labor. The contradictions of class could not be resolved or abolished in the armed logos of the state, but only in the revolutionary processes that would found a classless society. Marx ultimately located this historic conflict in the developing antagonism between society's productive capacity (forces of production) and the social relations (relations of production). For Marx, the revolutionary transformation of capitalism would be driven by this tendency for society's productive capacity to break the social relations which constrain it.

Neither Hegel nor Marx saw political consequence in the difference of need and desire, or in the ways that cultural practices, through symbols of desire and suffering, mark the limits of the satisfactions that a given system of social labor provides. Desire could not be a category of political thought for these thinkers; they were instructing a society still going to the school of necessity and scarcity. But once the quantitative growth of society's productive forces ceases to drive the tendencies toward social transformation, the relation between needs and desires has to be rethought within the Marxian framework. Elements of such a rethinking have appeared in critical Marxism in the past fifty years, as well as in psychoanalysis. Contemporary capitalism reproduces existing social relations *despite* the growth of its productive capacity; moreover, it manages or directs the satisfaction and nonsatisfaction of needs in accordance with the imperatives of reproducing the social relations. Ours is "the bureaucratic society of controlled consumption" (Lefebvre). Culture has become a site of political and protopolitical contestation, for it is in cultural practices that the difference between needs and desires, between what is provided and what is denied, becomes visible or readable in a socially relevant form.

What role do aesthetic experience and interpretive practice have to play in the social and political learning processes of contemporary society? This question sets the stakes of the politics of theory and interpretation. For Hegel, the whole of society's learning processes — its culture in the broadest sense — was determined by the systems of social needs and social labor. These nourished and shaped learning processes into the "theoretical education" and "practical education" consistent with society's level of material development. But in *our* era, the imperative to reproduce the social relations has acquired the form of systematically preempting their transformation; even what may appear as a legitimate need is managed or controlled administratively and culturally. In turn, education loses its organic tie to the development of human capacities, powers, aptitudes. The system of labor and the system of needs are no longer mutually determining in either Hegel's or Marx's sense. Education in the advanced capitalist societies moves along two fronts: it structures knowledges, their forms as well as contents, in accordance with the imperatives of social reproduction, and it continually destructures those knowledges or cognitive capacities required to transform society.

Learning processes no longer embody the objective growth of human capacities, but rather are the site where knowledges are formed and deformed, needs structured and destructured.

The *aesthetic education* is thus confronted with a political task, unless it is to render itself ever more irrelevant in attempts to preserve its traditional character. The aesthetic must foster people's cognitive capacity to grasp the difference of desires and needs. Through its symbolization in aesthetic practices, desire opens itself to interpretation, in the sense that works of art give form — socially meaningful form — to the difference between desire and the satisfactions actually attained within the social system of needs and labor. Aesthetic symbolizations carry desires toward a threshold where they may be recognized as social needs and rearticulated as a collective demand on society's capacity to produce not only goods but also new social relations. The bureaucratic society of controlled consumption, especially through its culture industry, continually folds this process back on itself, returning the figurations of desire back into the idiosyncratic cradle of endless repetitions. The social task of the aesthetic education today is to contest this destructuring of aesthetic-cognitive experience, and to orient the desires that arise from the structured nonsatisfactions of contemporary social life toward their collective articulation as real needs.

9.

Culture comprises the entire continuum of symbolic interactions and expressive forms through which a collectivity establishes solidarity from its relation to nature and from the antagonisms it experiences in the social relations. Cultural practices elaborate the multilayered dialectic of identity and difference, of solidarity and struggle, of possible community and actual social conflict.

As the modern world has become unified in the form of the capitalist world system, the multiplicity of collectivities has become ever more obvious. Be they in the Third World or in the industrial and postindustrial societies, these collectivities are continually in process of formation and dissolution, struggles for self-determination and struggles against extinction. They are subjected to historical events they do not control, and the cultural ground of their potential forms of self-organization is constantly shifting. Moreover, their cultural practices, from everyday life to art, are entwined with other symbolic systems, particularly mass culture, which they must absorb or contest. Such a cultural plurality has made obsolete both the notion of "organic communities" whose traditions consist of the uninterrupted transmission of ancestral values and habits, and also the claim of European culture that it constitutes a universal realm of freedom in which evolve the values and symbols of "Man."

Cultural plurality has also confused critical Marxism, whose own cultural formation lay in bourgeois traditions, from the age of Goethe to modernism. Western intellectual and aesthetic traditions do indeed harbor concepts without which struggles for liberation and justice are impossible: *freedom* and *universality*. However, these concepts have been harbored like fugitives not to be seen in broad daylight. As Adorno rightly saw, the concepts atrophy in a culture that believes it already possesses freedom and universality. Negative dialectic is the unending task of wrenching these concepts from the intellectual and aesthetic practices in which they have found expression and reviving them in order to indict the actual social totality of the domination and inequality on which it thrives.

The work of negative dialectic must also generate a counterinterpretation of the bourgeois heritage itself. It must contest the self-understanding that the institutions of culture yet

sustain. While Greek philosophy originated the concepts of freedom and universality, it also first developed the cultural forms in which the affirmation of spiritual freedom coincides with social unfreedom. Socratic philosophy is not founded on the self-genesis of ideas, but rather on a set of discursive, sexual, and pedagogic practices that transfigure socially organized differences (male-female) and divisions (master-slave) into images of transcendence, the very movement from the material realm of transient values to the ideal realm of truth and identity. Freedom and universality are announced as concepts but buried within a philosophical project unaware of its own inherence in unfreedom and inequality.

The project of Enlightenment must likewise undergo a counterinterpretation. The bourgeoisie was itself a *particular* collectivity, and the solidarity it developed through its symbolic forms is not identical with humanity as a whole, even if it produced the very idea of humanity. The bourgeoisie sought to comprehend its own literature, art, and music and its intellectual and moral values as universally valid, while at the same time establishing the continuity between its culture and all that it would recognize as culture in the past or elsewhere in the world. Traditional hermeneutics and bourgeois aesthetics have been integral to this class project. But the project's contradictory elements leave their mark on the expressive and intellectual forms themselves. The appearance of universality is gained only as the bourgeoisie differentiates itself first from the aristocracy whose power it challenges and the peasantry from which it came, and then from the indigenous populations it exploited the world over and from the proletariat it helped create. Secondly, the mythologies and art through which the bourgeoisie symbolizes its relation to nature are constantly subverted by bourgeois civilization's real relation to nature, the subjugation of hostile raw material for production and consumption. Finally, perhaps the deepest contradiction of bourgeois culture is the attempt to achieve solidarity by removing cultural experience to the inner life of the solitary individual; the bourgeois individual participates in universal humanity only through an inward identification with abstract Man, without ever entering into a living, self-forming collectivity. These contradictions — between universality and differentiation, between the technical control and the symbolic appropriation of nature, between solidarity and solitude — affect every work and representation, symbol and interaction, in bourgeois culture.

Marxism can ill afford either to mask these contradictions or to pretend it has already transcended them. There are two senses in which cultural practices are fragments or rough drafts of self-activity. On the one hand, culture is formative of a collectivity whose members develop uncoerced interactions and expressions. On the other hand, the potential for freedom within cultural practices lies also in the fact that they are open to interpretation and thus incite acts of self-understanding which must include the possibility of dissolving the very elements which have caused those practices to be binding for a specific collectivity. Cultural Marxism stands in this complex, open relation to the bourgeois tradition.

10.

The immanent critique of Enlightenment or of Western culture more generally is taking new forms whose outcome cannot be decided in advance. Marxism today is deprived of both the sense of expectation and the sense of security it possessed in the 19th century. It has lost the expectation that a single historical actor — *the* revolutionary class — could in one blow appropriate the philosophical heritage of freedom and universality, the aesthetic heritage of autonomous self-expression, and the ethical heritage of universal equality. At the same time,

the sense of security that critical Marxism derived from its own grounding in bourgeois culture has been lost. The survival of capitalism has not, at least since around 1870, required the survival of the bourgeoisie. On the contrary, capitalism has sacrificed the bourgeoisie as a culturally coherent class, seeking the instruments of hegemony in mass culture not in the universalistic claims of bourgeois culture. Unsure of its own cultural ground and bereft of the external subject of history, Marxism has found itself, by its own account, in perpetual crisis.

Cultural Marxism cannot avoid the risks that go with the bifurcation of its theoretical project. On the one hand, theory preserves and develops concepts from the Western tradition through the procedures of negative dialectic, combined with an interpretive contestation of the meanings of that tradition itself. On the other hand, theory participates in the self-clarification of all concrete struggles and wishes that erupt unevenly across the surface of the "modern world system." The destiny of the universal and the particular has become undecidable. This situation justifies neither the inhibiting defense of universal values, a tendency now evident in neo-Marxism, nor the mere celebration of dispersal and particularity, a tendency associated with post-structuralism. The option between the universalistic and the particularistic is a snare set by contemporary history itself. Theory, like the processes of political organization it has the responsibility to illuminate, must follow the path dictated by the modern or postmodern world: it has continually to renew and reconstruct the connections among particular social and political movements, relating them to a whole which can be grasped only negatively. When will these separated movements and revolts succeed, will they succeed in forming a historic bloc capable of grasping the multiple levels of social and cultural transformation required to bring about the real genesis of freedom and self-activity? — This question the darkness of the immediate future does not allow us to answer.