

CLASS CONSCIOUSNESS AND POLITICAL AGENCY:
A CONCEPTUAL RECONSTRUCTION FOR THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

by

Benjamin Elliot Curtis

A Dissertation
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

Major: Philosophy

The University of Memphis

May 2020

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I'd like to thank my director, Tom Nenon, for supervising this dissertation. I would like to thank my committee members, Verena Erlenbusch-Anderson, Deb Tollefsen, and Shaun Gallagher for their support and feedback on the project. A big thank you to Connie and Cathy for helping to navigate the administrative side of things. I would also like to thank Somogy Varga, who helped considerably during the beginning stages of this project. Without your academic support and mentorship, this project would have never gotten off the ground.

In addition, I would like to thank all the mentors I have had along my academic journey. To William Harwood, thank you for introducing me to philosophy; to Jonathan Judaken, thank you for encouraging me to continue my studies in Paris. I would especially like to thank Leigh Johnson for her wonderful and supportive mentorship over the past ten years. You have been an incredibly caring professor and mentor, and a dear friend and colleague.

I must also thank my parents, Mary and Stan, for their continued support and guidance. Your love and kindness made this project possible. Thank you for believing in me, and I love you with all of my being.

And last, but certainly not least, I would like to thank the Memphis philosophy graduate community – including past and present students, as well as honorary members. I have learned so much from y'all over the past five years, intellectually, emotionally, and spiritually. I cannot possibly do justice in thanking you each individually; we are truly a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. It takes a village, and you have gotten me through the dissertation process every step of the way.

ABSTRACT

This dissertation aims to analyze, clarify, and reconstruct the concept of class consciousness by developing a dialectical account of political agency at work in the concept. I defend a dialectical account of agency, that includes both the way in which individuals come together to form groups, but also the capacity of a collective to transform social conditions. I argue that this account of political agency is necessary in order to understand the possibility of social transformation or change. I trace the development of the relationship between consciousness and agency in the early tradition of Western Marxism, focusing primarily on the account of class consciousness given by Georg Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness*. Against his account of the world historical agency of a unified proletariat, however, I defend Theodor Adorno's insistence on nonidentity, and the importance of unreconciled groups in capitalist society. In order to understand these groups, such as the vanguard, party, or proletariat, we must understand the way in which individuals form groups, as well as their inherent collectivity.

My account of the political agency at work in the concept of class consciousness is broadly speaking pluralist. I argue that a multiplicity of methodologies is needed in order to arrive at a complete picture of the concept. I defend an account of class consciousness that is neither reductive nor deflationary with respect to other dimensions of social domination. This class forward approach seeks to build intersectional political coalitions in order to undertake revolutionary action. Successful revolutionary social transformation is never guaranteed in advance; however, the concept of class consciousness, reconstructed through the lens of political agency, offers conceptual resources to address the problems of today, for the sake of a better tomorrow.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
A Note on Methodological Pluralism	3
Chapter Summaries	6
 Chapter 1: Agency and (Class) Consciousness in the Early Marxist Tradition	 8
Introduction to Marx and Engels	11
Agency and Alienation in the <i>1844 Manuscripts</i>	13
Class Agency and ‘Communist Consciousness’ in the <i>German Ideology</i>	16
Dialectics in the <i>18th Brumaire</i>	24
Conclusion	30
Introduction to Lenin and Luxemburg	31
Lenin and the Agency of the Vanguard	32
Luxemburg’s Critique of Centralization	38
Conclusion	44
Introduction to Lukács	45
Lukács’ Dialectical Account of Class Consciousness	46
Epistemic Difference between Bourgeois and Proletarian Class Consciousness	52
In Defense of the Agential Component of Class Consciousness	58
Conclusion	64
Summary of Chapter 1	65
 Chapter 2: Lukács and Adorno on Possibility, Agency, Ideology	 68
Adorno’s Critique of Lukács	71
Reification in Negative Dialectics	73
Lukacs and the ‘Subject-Object of History’	75
Adorno and ‘The Spell’	80
Conclusion	83
Politics without a Party	84
Theory and Practice in Trying Times	86
Hope, History, Ideology	90
Adorno and Class Consciousness	93
Conclusion	96
Summary of Chapter 2	97
 Chapter 3: Group Agency: Vanguard, Party, Proletariat	 101
Vanguard and Plural Subjects	103
Key Features of the Vanguard	104
On Plural Subjects	108
Conclusion	113
The Corporate Agency of the Communist Party	114
The Role of the Party in the Communist Manifesto	115
List and Pettit’s Account of Group Agency	118
Holistic Supervenience and the Autonomy of the Group Agent	128
Conclusion	134

Identifying with the Proletariat	135
Class Interest	137
List and Pettit on Identifying with Group Agents	139
Strategic Use of We-Narratives	141
Conclusion	144
Summary of Chapter 3	145
Chapter 4: The Capacity of the Collective	149
Dean and the Theory of the Crowd	151
Individuals and Subjects	152
The Power of the Crowd	156
The Egalitarian Discharge of the Crowd	160
Conclusion	166
Butler and the Capacity of Relation	167
Embodiment and Public Appearance	168
Interdependence and Vulnerability	173
Conditions of Precarity	178
Conclusion	183
Summary of Chapter 4	184
Conclusion	187
Future Projects	190
A Note on Social Conditions Today	193
Bibliography	196

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between class consciousness and political agency is an important question not only in the tradition of Marxist scholarship, but also our contemporary historical moment. I argue that class consciousness is more than just an awareness of one's individual or class position in capitalist society. It also involves political agency – in particular the kind of agency capable of social transformation. In this dissertation, I develop an account of agency that includes both the way in which individuals come together to form groups, but also the capacity of a collective to transform social conditions. The concept of class consciousness includes both epistemic and agential components, making it a useful concept for political organization and action.

Recent critical theorists have looked to more traditional Marxist concepts and categories in order to rework them for contemporary society. Axel Honneth (2008),¹ for example, has revived interest in the concept of reification. Rachel Jaeggi (2016)² has done the same for the concept of alienation. In a similar vein, the purpose of the present work is to offer a conceptual reconstruction of class consciousness, focusing on the kind political agency entailed by it. To do this, I will consider the development of the relationship between consciousness and agency in the early Marxist tradition, and offer a critical approach following the tradition of Frankfurt School critical theory. In order to do this, I will draw on resources from both the analytic and continental philosophical traditions. Broadly speaking, I will take a methodological pluralist approach.

¹ Honneth, *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*

² Jaeggi, *Alienation*

The role of class consciousness in the traditional Marxist theory of revolution goes roughly as follows. Workers in a capitalist economic system are alienated from their labor and exploited by the owners of the means of production. Life as a worker is miserable, and as more individual workers become aware of this misery, they also become aware of the fact that they have the political and economic capacity to change their conditions. Once enough workers come together, they organize as a class – the proletariat – in order to overthrow the capitalist system altogether. They abolish private property relations and establish a classless society. To Karl Marx in the second half of the 19th century, this revolution was imminent; the proletariat had nothing to lose but its chains, and unprecedented social change was on the horizon.

While the social, political, and economic landscape changed drastically during the 20th century, the global communist revolution did not unfold as Marx had predicted. Specifically, the mass of workers did not come together in the name of the Communist revolution. Instead, nationalist and fascist movements emerged around the globe, and by the middle of the century even those countries who remained officially committed to Communism had strayed from Marx's insights. In the two decades of the 21st century we have witnessed a rise of populist movements in response to the global economic recession. Today, capitalist economic structures continue to exploit and alienate workers, even if their form has changed considerably since Marx's day.

The fact that a unified, global proletariat has not arisen to overthrow these structures puts this traditional view of class consciousness into question. In order to consider the relevance of a Marxist analysis of society today, we must be able address, at the very least, possible reasons why class consciousness, and especially the political agency at work, did not develop in industrialized nations in the way Marx initially expected. Such an account will need to attend to

the ways in which society has changed, as well as the different political groups by whose action those changes occur. The position needs to be able to account both for the possibility of revolutionary change, as well as for why it does not occur. The aim of this dissertation is to address this question by developing a ‘dialectical’ account of agency at work in the concept of class consciousness. I argue that such an account of class consciousness must emphasize class as distinctive feature of contemporary capitalism, but also allow for other forms of social domination and oppression. Thus, I defend an account of class consciousness that is neither reductive nor deflationary with respect to class.

The motivation for the present project comes in no small part from my own feeling of political powerlessness in the face of the monolithic political and economic institutions of present-day capitalism. As an individual it is easy to sink to a level of quietism or helplessness. The capitalist economic system has so much momentum that from the individual perspective, political action can appear pointless. Nevertheless, I argue that an analysis of the agency of groups offers new ways of thinking of political action that go beyond the mere aggregation of the capacities of individuals. Together, we can do things that we could not do separated from each other. Perhaps this is naive, and the systems in place are in fact too powerful to be changed. Still, I argue that a reconstruction of the political agency at work in the concept of class consciousness offers new ways of thinking about group organization and structure, in order to better understand how society is changed and transformed.

A Note on Methodological Pluralism

This dissertation cover thinkers from different traditions who do not always agree on one, unitary methodology. For the present purposes, I will adopt an open, methodological pluralism that I claim can draw insight from multiple methodologies, incorporating them in order to come to a deeper and wider understanding of the social phenomena under interrogation. I maintain that despite or even because of their differences, incorporating these methods allows the present work to include insights that might otherwise be overlooked. I am not claiming here to establish an overarching meta-methodology that is capable of unifying all these methods under one methodological roof. Rather I take the often-contradictory stances these traditions take to indicate the one-sidedness of their position and reveal the inability of any one of them on their own to give a complete account of class consciousness, political agency, or any other social, political, or economic concept. I do not claim to offer a complete account of class consciousness or political agency in the present account; however, I do claim that the use of multiple methodologies allows for insights that a more narrowly focused, closed methodology might miss. This broadly pluralist account remains open to new discoveries, both theoretical and practical.

By pluralism, I do not simply mean to employ different methodologies side by side, but rather take insights from one and apply them to the other. While the present work is divided into four chapters, each with roughly its own orienting methodology, it is my hope that the insights of one methodology also bleed into the discussions in other chapters. I argue that methodologies from different traditions have much to offer the others – looking at an old concept or idea from a new perspective can shed light on aspects that might have otherwise been overlooked. The organization of the present work into four distinct chapters groups together analyses that focus on similar thinkers and traditions for the sake of clarity, but it is my hope that the connections

across traditions are clear as well. While such an approach offers its own unique set of problems, on the whole I argue that it is more beneficial than detrimental to the aims of the dissertation as a whole.

Roughly speaking each chapter has an orienting methodology. Chapter 1 looks at thinkers from the early Marxist tradition, who all adhere to a dialectical, historical materialism. This method understands social phenomena as the material unfolding of history. While the thinkers in this chapter fall broadly under this methodological category, their approaches often differ greatly. What unites them is a commitment to revolutionary social transformation, as well as the intellectual and conceptual tools required to carry out such social transformation. Chapter 2 looks at the negative dialectics of Theodor Adorno. While certainly committed to social transformation, he develops a methodology more in line with his own nonrevolutionary social conditions. Adorno has the benefit of historical hindsight and takes into account the failures of revolutionary action in Russia and Germany to establish Communist regimes that stayed true to Marxist principles. Broadly speaking, the theorists I will discuss in these two chapters could be understood as in some way responding to Hegelian dialectics, although their criticisms of Hegel differ widely. Mediation is another shared theme, as well as a vehement rejection of mechanistic or positivist opportunism.

Chapter 3 turns to contemporary analytic philosophy and focuses on thinkers committed to some form of methodological individualism broadly construed. In general, they maintain that group agency is determined by the agency of individual members, as well as the relations between those members. They argue convincingly that attention must be paid to the differences between members as well as their different relations in order to understand the agency of the group in question. I hold that this is a necessary aspect of understanding group agency; however,

it is not sufficient for a wider account of agency I wish to develop. In Chapter 4, I consider figures from contemporary continental philosophy, specifically thinkers who draw on resources from French theory. Broadly construed, these thinkers adopt some form of methodological holism that emphasizes that methodological individualism provides a scope that is too narrow to account for the diversity of collective political action. They argue convincingly that an understanding of the collective that is irreducible to the sum of its parts is also required in order to understand group political agency. Drawing on resources from both traditions, I argue that what is needed is an account of group agency that incorporates insights from both these traditions. For the purposes of the present work, I call this account of agency a ‘dialectical’ account of group agency, since it emphasizes neither individual nor group, but rather the relation or mediating forces between them. This dialectical account follows broadly the methodological insights from the theorists from Chapters 1 and 2. I argue that this methodological pluralism is required in order to understand the kind of political agency at the heart of the concept of class consciousness.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 traces the history of the relationship between consciousness and agency in the early Marxist tradition. Following Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, I argue that while the agency of the individual worker is limited under capitalism, an analysis of class struggle shows that the proletariat retains a different kind of agency as a class. Next I look at Rosa Luxemburg and V.I. Lenin’s practically orientated approach. Finally, I turn to Georg Lukács’ position in *History and Class Consciousness* in order to reconstruct his argument for class consciousness. I argue that already in Lukács’ work there is an understanding of agency entailed by class consciousness.

Chapter 2 reconstructs Adorno's critique of Lukács that emphasizes nonidentity and the unreconciled elements of society. I argue that Adorno's critique is not a rejection of Lukács' account, but rather deepens his materialist position. For Adorno, breaking the spell of capitalist ideology remains possible; however, liberation is not guaranteed, and social transformation can also lead to total disaster. Through an analysis with his friend and mentor Max Horkheimer, I show that one element of their own society this is missing is a properly functioning Communist Party. In the absence of the party, revolutionary action appears impossible. While the social conditions of their time inhibit revolutionary action, this does not stop them from sending messages to future generations whose social conditions might be different from their own.

Chapter 3 develops an account of three important social groups: the vanguard, the party, and the proletariat. I argue that we can use the conceptual resources from contemporary analytic philosophy to better understand the agency of these groups. The vanguard, as it is understood by Lenin can be described as a plural subject. The party, as it appears in the *Communist Manifesto* can be understood as a group agent. While the proletariat might not have agency in a narrower sense, I argue that we can identify with it as a collective through the use of we-narratives.

Chapter 4 develops an approach to political agency in a wider sense than Chapter 3. I turn to conceptual resources from contemporary continental philosophy, specifically in the French tradition in order to understand the capacities of the collective to engage in political action. I focus on Jodi Dean's account of the crowd as a collective political subject. Her position shows that the crowd, in so far as it is always changing and splitting itself, has certain capacities that are irreducible to those of its constituent members. For Dean, the process of separating someone from the crowd is part of the ideological process of individualization. I also discuss Judith Butler's embodied account of precarity to complicate the distinction between action and

conditions of action. On Butler's view, vulnerability, as a capacity to be affected, not only helps to determine why we engage in political struggle, but also helps to shape how to engage in political action.

CHAPTER ONE

AGENCY AND (CLASS) CONSCIOUSNESS IN THE EARLY MARXIST TRADITION

In this chapter, I will trace out the history of the development of the relationship between consciousness and agency in the early Marxist tradition. Certainly, this history predates Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels; Hegel clearly discusses this relationship in both the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Philosophy of Right*. I choose to begin here, however, and not with an extended exposition on Hegelian thought, because it is Marx and Engels who insist that the phenomenon of consciousness is rooted in the material conditions and mode of production of society. The debt to Hegelian dialectics should be clear throughout – from the early so-called ‘humanist’ writings of Marx, through the practically oriented thought of V.I Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg, and to Lukács’ own early Marxist writings. While this dialectical tradition is no longer as fashionable as it once was, I argue that its methodology is still useful today. While the insights of these early Marxist thinkers may not constitute a fully developed position on what constitutes this relationship between consciousness and agency, they provide conceptual tools we can use to expand on their thought. If there is in fact a dialectical relationship between theory and practice, as these thinkers maintain, then no theoretical work from the past can provide a ready-made theoretical solution to the practical problems of today. Rather, it our job as theorists to continue to develop this relationship between theory and practice, so that our thinking is grounded in the material conditions of our present-day society, rather than the society over one hundred years in the past.

Lukács, at the beginning of *History and Class Consciousness*, offers a helpful clarification with respect to Marxist methodology. This first essay is entitled “What is Orthodox Marxism” and develops an account of Marxist methodology that can serve as useful orientation

for uniting the thinkers discussed in this chapter. Lukács wants to challenge those so-called Marxist thinkers who raise up Marx's insights to near religious belief. He wishes to rescue the term 'Orthodox Marxism' even in the event that all of Marx's theories, predictions, and interpretations are somehow disproved empirically. Rather than accepting Marx's work as received wisdom, Lukács argues that "Orthodox Marxism, therefore, does not imply the uncritical acceptance of the results of Marx's investigations. It is not the 'belief' in this or that thesis, nor the exegesis of a 'sacred' book. On the contrary, orthodoxy refers exclusively to *method*."¹ Adopting this method – the method of dialectical and historical materialism – does not, in itself, commit one to any theoretical or practical positions in advance. To determine such a position in advance entails taking a one-sided view. Rather, on this understanding of orthodox Marxism, the point is not to take this side or that side, but rather to understand the relation between them, i.e., the mediating force at once separating and conjoining them. I will return to this theme below – both in Chapter 2, which will use Theodor Adorno's own negative dialectics, as well as the way in which I hope to think through the relationship between chapters 3 and 4 on group agency.

The present chapter is composed of three sections. The first section covers early work by both Marx and Engels concerning the relationship between consciousness and agency. First, I discuss Marx's theory of alienated labor, and the role it plays in understanding what a materialist account of agency might look like. Then, I look at Marx and Engels' argument for the material and social basis of consciousness. Finally, I turn to a more practical example Marx gives through his analysis of the events in France during the 1850s. This section shows that while Marx and

¹ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 1.

Engels may not have a fully developed account of the relationship between consciousness and agency, they are, from the start, concerned with questions about how the proletariat come together, what their class interests are, and how and why they engage in political struggle and revolutionary action. Already in these texts, it is necessary to go beyond an individual perspective, and think the relations between different parts of society.

The second section covers both Lenin and Luxemburg's arguments about the practical aspects of political organizing, including the relationship between class consciousness, agency, and the role of the vanguard party. The first part of this section develops Lenin's critique of spontaneity. While Lenin is concerned about leadership blindly following the spontaneous masses, I argue that he does not advocate a completely top-down approach. Material conditions are for him still part of the equation, and even the most dedicated cadre of professional revolutionaries consciously intervening according to the best, and most advanced Social-Democratic theory could not generate a revolution absent a revolutionary situation. The second part of this section develops Luxemburg's critique of centralization. Her worry is that separation between the masses and party leadership risks blind obedience to those in power, and would ultimately lead to the reproduction of existing, problematic power relations. She holds onto the revolutionary kernel of the masses, arguing that we should not forget who in fact has the power to change society.

The third section covers Lukács' account of the concept of class consciousness. I develop a reading of this concept such that it includes not only an epistemological dimension, but an agential dimension as well. The first part presents his account of class consciousness, showing how and where he draws on both Lenin and Luxemburg for insight. The second part explores the concept of class consciousness in more detail through a comparison between bourgeois and

proletarian class consciousness. I show that proletarian class consciousness is superior epistemologically, since it opens onto the possibility of going beyond its own immediacy. The third part draws a distinction between a thick and thin notion of class consciousness. A thin notion of class consciousness would include merely the epistemological dimension – a thick notion would also include the agency to change society. I argue that Lukács’ account is already a thick notion, and that to best think through the relationship between consciousness and agency, we must further develop this thick notion of class consciousness.

The purpose of this chapter is not to defend explicitly the views of any one of these particular thinkers, but rather to use this history as a jumping off point for my discussion of class consciousness and political agency. Methodologically, I will draw on the resources of this chapter throughout the rest of the dissertation. In Chapter 2, I follow Adorno’s further development of these ideas, neither accepting them uncritically, nor dismissing them out of hand.

Introduction to Marx and Engels

While Marx and Engels might not provide pre-packaged a fully developed account of political agency, their work provides a fertile foundation from which to begin thinking through these issues. Against the backdrop of Hegel’s dialectical idealist method, Marx and Engels develop their own materialist dialectics, rooted in an analysis of the real, material conditions of society. Like Hegel, Marx and Engels develop a deeply historical account of the possibility of social change. Unlike Hegel, however, they argue that it is not spirit, or *Geist* that drives history forward, but rather the struggle between existing classes within society. Ideas or values, while perhaps an important part of the description of transformative change, do not cause it

independently of the material conditions of society. The expression of what an individual or class can do is thus tied to these material conditions – there is no agency on their view to be understood independently from society. Hegel, and his subsequent followers, ascribed to such a view, which Marx and Engels reject as ‘ideology.’ This concept of ideology will return later in this chapter, as well as in Chapter 2, but for now let us turn to the contents of this subsection.

All three subsections discuss texts from the earlier part of Marx and Engels’ life. Often referred to as the ‘humanist’ writings, these texts focus more closely on the experiences of life under capitalism. Some thinkers, such as Louis Althusser, contend that there is a break or gap between these ‘humanist’ writings and the later, ‘scientific’ writings. My choice to focus on the early writings is not intended to take a stance on this debate. However, I will note in passing that it is interesting that these early texts are when Marx and Engels talk most about agency. First, I discuss Marx’s early thinking on agency in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*. Here Marx develops his account of alienated labor, which I argue constitutes an account of the diminished agency of the worker under capitalism. Next, I discuss the relationship between agency and consciousness in *The German Ideology*. I argue that the inherently social nature of consciousness plays an important role in their account of ‘communist consciousness.’ Finally, I use the *18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* as an example in which Marx develops a dialectical account of the relationship between individuals and groups during the political upheaval in France during the 1850s. I hope to show that Marx and Engels are thinking about the relationship between agency and consciousness (individual and collective) even if they do not provide a fully developed account of it.

Agency and Alienation in the *1844 Manuscripts*

In order to think through a Marxian account of agency, we must first start with the concept of alienation. In the early work of *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, Marx is working with a broadly Hegelian conception of labor.² As Hegel explains in the *Philosophy of Right*, the process of labor involves externalizing oneself in the object.³ Within this Hegelian framework, what is alienated during the process of labor is returned – reconciliation between subject and object happens in spirit. For Marx, however, such a reconciliation for the actually existing worker never occurs. Rather than constituting the self-expression of spirit, labor under a capitalist system reduces the worker to the level of the commodity. Marx argues that this process ultimately restricts the agency of the individual.

Turning now to the *1844 Manuscripts*, Marx argues that the alienation of labor not only produces goods that can be bought and sold, but also the worker herself as something bought and sold. “Labor produces not only commodities: it produces itself and the worker as a *commodity* – and does so in the proportion in which it produces commodities generally.”⁴ When the worker produces something, she puts a part of herself into the object. Under a capitalist system, the worker sells her labor time, so that when she puts that part of herself into the object, she sees it returned to herself as something foreign, as something estranged from herself. This relation, Marx argues, thus produces not only the commodity, but also the worker as a commodity. The

² For Marx’s own critique, see Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” in *Marx Engels Collected Works*, Vol 3.

³ Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. The first section of Abstract Right (paragraphs 41 – 71) talks about the concept of property. Interestingly, the third part of this section is on “The Alienation of Property.” A longer discussion of the similarities and differences between these two accounts of alienation, while interesting, is unfortunately outside the scope of the current work.

⁴ Marx, *1844 Manuscripts*, p. 71; see also “The Fetishism of the Commodity and its Secret” in *Capital*, p. 163-177.

more value that is placed on the world of things, the less value is placed on the world of human beings. The more value produced by the worker, the less valuable she is.

Marx shows that this relation of the worker to the object of production is an inversion of the way we might normally think about it. Since the worker is only able to continue existing because she receives the means of subsistence by selling her labor, she is primarily understood as worker, and only secondarily understood as a subject. “The extremity of this bondage is that it is only as a *worker* that he continues to maintain himself as a *physical subject*, and that it is only as a physical subject that he is a *worker*.”⁵ Any subject within a capitalist system who doesn’t work (and who also does not own the means of production or capital), will not be able to continue to exist. Thus, we exist in order to produce, and it is only as a producing subject, allowed to exist. Marx compares this condition to the status of machines – like machines, workers under capitalism are valued according to what they produce. The more the worker produces, the more machinelike she is.

In his account of the four modes in which labor is alienated under capitalism, Marx gives a description of how the worker’s capacity to act is also diminished. Through being alienated from the process of production, for example, the worker feels like she is only human when she is *not* at work. Marx argues that the kind of beings we are, our “species-being” is to engage in free, conscious activity. When we sell our labor under capitalism, however, we act only as a means to life. We engage in wage labor merely to satisfy need, i.e., to continue physical existence. This is contrary, Marx argues, to the kind of beings we are. Human beings engage in “conscious life-activity” and “produce universally.”⁶ Thus under a system of capitalism, human beings are not

⁵ Marx, *1844 Manuscripts*, p. 73.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 76-77.

able to be the kind of beings that they are, and are turned into machines, producing not freely or consciously for themselves, but forced to produce at the will of their employer.

The process of the alienation of labor, which is at the heart of the capitalist process of production, diminishes the human aspects of this activity, forcing it to appear as a mere means to life, rather than life for itself. This certainly restricts the capacities of the individual to act; or at the very least generates in the worker certain barriers or roadblocks to action. Speaking concretely, there are a whole host of barriers imposed on the worker. For example, working a wage-labor job often includes manual labor, or requires the worker to be on her feet for the entirety of her shift. After work, the worker has little to no energy to engage in other endeavors or pursuits. In more abstract or theoretical terms, the worker is presented with a worldview in which changing social position seems impossible, or where it appears possible, but that it is the worker's own fault for not advancing in society. While at work, the worker has sold her labor time, and is obligated (even in most instances legally required) to engage in the kind of projects she has been told to do. Here, certainly, it is clear that her agency is restricted – diminished such that her actions take on a mechanistic quality.

Despite this seemingly pessimistic outlook on human society, Marx does identify the possibility of overcoming this system in the emancipation of the working class, arguing, “not that *their* emancipation alone was at stake but because the emancipation of the workers contains universal human emancipation...”⁷ The fact of alienated labor under capitalism does not foreclose the possibility of emancipation, even though those who are supposed to carry out this

⁷ Ibid., p. 82. This requires further explanation, because it seemingly supports a reductive view of emancipation, vis. a view that argues all existing suffering or oppression can be explained through the commodity relation, the alienation of labor, and economic underpinnings of capitalist economics based in private property. This is not the view I am defending.

social transformation are precisely the ones whose agency is diminished by the system. This is, at least in part, because of the inherently *social* nature of labor. “Activity and consumption, both in their content and in their *mode of existence*, are *social*: *social* activity and *social* consumption; the *human* essence of nature first exists only for *social* man.”⁸ For Marx, human beings are social critters all the way down. As we will see below, this social nature opens new possibilities for workers and the working class.

It is important to note the universality of the emancipation in question. First this is important because emancipation arises not from the actions of the worker as an individual, but as we will see below, through workers as a class. What is at stake is not the emancipation of this or that worker from the bondage of capitalism, but rather the emancipation of society as a whole from private property. Second, the emphasis on universality is important because the emancipation of the workers is not isolated to the economic sphere. Emancipation entails not only the end of economic servitude (via wage-labor), but also all other relations of servitude as well. The *political* form is expressed through the emancipation of workers, but Marx’s point here is that the alienating relations of capitalism infect all spheres of life, not just the economic. This is to say, the economic restrictions of the worker narrowly construed translate to diminished agency in aspects outside of the economic sphere, strictly speaking

Class Agency and ‘Communist Consciousness’ in the *German Ideology*

While the *German Ideology* still focuses on the powers or capacity of the individual, Marx and Engels begin a shift to a focus on the formation of a class (over and against another class). Importantly, they argue that the interest of the class in the subordinate role (the

⁸ Ibid., p. 104.

proletariat) is itself generated by the capitalist system itself, as specifically through the class struggle with the dominate class (the bourgeoisie). Further, Marx and Engels discuss consciousness formation, and open the possibility of a revolutionary or communist consciousness that appears to be applicable to a class as a whole, not just an individual within that class. They defend the position that German idealism, particularly the dialectical Hegelian modes, must be “turned on their head,”⁹ meaning that the material conditions of society (including the modes of production) influence the ‘higher’ level phenomena of society such as politics, religion, and philosophy.

Marx and Engels argue that the first premise of human history is not an abstract understanding of the individual or even society as a whole, but rather, “the real individuals, their activity and the material conditions of their life, both those which they find already existing and those produced by their activity.”¹⁰ While the individually existing human being constitutes this first premise, it is important to note that Marx and Engels include their activity and material conditions. Methodologically, these conditions in part constitute, and in part are constituted by these individuals and the relations between them. Abstracting away the individual as an entity existing solely apart from these conditions makes no sense. There is a bidirectional relation, then, between the conditions in which individuals in society find themselves, and the activities or actions of these individuals. Individual action produces the material conditions, which in turn conditions the way in which individuals act in society.

⁹ Marx, *The German Ideology*, p. 42. Marx and Engels use the analogy of a *camera obscura*, arguing that German philosophy as ideology inverts the relations of its object(s) in a manner similar to the inversion on the retina.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 36-37.

Employing this materialist, as opposed to idealist methodology, Marx and Engels argue that the activities of individuals and their material conditions at least in part determine or condition the ideas produced by, and which can be found in, society. “Morality, religion, metaphysics” are not independent from the material relations of society, but are in fact grounded in the real, existing activity of society. These forms of ideology and ideological thinking, according to Marx and Engels, have no history or development. Actually existing human beings, however, in “developing their material production and their material intercourse, alter, along with this their actual world, also their thinking and the products of their thinking.”¹¹ For Marx and Engels, thought is not an independent entity over and above the material or bodily elements. Rather, thinking is a material process related directly to the material conditions (of the society) in which it finds itself. At its core, the problem with ideological thinking is that it attempts to completely separate consciousness from life and the material life processes around it. It is not the case (as Hegel seems to imply in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*) that thinking understands life as grounded in conscious activity completely independent from the material conditions of existence. Rather for Marx and Engels, “it is not consciousness that determines life, but life that determines consciousness.”¹² The kind of ideation or abstraction of German ‘ideology’¹³ thus misses this vital relation between individual and individual, and individual and the material conditions in which she finds herself. Any attempt to understand consciousness independent from these relations will be at best incomplete, at worst a complete misunderstanding.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 42.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ By this Marx and Engels mean, in the work of Hegel himself, or in the work of his representatives like Feuerbach, Bauer, Stiner, or other members of the Young Hegelians.

Through an analysis of four historical moments or aspects of human progression, Marx and Engels show that consciousness is an inherently social product. They argue that the “history of humanity” is not merely a succession of different ideas, but also involves the material relations of production and reproduction of society.¹⁴ This history is, at least in part, determined by the needs and modes of production of the individuals in society. These needs and modes of production, Marx and Engels argue, are themselves inherently social. Relations between individuals conditions the material conditions and modes of production of a society, and thus human beings qua individuals (as opposed to mere animals) cannot exist outside of society. “Consciousness is, therefore, from the very beginning a social product, and remains so as long as men exist at all.”¹⁵ Marx and Engels trace the development of this consciousness from a ‘herd-consciousness’ into ‘national consciousness’. At each stage of this development, the production of this consciousness is tied to the division of labor of the society in question, and the modes of production that typify it. Here Marx and Engels are not making the strong claim that consciousness cannot or does not affect the modes of production or material conditions of society; only the claim that consciousness is not a thing apart, independent from the real, material conditions of life, but rather in a dialectical relation with these conditions.

Take the concept of general or mutual interests¹⁶ as an example of this kind of relation.¹⁷ Marx and Engels argue that there is a contradiction within the capitalist mode of production between the interest of separate individuals and the common interest of a collective of individuals. They argue that, “this common interest does not exist merely in the imagination, as

¹⁴ Marx, *The German Ideology*, p. 49.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 49-50.

¹⁶ I will return to general interest as it relates to the Communist Party below in Chapter 3.

¹⁷ Cf. Marx’s discussion of common interests of those under the domination of capital in Marx, *The Poverty of Philosophy*, p. 187-191.

the ‘general interest’, but first of all in reality, as the mutual interdependence of the individuals among whom the labor is divided.”¹⁸ This imaginary ‘general interest’ appears in capitalist society as though it is in opposition to the particular interest of the individual. The actually existing common interest, generated through mutual interdependence, however, does not take on this characteristic. Whereas general interest is presented as something independent and alien with respect to particular interest, common interest is in a dialectical relation with the actually existing individuals in society. Further, the same can be said about the social power or reproductive force generated by the division of labor. Individuals see this social power as something alien and independent from them, rather than something they themselves are in part creating.¹⁹

In order to liberate themselves from this alienating force, individual members of the proletariat must come together as a class,²⁰ and through practical, revolutionary action (rather than ideal criticism) overthrow the existing state of society.²¹ Marx and Engels are clear that criticism by itself will not change the established order. They state, “that not criticism but revolution is the driving force of history,”²² and that, “it is absolutely immaterial for practical development whether the *idea* of this revolution has been expressed a hundred times already...”²³ Establishing theoretically the concept or idea of revolution does not, in itself, further the *practical* development of a revolutionary situation.

¹⁸ Marx, *The German Ideology*, p. 52.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 53, 89.

²⁰ Marx and Engels discuss the development of a class in the *German Ideology*, p. 68-69. See also Marx’s discussion of the historical role of the proletariat in Marx and Engels, *The Holy Family or Critique of Critical Critique*, p. 51-53.

²¹ See also: Marx, *The German Ideology*, p. 57: “Communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality will have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things. The conditions of this movement result from the now existing premise.”

²² *Ibid.*, p. 61.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 62.

This means that the fundamental task is not to merely alter the consciousness of the proletariat, but rather altering the circumstances of society.²⁴ This point is made clearer through an analysis of the relation between the ruling material force and the ruling intellectual force of a particular society. “The ruling ideas,” Marx and Engels argue, “are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relations, the dominant material relations grasped as ideas.”²⁵ Since, in capitalist society, the ruling material force is the bourgeoisie, it follows that the dominant or ruling ideas would express these material relations. It is for this reason, for example, that the laws of bourgeois economy are presented as eternal, unchanging laws of nature. It is not enough, Marx and Engels argue, to simply criticize these ruling ideas; one must also confront them on the practical, material level as well. Put differently, changing hearts and minds without changing the underlying conditions or structures of society is not sufficient.

Beginning, then, from an understanding of the mutual interdependence of individuals, as well as the dialectical relation between these individuals and the material conditions of their society, Marx and Engels argue that

separate individuals form a class only insofar as they have to carry on a common battle against another class...the class in its turn assumes an independent existence as against the individuals, so that the latter find their conditions of life predetermined, and have their position in life and hence their personal development assigned to them by their class...²⁶

Here we see the way in which class is constituted through a common battle or class struggle, against another class. This class gains independence over and against the separate individuals so long as the class struggle exists. Under the conditions of class struggle, individuals within a class

²⁴ Ibid., p. 64.

²⁵ Ibid., p. 67.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 85.

experience their life and possibilities curtailed or limited by their class position. This class position, however, also opens up new possibilities not afforded to bourgeois consciousness.²⁷

The proletarian class, as representative of the common interests of not only their own class, but of society as a whole, struggle for the universal emancipation of human society. Historically, the revolutionary class presents its own interests as the common interests of all members of society. “The class making a revolution comes forward from the very start, if only because it is opposed to a class, not as a class but as the representative of the whole of society, as the whole mass of society confronting the one ruling class.”²⁸ Marx and Engels argue that with each new revolutionary project, the basis on which the new class achieves domination becomes more and more broad. Eventually, once this basis becomes so broad so as to encompass all of society, the complete abolition of class becomes possible, that society is able to emancipate itself universally.²⁹ This universality, Marx and Engels argue, is what conditions the possibility of abolishing classes altogether. As long as society is divided into classes, these classes will have their own separate, contradictory interests, and will thus impose their (common) interest as the supposed (imaginary) general interest of society. It is only through the abolition of classed society, and the establishment of a classless society that separate individuals can be emancipated from the contradictions inherent between these individual and collective interests. Further, only a class that can act world-historically,³⁰ such as the proletariat, has the capacity for this universal

²⁷ See the section below on Lukács and the standpoint of the proletariat.

²⁸ Marx, *The German Ideology*, p. 68-69.

²⁹ For example, see *Ibid.*, p. 54-57: “...Only with this universal development of productive forces is a universal intercourse between men established, which on the one side produces in all nations simultaneously the phenomenon of the ‘propertyless’ mass (universal competition), making each nation dependent on the revolutions of the others, and finally puts world-historical, empirically universal individuals in place of local ones.”

³⁰ Again, see Marx, *The Holy Family*, p. 51-53.

emancipation, because it abolishes the material conditions that ground these contradictions, and thus can establish the foundations of a society in which these contradictions³¹ do not exist.

This process of practical, revolutionary action is taken up by the proletariat as a class. The proletarian class is the most revolutionary, Marx and Engels argue, because it is the class that feels the sharpest contradiction of the capitalist mode of production. It must bear all the burdens of society, while enjoying none of its advantages. It is a class that, “forms the majority of all members of society, and from which emanates the consciousness of the necessity of a fundamental revolution, the communist consciousness, which may, of course, arise among the other class too through the contemplation of the situation of this class.”³² It is important to note that this communist consciousness ‘emanates’ from the class – not that the consciousness determines or constitutes it. What is emanating is a consciousness of the necessity of fundamental revolution, i.e., that the foundation of society must change, and that this change is necessary.³³ Here Marx is not arguing that revolution is inevitable – only that for the contradiction of society to resolve, the mode of production and material conditions of society must radically change.

Further, ‘communist consciousness’ is something that is generated by and in the proletariat, however it is not something restricted to members of that class. By contemplating

³¹ To be clear, the abolition of the particular classes inherent to capitalism would overcome the particular contradictions inherent to the capitalist system. While Marx and Engels imply that a classless society would follow, they never contend that post-capitalist society would be completely without contradiction. For a longer discussion of this point, see Chapter 2.

³² Marx, *The German Ideology*, p. 60.

³³ We might say necessary in a moral, rather than physical sense. Marx’s own position with respect to the question of the ‘necessity of the revolution’ is unclear, and has been interpreted in many different ways. For example, some, such as certain members of the Second International, develop a mechanistic view of revolutionary action. A longer discussion of the differences between dialectical and vulgar Marxism is unfortunately outside the scope of the present work.

their situation, and presumably understanding the fundamental contradictions of society that produces the proletariat as a class, members of another class can also arrive at this consciousness.³⁴ It is unclear here whether the class *as a class* could achieve this understanding, although it would appear not. This, then, suggests that the ‘communist consciousness’ is an individual phenomenon, since only members of a class, and not a class as such (besides perhaps the proletarian class), can achieve it (whatever the conditions of achievement are).³⁵

For Marx and Engels, it is clear that a class can do something that individual members of that class cannot. This class agency is expressed in its consciousness. Consciousness is not something that floats about the class, independent from the individuals within society or its mode or process of production. Rather, it is something generated by the real relations of society. Starting with their rejection of idealist methodology, Marx and Engels develop an account of consciousness that is inherently material as well as social. The communist consciousness that becomes aware of the necessity of revolutionary action cannot (or ought not) be isolated through formal abstraction but rather is tied to the material conditions of society out of which it arises. Class agency in general, and proletarian class agency in particular, is thus directly related to the expression of this consciousness.

Dialectics in the 18th Brumaire

In *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx provides an empirical case study in which he applies the dialectical method of historical materialism to the events of the attempted revolution in 1848 and its immediate aftermath. This text echoes the position Marx lays out in

³⁴ Cf. Lenin, *What is to Be Done?* p. 37: “Marx and Engels themselves belonged to the bourgeois intelligentsia.”

³⁵ Achievement or non-achievement may not be the best terms to describe the becoming conscious of a class (or of an individual for that matter).

the *1844 Manuscripts* and the *German Ideology*, arguing for a position that accounts for both the individual and collective actions of the participants, as well as the material conditions and modes of economic relations in which they find themselves. In the preface, Marx explains that his position focuses not solely on the individual or material conditions, but rather the class struggle (as the relation between them). The class struggle, as a relation, reveals the capacities of the varying individuals and classes.

Marx begins the 18th Brumaire by indicating the methodology he will use to give his analysis of the events in France. “Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.”³⁶ Here Marx shows explicitly the way in which he understands the movement of history. He grounds the process of historical movement in the capacities of human beings to affect change on a transformational level. They have the power to make their own history, but with a catch. They do not make it *ex nihilo*, but rather by and through their contemporary material conditions. We do not choose the past, or the society we inherit from previous generations. However, this does not mean that the present or future are determined by that past or those conditions. Rather, we take up the conditions of the society we encounter, and act upon that society in order to engage in revolutionary action.

Marx distinguishes his position from two texts about the same events: Hugo’s *Napoléon le Petit*, and Proudhon’s *Coup d’Etat*. On Marx’s view, Hugo’s work focuses exclusively on the

³⁶ Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, p. 15.

actions of Louis Bonaparte as a singular individual.³⁷ According to Marx, this ascribes to him too much power. “He [Hugo] does not notice that he makes this individual great instead of little by ascribing to him a personal power of initiative such as would be without parallel in world history.”³⁸ By neglecting the material conditions out of which the individual acts (as well as the social relations that condition the possibility of such action), Hugo ascribes a capacity for action that is unwarranted. No individual acts in a vacuum, not even a despotic tyrant. On the other hand, Marx also distinguishes his position from the more objectivist view of Proudhon. “Proudhon, for his part, seeks to represent the *coup d’état* as the result of an antecedent historical development.”³⁹ While avoiding Hugo’s problem of granting an unwarranted capacity to the individual, Proudhon makes the opposite mistake, and unwittingly turns the preceding historical development into a defense of Bonaparte’s actions. If the historical conditions all by themselves produced his actions, then it would be difficult, if not impossible, to see the events in France as happening otherwise.

These two positions exemplify opposite, one-sided accounts of the historical facts. On the one side, Hugo’s individualism posits the actions of the individual as independent from historical material conditions. On the other side, Proudhon’s objective historicism denies the generative capacity of individuals (and by extension, the relations between those individuals), which amounts to a materialist determinism. Marx takes these two dialectically opposed viewpoints and defends a position that overcomes their contradictions. “I, on the contrary, demonstrate how the

³⁷ Here I follow Chad Lavin’s argument in “Postliberal Agency in Marx’s Brumaire.” Lavin argues that Marx goes beyond the liberal account of agency and connects his work in the *18th Brumaire* with Judith Butler’s account of performativity. For example, see p. 448: “Like Marx, Butler is unsatisfied with the conventional alternatives of liberal voluntarism and structural determinism.” For my own discussion of Butler, see Chapter 4 below.

³⁸ Marx, *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, p. 6.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

class struggle in France created circumstances and relationships that make it possible for a grotesque mediocrity to play a hero's part."⁴⁰ According to Marx, Hugo is not wrong to blame Bonaparte for his mediocrity – the material conditions did not determine or necessitate his actions. The individual (and by extension their relations) are not deterministically necessitated by a particular social situation. Neither is Proudhon wrong to look at the objective and material conditions that made such a *coup* possible. In the absence of the conditions, or in different conditions, new or other possibilities would have arisen. Marx's point here is that to understand how both these sides can be held together in dialectical tension, one must focus on the way in which the class struggle played out just before and during the events in question, as well as how that struggle at times opened onto the possibility of revolutionary action, and at times foreclosed its possibility. Class struggle, as a conceptual lens through which to understand historical events, must be capable of incorporating both of these aspects.

As an example of the centrality of the class struggle for Marx's analysis, consider the relationship between the Legitimists and Orleanists. The Legitimists backed the House of Bourbon, while the Orleanists backed the house of Orleans. On the surface, it would appear that the differences between these two major groups of the royalist coalition (party of Order) were ideological; each fraction supported a different family to be the royal family of France, and so the tensions between them appear as independent from the material conditions or modes of production in French society. Marx, however, argues that in fact this division was directly tied to a contradiction between differing modes of production – specifically between big landed property and finance capital. The House of Bourbons represented a feudal system of lords, and

⁴⁰ Ibid.

thus represented the political expression of hereditary ownership of land. The House of Orleans, on the other hand, represented large-scale industry and trade, and thus represented the political expression of capitalism and ‘free market’ trade.

These two interests, while still bourgeois interests, constituted conflicting and divided interests of the groups represented. “If each side wished to effect the *restoration* of its *own* royal house against the other, that merely signified that each of the *two great interests* into which the *bourgeoisie* is split – landed property and capital – sought to restore its own supremacy and the subordination of the other.”⁴¹ Without understanding this divided interest of the party of Order, Marx argues that one misunderstands the ideological differences between them. This contradiction between landed property and free-market capitalism may sow division amongst the ranks of the bourgeoisie, however it does not stop the coalition of royalists, under the banner of the party of Order, from engaging in class warfare against those with opposing material interests (in this particular instance, what Marx calls the “so-called” social-democratic party).

Understanding the difference between these different kinds of tensions, is crucial to understanding the way in which class struggle plays out. Whether these tensions are within a class, or between classes, the material conditions and interests at stake are (in part) a determining factor of their political, social, or economic expression. However, the nature of these tensions also (in part) determine the way in which the representatives of these interests relate to one another. Ultimately, the royalist representatives of differing bourgeois interests banded together under the banner of the party of Order in order to further the interests of the bourgeoisie *as a class*. Further, the so-called social-democratic party, while provisionally a coalition of the

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 48.

workers and petit bourgeoisie, fought from the weakening of the antagonism between labor and capital rather than doing away with it entirely. This party's position was that the special conditions of its emancipation are actually the general conditions, and thus by fighting the tyranny of the royalists, modern society can be saved, and the class struggle avoided.⁴² The class struggle, of course, cannot be avoided in this way. As a part of the bourgeois mode of production, the interests of individual shopkeepers or other "self-employed" entrepreneurs do not always materially line up with the working class. When they do, their collective expression resists the established order. More frequently, however, when material interests divide the party, these representatives of the petit bourgeoisie capitulate to the established order, and the resulting coalition either disintegrates or ceases to be revolutionary.⁴³

While Marx may not provide necessary and sufficient conditions for an account of the political agency in the *18th Brumaire*, he sets out the scope and framework for thinking about how political agency functions within a given society. He emphasizes the relations between individuals, as well as the material conditions that produce, and are produced by, those relations. He sets up an account of consciousness that is inherently social, and dependent on the historical and material developments in which they arise. Applying this methodology to his contemporary events in France, he shows that a focus on class struggle reveals the material interests of the individual actors and groups in the political arena, and grounds the capacities of those

⁴² Ibid., p. 50.

⁴³ We might see an apt political analogy in our contemporary historical moment, with the Republicans as the party of Order, and the Democrats as the so-called social-democratic party. The analogy certainly holds for the Democratic Party, which appears as a coalition of working class and petit bourgeois interests. The analogy with Republican Party, however, might be less similar, since it seemingly includes a large fraction of the working class, particularly the so-called 'white working class.' Later in the *18th Brumaire*, Marx argues that Bonaparte claims to speak for the lumpenproletariat, which may also be an apt analogy for the populist politics of Donald Trump (Marx calls Bonaparte a "princely lumpenproletarian" *ibid.*, p. 85). A more nuanced comparison of the relevant similarities and differences between these historical moments, while interesting, falls outside the scope of the current section.

individuals and groups in the material conditions of their society, without determining their actions in advance. The capacity of the proletarian class to engage in revolutionary action, as we have seen, is tied to the possibility of that class to engage in revolution universally. For Marx, the emancipation of the working class would constitute the emancipation of human labor as such, and thus the emancipation of humanity in general.

Conclusion

Even absent a fully developed account of agency and consciousness, the early Marx and Engels clearly see a relationship between the two concepts. The alienation of the worker under capitalism diminishes her agency – she is not able to do the things she wants. Even while the capacities of the individual are diminished, the capacities of the class are different. Aspects of consciousness or ‘spirit’ like interest or desire can be expressed on multiple registers. These conscious aspects are not independent, operating separately from the material conditions of society. Rather, they are interwoven into these conditions, such that any Marxian account of consciousness must itself be tied to these conditions.

This initial discussion of the relationship may be unsatisfying in its lack of definition. In the section that follows, I will show how this relationship gets taken up by two of the most important Marxist intellectuals and activists of the turn of the 20th century: Vladimir Lenin and Rosa Luxemburg. Each thinker, both theoretically and practically, picks up on this discussion of the relationship between agency and consciousness sketched out by Marx and Engels. Finally, in the third section, I will show how Lukács continues this discussion, uniting the thought of all these thinkers in a theory of class consciousness.

Introduction to Lenin and Luxemburg

Both Lenin and Luxemburg are important figures in the history of Marxism – both as theorists, but also as revolutionaries engaged in the political struggles of their time. While both agreed on the major insights developed by Marx and Engels, their approaches to revolutionary action and the development of class consciousness differ in important ways. Following the insights from Marx and Engels in the section above, both thinkers employ a dialectical, historical materialism. Their concern with the relationship between political agency and class consciousness follows the broadly Marxist aim of proletarian revolution. Their main point of contention concerns the practical relationship between party leadership and the proletarian class. While I will return to the question of party organization in Chapter 3, this section will focus primarily on the differences between Lenin and Luxemburg with respect to the development of class consciousness, and the kind of agency involved. It is important to stage this encounter before engaging with Lukács' account of class consciousness below, since he references both thinkers with respect to the development of his own account.

Lenin's account stresses the importance of conscious intervention in the political situation, warning against blindly following the spontaneity of the masses in revolt. His proposal is the establishment and development of a vanguard of professional revolutionaries, armed with Marxist theory, in order to best direct political action. The first section develops this account, relating class consciousness to the agency of this vanguard. On his view, we must guard against the loss of agency to the spontaneous masses. Luxemburg's critique of Lenin, on the other hand, warns against centralizing power in an elite few. She emphasizes that the capacity for revolutionary action arises out of political and economic struggle and separating the party leadership from the masses in turn cuts them off from this revolutionary potential. On her view,

blindly following an elite vanguard of professional revolutionaries is at least as dangerous as blindly following the spontaneous masses. The second section looks at this critique, focusing the relevance of experience of class struggle to the development of class consciousness. On her view, we must guard against the loss of agency to an elite few, who might not act in the best interest of the proletariat, even if they are trying to. Again, while these thinkers share quite a bit, I emphasize their differences so as to better understand the way in which Lukács' account of class consciousness brings them together.

Lenin and the Agency of the Vanguard

In *What is to be Done?* Lenin argues that the Social Democratic party should play a central role in the revolutionary action in Russia. He argues that this small, but dedicated group of professional revolutionaries play a necessary role on the development of class consciousness, as well as the development of the material conditions necessary for a communist revolution. This small group must incorporate Marxist and Social Democratic theory into its practice, while always keeping the class interest of the proletariat in mind. Later, in Chapter 3, I will return to Lenin's account of the vanguard party. In this section, I will rather focus on the relationship between agency and what he calls 'Social-Democratic' consciousness. While 'trade-union' consciousness – consciousness of the economic struggle only – is an important aspect, it is ultimately not yet political, and only in an embryonic form. Ultimately for Lenin, what is important is that the vanguard intervenes consciously, and with full knowledge of the situation understood through Social-Democratic theory.

Lenin presents the following dilemma concerning the task set out before the vanguard of professional revolutionaries – those who actively and consciously take up the revolutionary struggle:

But the crux of the question is, how is one to understand the statement that the mass working-class movement will ‘determine the tasks’? It may be interpreted in one of two ways. *Either* it means bowing to the spontaneity of this movement, i.e., reducing the role of Social-Democracy to mere subservience to the working-class movement as such...; *or* it means that the mass movement puts before us *new* theoretical, political and organizational tasks, far more complicated than those that might have satisfied us in the period before the rise of the mass movement.⁴⁴

Lenin clearly defends the second approach, arguing that the first approach lends itself to opportunism. While listening to the spontaneous uprising of the mass movement and being in correct relation to it is a necessary part of revolutionary action, merely following along (as a kind of rear- rather than vanguard) is at best ineffectual, and at worst takes advantage of the struggle for one’s own ends. It is important to note here that Lenin is not dismissing the experience of workers in the mass movement; rather, he is indicating that the role of the mass movement is to provide new tasks for revolutionary action, whether they are theoretical, political, or organizational. The relation, then, between mass movement and organizational leadership, must be complex and bidirectional. While one may be tempted to read what follows as Blanquist⁴⁵ or as a “top-down” organizational model, it is crucial to note Lenin’s insistence on the experience of workers’ struggle during mass movements. Giving in to the spontaneity of the movement entails giving over what agency one has.

Lenin argues that achieving societal transformation and developing the agency of the working-class must involve Social-Democratic Marxist theory: “Hence our task, the task of Social-Democracy, is to *combat spontaneity*, to *divert* the working-class movement from this

⁴⁴ Lenin, *What is to Be Done?* p. 55-56.

⁴⁵ Louis Auguste Blanqui (1805-1881) was a revolutionary socialist during the time of the Paris Commune. The political view often attributed to him is that a successful revolution can be carried out by a small group of highly dedicated and organized group of secret conspirators. An in-depth discussion of actual political views, while interesting, is unfortunately beyond the scope of the present work.

spontaneous, trade-unionist striving to come under the wing of the bourgeoisie, and to bring it under the wing of revolutionary Social Democracy.”⁴⁶ Combating spontaneity, in this context, does not entail its opposition, abscision, or dismissal. Rather, it is a force, instantiated materially and socially, which can be used and harnessed politically. Lenin’s use of the word ‘divert’ indicates that spontaneity is not something to be induced in the working class. Diversion here indicates a kind of guidance, vis., guidance toward the political forces at work defending, maintaining, and furthering the interests of the working-class. It is this capacity for guiding, not a power for domination, that Lenin argues must be developed.

Lenin is primarily interested in the political, rather than purely economic or social, expression of working-class consciousness. The consciousness of the working-class can be expressed in many forms, on many levels or aspects; it is often expressed in conflicting or contradictory ways. The task of Social-Democratic theory is to raise this consciousness among the working class, elevating it beyond its purely economic form. Lenin argues that the spontaneous element found in the riots and strikes of the mass movement involve a kind of consciousness in its “embryonic form.”⁴⁷ These trade-unionist struggles, in their economic expression are “...not yet Social-Democratic struggles. They testified to the awakening antagonisms between workers and employers, but the workers were not, and could not be, conscious of the irreconcilable antagonism of their interests to the whole of the modern political and social system, i.e., theirs was not yet Social-Democratic consciousness.”⁴⁸ Lenin is not

⁴⁶ Lenin, *What is to Be Done?* p. 49. The use of the first-person plural here is interesting, and an important signifier throughout Lenin’s work. ‘Us’ here almost certainly refers to a revolutionary vanguard party rather than the collection of proletariat workers. Making this a clear and dividing distinction, however, is unwarranted, since Lenin also encourages the promotion of working-class proletarians to the ranks of the revolutionary vanguard, especially those workers with a lot of trade-unionist experience, or experience, in the class struggle in general.

⁴⁷ Lenin, *What is to Be Done?* p. 36.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

denying the revolutionary kernel or potential of these strikes; rather, he is pointing out that those engaged in struggle are not yet aware of the impossibility for capitalism to resolve its internal and inherent contradictions, and thus are engaged in a struggle for the amelioration of their own circumstances, not the complete overthrow of capitalist bourgeois society. This distinction is important because Lenin is not denying that the workers are *experiencing* these antagonisms, or that they have no access to their own alienation. Surely, the workers have some sense of (even if they do not fully, or consciously understand) these antagonisms as well, or even better, than the theorist. Lenin's point here is that the expression of these strikes does not yet take a fully political or theoretical form, and thus are missing crucial aspects of the struggle. In order for one to have any agency within this movement, one cannot merely bow to the spontaneous outbursts of the masses.

It is in the context of this discussion concerning the relationship of class consciousness in its trade-unionist or embryonic form to a class consciousness in its full or Social-Democratic form that Lenin makes his famous claim that Social-Democratic consciousness can only be brought to the working class 'from without.'⁴⁹ Lenin points out that historically the theory of Socialism was generated not by the spontaneous movements of the working class, but by educated representatives of the bourgeois intellectuals in the form of Marx and Engels.⁵⁰ This

⁴⁹ With respect to class consciousness, Lenin's point is that political consciousness must be brought from outside the economic struggle narrowly defined, not from those outside of the working class itself. Cf. (Lenin, *What is to be Done?* p. 98: "Class political consciousness can be brought to the workers *only from without*, that is, only from outside of the economic struggle, from outside of the sphere of relations between workers and employers." This is not a Blanquist call for the revolution to be carried out by the elites, but rather an argument against reduction of the political struggle to its economic dimension.

⁵⁰ *The Communist Manifesto* makes this point clearly. Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels, "Manifesto of the Communist Party" in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 481: "Finally, in times when the class struggle nears the decisive hour, the process of dissolution going on within the ruling class, in fact within the whole range of society, assumes such a violent, glaring character, that a small section of the ruling class cuts itself adrift, and joins the revolutionary

merely descriptive fact about the history of ideas guides Lenin's position on the role of Social-Democratic theory, as well as its practitioners. It is for this reason that he polemically argues that intellectuals are faced with the choice of either bourgeois or socialist ideology.⁵¹ In a footnote on the same page, Lenin clarifies that his position does not exclude the working class from the activity of theorizing. He does, however, contend that when workers take part, they do so not as workers, but as 'social theoreticians.' His position thus advocates for greater political education of the working class in socialist theory, not less. The point is to raise workers up to the level of theoreticians, rather than reduce theory to what intellectuals expect workers to be able to understand.

Agitation, then, must not merely explain class interests to a befuddled working-class, but educate workers about new tools that help them to see how the alienation of their labor affects society, and how it manifests itself in their own lives on a personal, family, civic, religious, etc., level.⁵² It is according to the multiplicity of these levels or registers that Lenin rhetorically asks: "...is it not evident that *we shall not be fulfilling our task* of developing the political consciousness of the workers if we do not *undertake* the organization of the *political exposure* of the autocracy *in all aspects*?" Focusing on and exposing concrete examples, such as factory abuses, are necessary for the activity of agitation. Far from defending a position wherein Social-Democratic theory is to be kept separate and independent from the mass movement of the working class, the relation between the two constitutes a key aspect of Lenin's revolutionary

class, the class that holds the future in its hands. Just as, therefore, at an earlier period, a section of the nobility went over to the bourgeoisie, so now a portion of the bourgeoisie goes over to the proletariat, in particular, a portion of the bourgeois ideologies, who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole."

⁵¹ Lenin, *What is to Be Done?* p. 48.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 70-71.

theory. Indeed, exposure of the working class to the comprehensive political struggle is necessary for the raising of political consciousness, as well as their training in revolutionary activity.⁵³

In order to do this, Lenin argues that professional revolutionaries are necessary. He states that “the organizations of revolutionaries must consist first, foremost and mainly of people who make revolutionary activity their profession.”⁵⁴ These revolutionaries can be from any class in society, although it would stand to reason that they come primarily from the working class, and/or be intellectuals well versed in socialist theory and strategy. It is important to note here that any distinctions between the revolutionaries in terms of background or trade must be removed.⁵⁵ There are also certain limits to its size and openness to society on a larger scale. These revolutionaries engage in revolutionary action professionally insofar as they make revolution their profession. This is to say that they might have other jobs or trades, but that their primary focus is revolutionary action, and that they are not inhibited by other kinds of (material) concerns.⁵⁶ Importantly, Lenin argues that “...our task is not to champion the degrading of the revolutionary to the level of an amateur, but to *raise* the amateurs to the level of revolutionaries.”⁵⁷ In particular this entails raising up members of the working class into these

⁵³ Ibid., p 85.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 138.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ For example, Lenin, *What is to Be done?* p. 163: “A worker-agitator who is at all talented and ‘promising’ *must not be left* to work eleven hours a day in a factory. We must arrange that he be maintained by the Party, that he may go underground in good time, that he change the place of his activity, otherwise he will not enlarge his experience, he will not widen his outlook, and will not be able to hold out for at least a few years in the fight against the gendarmes.”

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 156.

ranks. Rather than ‘talking down’ to the working class, Lenin is, “devoted *principally* to raising the workers to the level of revolutionaries.”⁵⁸

The kind of consciousness required, according to Lenin, is not one that focuses on only one aspect or dimension of society, but rather a fully developed political consciousness that is able to address the many ways in which the working-class struggles under capitalism. For Lenin, Social-Democratic theory should not lag behind the working class, supporting whatever spontaneous outbreak happens to come along next. Rather, theory should be at the forefront, with a vanguard of professional revolutionaries armed with the most advanced theoretical tools leading the way. Only this, he argues, will provide the agency necessary for a successful revolution. This vanguard of professional revolutionaries “...combined voluntarily, precisely for the purpose of fighting the enemy.”⁵⁹ This work is not left to the spontaneous or ‘organic’ development of the working class. Perhaps there is a tendency of the working-class towards left-leaning politics; this tendency, however, is not always strong enough to win the day. Historically at any rate, Lenin is still right insofar as spontaneous revolutionary tendencies have not yet succeeded in revolutionary action. This kind of agency must be developed – by and through the political ‘Social-Democratic’ consciousness of the working class.

Luxemburg’s Critique of Centralization

In “Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy” Rosa Luxemburg provides a sustained critique of the strategy of centralization adopted by Lenin and the Bolshevik party in Russia.⁶⁰ She warns against the tendency to centralize and consolidate power in one political

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 161.

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 10.

⁶⁰ Note that her critique is before the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917.

party, arguing that it is in and through the mass movement of the workers that the revolutionary and transformative power lies. According to Luxemburg, class consciousness arises through working-class engagement in spontaneous economic, social, and political action, and that it is not necessary for it to be ‘brought from without.’ At best, this top down approach is out of touch with the mass of workers; at worst, it manipulates them into acting in the interest of the party elite and not their own class interest. Agency is indeed developed and maintained in revolutionary organizing; Luxemburg’s worry, however, is that this agency will direct the revolutionary kernel of the masses away from their own interest. Luxemburg’s worry is justified, even if a vanguard party of professional revolutionaries plays a crucial role in the development and continuation of proletarian class consciousness.

Luxemburg, at the beginning of her essay criticizing Lenin, warns that while parallels can and should be drawn between different revolutionary movements happening in different places and at different points in history, making these connections requires understanding the context and material conditions out of which they arise. Lessons can indeed be learned from studying these revolutionary moments as long as one attends to these differences. This attention to difference, she argues, is precisely what Lenin misses in his analysis of the class struggle in Russia. “Lenin sees the whole of the difference between Social Democracy and Blanquism in the organization and the class consciousness of the proletariat as opposed to the conspiracy of a small minority.”⁶¹ The conditions in Russia, Luxemburg asserts, are very different from the conditions in France that allowed Blanqui and his small band of followers to engage in their revolutionary action. She continues: “He forgets that this difference implies a complete revision

⁶¹ Luxemburg, “Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy” p. 288.

of the concept of organization, a whole new content for the concept of centralism, and a whole new conception of the reciprocal relation of the organization and the struggle.”⁶² Because of these differences, she argues, no ready-made, pre-established tactics⁶³ can be determined in advance by any kind of central committee, even if such a central committee employs the most accurate Social-Democratic theory and propaganda.

The type of centralization favored by Lenin, Luxemburg argues, draws too sharp of a distinction between the masses and the party leadership. This hard and fast distinction relies on the blind obedience of the workers – a ‘skill’ learned from and perfected by employment within a capitalist economy. Obedience, Luxemburg argues, is precisely the opposite character trait needed by the masses engaging in revolutionary action. Rather, it is in and through struggle that the working class arrives at an awareness of the economic structure of capitalism, as well as their class position in it. Thus, the proletariat, insofar as they are already engaged in the class struggle, maintain, continue, and develop the “class-conscious kernel”⁶⁴ of the movement. Instituting a division between this kernel and the party leaders thus not only puts those leaders out of touch, but also separates them from precisely the conditions that make revolutionary or transformative action possible. It follows that a ‘vanguard’ party out of touch with this kernel could be a ‘vanguard’ in name only, since it would be disconnected from the very possibility it is supposedly attempting to actualize.

⁶² Ibid., p. 288.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 289.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 289-290: “It follows that the Social Democratic centralization cannot be based on blind obedience, nor on the mechanical subordination of the party militants to a central power. On the other hand, it follows that an absolute dividing wall cannot be erected between the class-conscious kernel of the proletariat already organized as party cadre, and the immediate popular environment which is gripped by the class struggle and finds itself in the process of class enlightenment.”

Luxemburg argues that in order for Social Democratic centralism to be effective in Russia, the following conditions must be met. First, there must be a “noteworthy stratum of proletarians already schooled in the political struggle,” and second there must be the possibility for these workers to “express their influence” in multiple arenas.⁶⁵ These conditions, particularly the second, decidedly did not hold in Russia during this historical moment (Luxemburg publishes this essay in 1904, importantly before the failed uprising of 1905). She admits that the first condition was being developed, calling it “the building of a class-conscious vanguard of the proletariat capable of self-direction.”⁶⁶ The principle goal of organizational or agitational work, she continues, should be the nurturing of the development of this vanguard.

Luxemburg’s critique of Lenin is not that he posits the necessity of a vanguard of professional revolutionaries, but rather that centralization, at this historical moment, does more harm to the working-class movement (as well as the development of their class consciousness) than good. With respect to the necessity of a vanguard party – a group of dedicated revolutionaries whose explicit aim is the development of class consciousness and the collective engagement in revolutionary action – Luxemburg is in fact in agreement with Lenin’s view. The only caveat she might add is that at least some of these professional revolutionaries must themselves come from the working class, and more importantly that no sharp distinction should be drawn between them and the working-class masses.

Further, it appears that on the question of class consciousness, Luxemburg is very much in agreement with Lenin, stating: “The great socialist significance of the trade-union and parliamentary struggles is that through them the *awareness*, the consciousness, of the proletariat

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 290.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 290-291.

becomes socialist, and it is organized as a class.”⁶⁷ Just as Lenin argues that the class struggle needs to be expanded beyond the narrow focus of the economic realm, Luxemburg’s position here⁶⁸ is that trade-union and parliamentary struggles in themselves are not revolutionary, but are important steps to the realization that only through revolution can the problems of capitalism be resolved. The movement from proletariat to socialist mirrors Lenin’s conception of the development from embryonic trade-unionist consciousness to a fully-fledged Social-Democratic consciousness. Whereas the proletarian or trade-unionist consciousness is involved only in the economic struggle, the socialist consciousness is involved in the class struggle in all of its forms, in all⁶⁹ of the realms of society, including the economic, the political, and the cultural.

Luxemburg’s ultimate point is that while *theory* might be brought to the working class from without, political *agency* cannot, or at least not in its entirety. The class-conscious kernel of the working class needs to be nurtured. It is not enough for a small, elite group of revolutionaries to engage in revolutionary action. The proletarian class must also engage in this struggle. “The mass of the proletariat must do more than stake out clearly the aims and direction of the revolution. It must also personally, by its own activity, bring socialism step by step into life.”⁷⁰ Thus the party certainly has a role to play in the formation of class consciousness in particular, and the engagement in revolutionary action in general; however, Luxemburg concludes that the masses should not unthinkingly follow the party leadership in blind obedience. Development

⁶⁷ Luxemburg, “Social Reform or Revolution” p. 86.

⁶⁸ She also develops this argument at greater length in “Reform or Revolution” arguing convincingly against Bernstein’s incrementalism.

⁶⁹ For Luxemburg, the Social Democratic Party is the lightning rod for the discontents of all classes of society. For example, see Luxemburg, “Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy” p. 303: “The proposition that Social Democracy...becomes true through the process of historical development by means of which Social Democracy, as a political party, gradually becomes the haven of the different dissatisfied elements of society, becoming a party of the people opposed to a tiny minority of capitalist rulers.”

⁷⁰ Luxemburg, “What does the Spartacus league want?” p. 368.

also occurs within the political activity and class struggle of the proletariat, and these insights should not be dismissed by party leadership, or any group of vanguard revolutionaries.

Ultimately, it is the relation between these different elements – between mass and leaders, between economic, political, social, etc., aspects of the class struggle, between Social-Democratic theory and agitational practice, between the embryonic consciousness of the trade-unionists and the fully class consciousness of the professional vanguard – that must be emphasized overall.

In Lenin's defense, he was aware that revolution itself cannot be brought from without. He recognizes the need for a "revolutionary situation" that no vanguard party, no matter how powerful or influential, could implement on its own. Consider the following passage from Lenin:

To the Marxist it is indisputable that a revolution is impossible without a revolutionary situation; furthermore, it is not every revolutionary situation that leads to revolution. What, generally speaking, are the symptoms of a revolutionary situation? We shall certainly not be mistaken if we indicate the following three major symptoms: (1) when it is impossible for the ruling classes to maintain their rule without any change; when there is a crisis, in one form or another, among the "upper classes," a crisis in the policy of the ruling class, leading to a fissure through which the discontent and indignation of the oppressed classes burst forth. For a revolution to take place, it is usually insufficient for "the lower classes not to want" to live in the old way; it is also necessary that "the upper classes should be unable" to live in the old way; (2) when the suffering and want of the oppressed classes have grown more acute than usual; (3) when, as a consequence of the above causes, there is a considerable increase in the activity of the masses, who uncomplainingly allow themselves to be robbed in "peace time," but, in turbulent times, are drawn both by all the circumstances of the crisis and by the "upper classes" themselves into independent historical action.⁷¹

A vanguard party might be better or worse at identifying where and when these conditions hold, but it is not the responsibility of that party to create them. Despite his appeal to centralization,

⁷¹ Lenin, "The Collapse of the Second International"

Lenin does not dismiss the necessity of these revolutionary conditions out of which the possibility of transformative action arises. This means that when considering the capacity for revolutionary activity, these material conditions are indispensable to the analysis. No level of class consciousness among the vanguard or organizational prowess of the party can replace the necessity of these conditions.

Luxemburg's warning against centralization of power and the division between party leadership and the working-class masses is poignant, especially considering that she made it over a decade before the successful Bolshevik Revolution in Russia. While she may agree with Lenin on the importance of developing class consciousness among the proletarian workers, Luxemburg emphasizes the need for close attention to the material conditions of society. Certainly Social-Democratic theory can help determine tactics and strategy, but nothing can replace the education of actually engaging in class struggle.

Conclusion

Thinking about the relationship between class consciousness and political agency today requires that we first look at the historical moment in which we find ourselves. Does it meet any of the three requirements that Lenin sets out? If not, then the time is not ripe for revolution. This does not mean, however, that the revolutionary vanguard has no further responsibilities and must sit and wait patiently for the right time to strike. On the contrary, it is precisely in this time of relative calm that the professional revolutionary must engage in agitation, raising class consciousness and building as much power as possible so that when the next crisis occurs (and it will always occur according to a Marxist critique of capitalist economy, sooner or later) they will be ready. In order to understand the political agency at stake, and for class consciousness to be a useful concept in the 21st century, we must first understand both our contemporary historical

moment, (i.e., the particular groups that have already formed or could form in order to carry out revolutionary action) as well as the relationship between both these elements. As we will see below, Lukács' own attempt to develop a concept of class consciousness draws explicitly on both Lenin and Luxemburg's arguments.

Introduction to Lukács

In this section, I will argue that Georg Lukács defends a concept of class consciousness that includes not only an epistemic aspect, but also an agential one. He does this in part by incorporating both Lenin and Luxemburg's account (as well as that of Marx and Engels) by showing that class consciousness signifies an 'imputed' position that is determined by the class struggle. Lukács develops this position as the standpoint of the proletariat, an epistemic position whereby society can be understood as a concrete totality. According to Lukács, the bourgeoisie can also be class conscious; however, this consciousness understands the laws of economy as natural or naturalized laws, and thus cannot understand the fundamental (dialectical) principles by which society operates. This bourgeois consciousness can only rise to a level that advocates reform of the system, but not a complete transformation of it. The proletarian class consciousness on the other hand understands that reform to the system does not resolve the fundamental contradictions inherent to capitalism, and thus is capable of thinking through or beyond them.

For Lukács, moving beyond capitalism in theory is tied to moving beyond it in practice. This entails that there is a crucial connection between the epistemic aspect of class consciousness that recognizes both the possibility and desirability of fundamentally restructuring society, and the agential aspect that entails actually being able to change it. Simply put, the 'ought' that is

entailed by the class-conscious standpoint of the proletariat implies a ‘can’ that is attached to the capacity for transformative action. Thus, a thin concept of class consciousness – a concept that includes only the epistemic aspect – misses this capacity, and results in a deficient model of class consciousness that risks fatalism or determinism. A thick concept of class consciousness – a concept that includes both the epistemic and agential aspects – avoids this fatalism.

This section focuses on Lukács’ early work, concentrating primarily on *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács’ own relationship to this text changes considerably over his lifetime, as he discusses in the 1967 preface. Despite this distance, I follow Frederic Jameson in understanding *History and Class Consciousness* as a jumping off point, rather than a self-contained position. The first part presents his account of class consciousness, showing how and where he draws on both Lenin and Luxemburg for insight. The second part explores the concept of class consciousness in more detail through a comparison between bourgeois and proletarian class consciousness. I show that proletarian class consciousness is superior epistemologically, since it opens onto the possibility of going beyond its own immediacy. The third part draws a distinction between a thick and thin notion of class consciousness. A thin notion of class consciousness would include merely the epistemological dimension – a thick notion would also include the agency to change society. I argue that Lukács’ account is already a thick notion, and that to best think through the relationship between consciousness and agency, we must further develop this thick notion of class consciousness.

Lukács’ Dialectical Account of Class Consciousness

In the essay entitled “Class Consciousness” Lukács lays out a programmatic understanding of the concept of class consciousness. On his view, class consciousness is not the empirical consciousness of actually existing members of a class, or even their mass

psychological consciousness. Rather, it is a consciousness that can be ‘imputed’⁷² from their class situation or position. Lukács arrives at this position through a dialectical unification of both Lenin and Luxemburg’s account of party organization. From Lenin, he takes the emphasis on conscious activity, especially in the form of a vanguard professional revolutionaries that reaches its highest expression in the Communist Party. From Luxemburg, he takes the emphasis on the development of the proletariat as a class arising from its concrete class struggles (in either parliamentary or trade-unionist forms). In this unification, Lukács constructs an account of class consciousness that emphasizes the mediation of becoming conscious of a class. Ultimately for Lukács, the Party is the highest concrete expression of class consciousness. While he is optimistic⁷³ concerning the revolutionary potential of the actually existing Communist Party of his day, it is important to note that his account of class consciousness does not guarantee successful revolutionary action.

In the essay “The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg” Lukács argues that the thought of Luxemburg and Lenin should be seen as “the theoretical rebirth of Marxism.”⁷⁴ Luxemburg’s theoretical project, Lukács argues, should be understood as picking up where Marx’s *Capital* left off. As Lukács notes (and as noted above), Luxemburg rightly observes that organization is seldom the cause of revolutionary action, but rather usually its effect. The (spontaneous) revolutionary ‘action’ of the masses reveals the necessity of some organizing body so that this action does not dissipate during times of relative calm. On this view, the party is the bearer of the class consciousness of the proletariat. The limits of her position, Lukács argues, is that “it

⁷² Lukács provides an extended account of his use of the term imputed in an unpublished defense of *History and Class Consciousness*. See the section entitled ‘imputation’ in Lukács, *A Defense of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic*, p. 63-86.

⁷³ A critique of this optimistic outlook with respect to the Communist Party is taken up in Chapter 2.

⁷⁴ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 35.

consists in the *overestimation* of its [the proletarian Revolution] purely proletarian character, and therefore the overestimation both of the external power and of the inner clarity and maturity that the proletarian class can possess” in the first stages of revolutionary struggle.⁷⁵ Conversely, this position also entailed an underestimation of the importance of non-proletarian elements. Thus, more generally, she overestimates the organic and spontaneous elements of revolutionary action. This overestimation, Lukács continues, is an uncharacteristically undialectical position for Luxemburg to take. He grants that the kernel of revolutionary action does arise from the spontaneous action of the proletariat; however, Lukács argues that an overestimation of this spontaneity denies the *conscious* aspects of revolutionary action, and thus leads to less effective political strategy.

To theorize this conscious aspect of organization, Lukács turns to Lenin, arguing that his arguments in defense of the Social-Democratic consciousness supplement Luxemburg’s position, leading to a better account of class consciousness. This conscious action is crucial to revolutionary action because, contra Luxemburg, the proletariat as a class (as well as proletarian class consciousness) does not develop evenly, uniformly, or even continually over time. Lukács cites Lenin as saying that in capitalist democracy “developments do not always lead smoothly and directly to further democratization.”⁷⁶ In other words, consciously directed action is necessary for any revolution because spontaneous action alone is rarely sufficient to make it successful. As the history of the twentieth century has shown, even in those situations where spontaneous and conscious action were married together, success is not guaranteed. Relying too

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 274.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

heavily on the spontaneous, organic development of the proletarian class ultimately devolves into a kind of fatalism.

Lukács emphasizes the conscious aspects of revolutionary action precisely so that he does not fall into this fatalism. Class consciousness must be more than merely the consciousness of, or produced by, a class engaged in class struggle. It must entail the dialectical relation between the spontaneous and conscious elements;⁷⁷ or more broadly speaking, a dialectical relation between theory and practice. Lastly, Lukács points out that the antithesis between Luxemburg and Lenin, while deeply rooted in the history of Marxism, is a disagreement about organizational considerations rather than tactics. They were “politically and theoretically”⁷⁸ in agreement on most issues, particularly with respect to the need to combat opportunism. I will pick up this discussion about Party organization and its relation to group agency in Chapter 3; however, it is important to keep in mind that despite their polemics against one another, their positions are quite close together, as Lukács shows.

In uniting the positions of Luxemburg and Lenin, Lukács defends the view that the concept of class consciousness must take a central position in both the theory and practice of revolutionary action. He gives the following definition of class consciousness: “Now class consciousness consists in fact of the appropriate and rational reactions ‘imputed’ [zugerechnet] to a particular typical position in the process of production.”⁷⁹ Two aspects of class consciousness according to Lukács immediately stand out. First, class consciousness is rooted in the ‘typical position’ of a class within a particular mode of production. Clearly this is in line with

⁷⁷ Feenberg refers to this as the dilemma between structure and agency in *The Philosophy of Praxis: Marx, Lukács, and the Frankfurt School*.

⁷⁸ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 284.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

a thoroughly material and historical approach of Marx (as well as Lenin and Luxemburg). Class consciousness is not something independent from the material conditions of society, floating in ‘spirit’ in an ideal form. It is generated by and through class struggle. Second, it is ‘appropriate’ and ‘rational’ and thus is not tied to the actually existing consciousness of anyone or group within society. He goes on to clarify this position: “This consciousness is, therefore, neither the sum nor the average of what is thought or felt by the single individuals who make up the class.”⁸⁰ While determining the actually existing consciousness of members or groups in society may be an important political or tactical step in order to engage in revolutionary action, it does not determine the content of the concept of class consciousness. Rather, the content is ‘imputed’ via a class analysis, i.e., an analysis of society from the standpoint of a particular class.

Lukács concludes this definition by emphasizing the role of class consciousness on the movement of a society in history: “And yet the historically significant actions of the class as a whole are determined in the last resort by this consciousness and not by the thought of the individual – and these actions can be understood only by reference to this consciousness.”⁸¹ Understanding the consciousness of individual members or groups in society is undertaken by reference to this concept of class consciousness, not the other way around. Indeed, Lukács goes on to highlight the practical significance of the differences between this imputed consciousness and the actually existing empirical consciousness of individuals or groups in society. However, in order to understand society, one must take up this standpoint of the class (in particular, the standpoint of the proletariat) rather than the standpoint of the individual.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 51.

⁸¹ Ibid.

The concept of class consciousness is thus a lens or perspective through which to look at society. As a lens or perspective, Lukács emphasizes the relationality within the concept of class consciousness, arguing that it plays the role of a mediating force.⁸² Unlike in previous revolutions, where the class interests of the revolutionary class could be understood in their immediacy, the class consciousness of the proletariat must be different, since “its class consciousness must develop a dialectical contradiction between its immediate interests and its long-term objectives, and between the discrete factors and the whole.”⁸³ Whether implicit (as in previous revolutions) or explicit (as with the proletariat revolution), the concept of class consciousness is not immediately given, but rather acts as a force of mediation – for example as a crystallization of the class struggle in practice, or as expressed in and by the Party in theory. Setting aside for the moment Lukács’ optimism in the role of the party, it is important to note that he cautions that even with this proper account of class consciousness, the revolution is not guaranteed⁸⁴ to be a success.

⁸² Cf. *Ibid.*, p. 163.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 71.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 43. Of Luxemburg’s ‘certainty’ of revolutionary action, Lukács says: “What they call faith and seek to deprecate by adding the epithet ‘religious’ is nothing more nor less than the certainty that capitalism is doomed and that – ultimately the proletariat will be victorious. There can be no ‘material’ guarantee of this certitude. It can be guaranteed methodologically – by the dialectical method. And even this must be tested and proved by action, by the revolution itself, by living and dying for the revolution. A Marxist who cultivates the objectivity of the academic study is just as reprehensible as the man who believes that the victory of the world revolution can be guaranteed by the ‘laws of nature’.”

Epistemic Difference between Bourgeois and Proletarian Class Consciousness

While each class in society can be class conscious, Lukács focuses primarily on bourgeois and proletarian consciousness. While both are dialectical (unlike other classes),⁸⁵ the proletarian class consciousness goes beyond that of the bourgeoisie because it is able to understand society as a concrete totality. Bourgeois consciousness is not able to resolve its own contradictions, and thus relies on the illusion of atomization and the insistence on the eternality of its own economic laws, describing them as ‘laws of nature.’ The class consciousness of the proletariat, as understood as taking up the standpoint of the proletariat, indicates this epistemic dimension of the role of class consciousness. The main difference, then, between the class consciousness of different classes is this ability to understand the whole.⁸⁶

While for Lukács both bourgeois and proletarian class consciousness are dialectical, the standpoint of the bourgeoisie is unable to transcend its own immediacy, and thus restricts its standpoint to that of the individual. For example, “Bourgeois thought observes economic life consistently and necessarily from the standpoint of the individual capitalist and this naturally produces a sharp confrontation between the individual and the overpowering supra-personal ‘law of nature’ which propels all social phenomena.”⁸⁷ From the standpoint of the bourgeoisie, there

⁸⁵ Marx and Engels are also aware that actually existing capitalist society is not simply split between bourgeoisie and proletariat. This class struggle, however, is the primary class antagonism within a system of capitalism, and thus are the ones a Marxist analysis often focus on. Even by Lukács’ time a middle class had begun to grow, which complicates the class situation considerably. For an analysis of this, with an interesting example of ‘contradictory class locations,’ see Wright, *Classes*.

⁸⁶ Martin Jay, in *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukacs to Habermas*, provides a history of the concept of totality as it appears in Marxist thought in the 20th century. While there is not space here to address all of his concerns about the concept, especially as Lukács deploys it, I do return briefly at the end of this section, as well as below in Chapter 2.

⁸⁷ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 63.

is a dialectical relation between the ‘free’ individual and the determinate economic structure. Thus, bourgeois class consciousness is unable to overcome this contradiction.

This entails that there is a necessary⁸⁸ illusion of the atomization of the individual wherein “this isolation and fragmentation is only apparent.”⁸⁹ In fact, the commodity form informs all relations under capitalism such that the inherently *social* aspect of the relation is covered over. The commodity becomes the universal category of society as a whole.

Only then does the commodity become crucial for the subjugation of men’s consciousness to the forms in which this reification finds expression and for their attempts to comprehend the process or to rebel against its disastrous effects and liberate themselves from servitude to the ‘second nature’ so created.⁹⁰

Under ‘normal’ capitalist conditions, the worker’s consciousness is reified because they cannot see beyond their immediate situation. In overcoming this reification,⁹¹ proletarian class consciousness is able to understand the inherently social aspect of the commodity and see society as a whole. Bourgeois class consciousness cannot understand this inherent sociality because it goes against its own immediate class interests. As a class, the bourgeoisie persists through the accumulation of surplus value, thus through the exploitation of the worker. If the worker is exploited, however, she cannot be ‘free’ or atomized in the way that classical economics assumes. Thus, the full realization of bourgeois class consciousness leads away from the standpoint of the capitalist, and towards the standpoint of the proletariat. The bourgeois

⁸⁸ Ibid., p. 92.

⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 91.

⁹⁰ Ibid., p. 86.

⁹¹ I return to the concept of reification below in Chapter 2

intellectual, according to Lukács, must either abandon his class position, or resort to a kind of false consciousness in order to continue defending his class interest.⁹²

The standpoint of the proletariat, on the other hand, does not run into the same problem. While in its immediacy it is the same for both proletariat and bourgeoisie, the means by which it is mediated through its class consciousness is very different.⁹³ Consider the following:

For the proletariat to become aware of the dialectical nature of its existence is a matter of life and death, whereas the bourgeoisie uses the abstract categories of reflection, such as quantity and infinite progression, to conceal the dialectical structure of the historical process in daily life only to be confronted by unmediated catastrophes when the pattern is reversed.⁹⁴

The main limitation of the standpoint of the bourgeoisie is that it takes the mediated relations in society as immediate facts. This leads to two problems. First, it takes the inherently contingent laws of society as universal and eternal, akin to the laws of nature; and second, it cannot explain the periodic crises that are generated by the system itself, and so can only posit them as catastrophic, accidental events. The standpoint of the proletariat, on the other hand, does not face these limitations. It understands the laws of society as mediated social relations, and thus understands the laws of society as fundamentally changeable and mutable. Further, it sees that capital itself generates its own crises, and thus sees them as opportunities to further the interests of the proletariat rather than an abnormality or something that could be avoided. Ultimately, Lukács argues, the superiority of the proletariat as a class is not because it is better organized or

⁹² Cf. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 164: "...this same reality employs the motor of class interests to keep the bourgeoisie imprisoned within this immediacy while forcing the proletariat to go beyond it."

⁹³ Ibid., p. 150: "To put it more concretely: the objective reality of social existence is *in its immediacy* 'the same' for both proletariat and bourgeoisie. But this does not prevent the *specific categories of mediation* by means of which both classes raise this immediacy to the level of consciousness...from being fundamentally different, thanks to the different position occupied by the two classes within the 'same' economic process."

⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 164-165.

has more power in society, but because it is able to understand society as a whole. This understanding of the whole of society, paired with active, conscious intervention, is what constitutes the capacity of the proletariat to engage in political action that can change society.

The epistemic advantage or the standpoint of the proletariat is that it can think society as a concrete totality. In order to understand society as a whole, Lukács argues that we must use the category of totality. “The category of totality, the all-pervasive supremacy of the whole over the parts is the essence of the method which Marx took over from Hegel...”⁹⁵ A method that prioritizes the part over the whole, while perhaps partially successful in localized areas, cannot get at the underlying movement of society.⁹⁶ Bourgeois historians, for example, think that they arrive at such analysis by locating the concrete in either the empirical individual or an empirically given consciousness.⁹⁷ Understanding this concrete totality is actually something else entirely. “Concrete analysis means then: the relation to society *as a whole*. For only when this relation is established does the consciousness of their existence that men have at any given time emerge in all its essential characteristics.”⁹⁸ Concrete analysis does not and cannot understand individuals or even groups of individuals in their abstract relation to one another devoid of any

⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 27.

⁹⁶ Ibid., p. 28: “The category of totality, however, determines not only the object of knowledge but also the subject. Bourgeois thought judges social phenomena consciously or unconsciously, naively or subtly, consistently from the standpoint of the individual. No path leads from the individual to the totality; there is at best a road leading to aspects of particular areas, mere fragments for the most part, ‘facts’ bare of any context, or to abstract, special laws. The totality of an object can only be posited if the positing subject is itself a totality; and if the subject wishes to understand itself, it must conceive of the object as a totality. In modern society only the *classes* can represent this total point of view.”

⁹⁷ Ibid., p. 50.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

other characteristics. Individuals in society are not abstractions – when we relate to each other, it is not qua atomized individual, but as a worker, as a capitalist, etc.⁹⁹

Lukács emphasized the dialectical nature of this relation. There are both subjective and objective aspects of this consciousness, and thus neglecting one of these sides of the relation cannot lead to an understanding of the whole. This is the process by which Lukács comes to understand the role of (proletarian) class consciousness in the analysis of society. “The relation with concrete totality and the dialectical determinants arising from it transcend pure description and yield the category of objective possibility.”¹⁰⁰ Objective possibility is not mere logical possibility, but rather describes what is possible given certain objective conditions.¹⁰¹ As we saw above, this focus on the particular, material conditions of society runs throughout the Marxist analysis. Lukács continues: “By relating consciousness to the whole of society it becomes possible to infer the thoughts and feelings which men would have in a particular situation if they were *able* to assess both it and the interests arising from it in their impact on immediate action and on the whole structure of society.”¹⁰² The relationship of consciousness with society as a concrete totality understood via dialectical method (i.e., historical materialism) is epistemologically superior to other methods of understanding society, since it does not take its own mediated relations as themselves immediate. Failing to see this relation (or covering it

⁹⁹ I would add here that not only as economic designations, but also as a woman or man, as homosexual or as heterosexual, as trans or cis, etc. While Lukács focuses primarily on the economic categories, on his own account, we must also look at these other social categories if we are to understand society as a whole. As DuBois argues, for example, the relation of the white proletariat to capital is not identical to that of the black proletariat, so in order to understand the totality at any given time, we must also attend to these social differences.

¹⁰⁰ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 51.

¹⁰¹ For a longer discussion of objective possibility, see Chapter 1 of Macdonald, *What Would Be Different: Figures of Possibility in Adorno*. I pick up on the category of possibility in Chapter 2 below, particularly with respect to Adorno’s critique of Lukács.

¹⁰² Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 51.

over), we can only arrive at some type of false consciousness. That the standpoint of the proletariat entails a correct dialectical view of society as a whole is a benefit that on Lukács' view, no other class has access to.

While this understanding of society as a concrete totality involves understanding history as a unified process, it does not entail a *totalizing* epistemic position. For Lukacs, the process of history unfolds dialectically such that any analysis of this or that aspect in isolation will miss its relation to the whole. Such an analysis might accurately describe the essential elements of a particular historical event, yet it misses the underlying relations, and thus its “function in the historical totality.”¹⁰³ The function of this historical totality, or an understanding of society as a concrete totality does not require the flattening out of differences within the whole. On the contrary, “the category of totality does not reduce its various elements to an undifferentiated uniformity, to identity.”¹⁰⁴ For Lukács, the category of totality enables us to understand the multitude of social relations in their complexity *without* recourse to abstraction.

While this use of the category of totality is perhaps not without its own problems,¹⁰⁵ it reveals the dialectical relation Lukács sees between the class position of the proletariat, and its epistemic standpoint. Both objectively and subjectively, the proletariat as a class occupies a position within society that can understand society as a concrete totality without abandoning its own class position. The standpoint of the bourgeoisie might get close, but cannot arrive at this position without abandoning either their class interest or epistemic position.¹⁰⁶ The standpoint of

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 12.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

¹⁰⁵ Cf. Jay, *Marxism and Totality*.

¹⁰⁶ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 181: “This can be seen only from the standpoint of the proletariat because the meaning of these tendencies is the abolition [*aufheben*] of capitalism and so for the bourgeoisie to become conscious of them would be tantamount to suicide.”

the proletariat incorporates both the epistemic position and its class interest because through an understanding of society as a whole, its class interest belongs to the overcoming of the system of capitalism rather than its continuation. It is for this reason that a concept of political agency is a crucial element of the proletarian class consciousness.

In Defense of the Agential Component of Class Consciousness

It is hopefully clear from the preceding section that the concept of class consciousness Lukács develops includes an epistemic component. It is important, however, to distinguish between two different notions of class consciousness – a thick and thin notion. A thin notion of class consciousness entails only an epistemic dimension, whereas a thick notion of class consciousness also includes an agential dimension. In this section, I argue that Lukács defends the latter, implying that the proletariat as a class has a certain kind of agency – the agency to overthrow capitalism – even if this agency is latent, and requires the organization of a party in order to manifest it fully.

In order to understand Lukács' position with respect to proletarian class consciousness, it is important to understand his rejection of the dilemma between fatalism and voluntarism. Fatalism is the position that the revolution will either happen or it will not, so any active, conscious intervention in political events ultimately cannot affect their outcome. Voluntarism, on the other hand, is the position that active, conscious intervention is able to make or create a revolutionary situation or outcome. Lukács rejects both these positions, arguing that:

Fatalism and voluntarism are only mutually contradictory to an undialectical and unhistorical mind. In the dialectical view of history, they prove to be necessarily complementary opposites, intellectual reflexes clearly expressing the antagonisms

of capitalist society and the intractability of its problems when conceived in its own terms.¹⁰⁷

The standpoint of the proletariat, insofar as it entails a dialectical understanding of society as a whole, incorporates a way of understanding the relationship between these two seemingly contradictory positions. Taking either the fatalist or voluntarist position entails a one-sided understanding of the relationship of the proletarian class to the whole of society. Understood dialectically, these two opposing positions reveal the antagonisms of capitalist society, as well as the impossibility of that society to resolve these antagonisms inherent to its structure without restructuring society completely. “Thus, dialectical materialism is seen to offer the only approach to reality which can give action a direction.”¹⁰⁸ Neither fatalism nor voluntarism can achieve this, since neither position admits that conscious, active intervention, while not a sufficient cause for revolution, constitutes a necessary condition of revolutionary activity.

In order to understand the dialectical nature of the class consciousness and standpoint of the proletariat, one must reject a mechanistic understanding of Marxism, particularly in the form presented at the Second International. A mechanistic understanding of society lends itself to the fatalist position, arguing that economic laws determine how and when revolutionary situations arise, and determines (at least in the last instance) the success or failure of revolutionary action. This includes positions that are optimistic about the possibility of revolutions (the spontaneity of Luxemburg, the structuralism of Althusser, etc.), or pessimistic (such as the vulgar Marxist position, or the positions of opportunists like Eduard Bernstein). Either way, Lukács argues, a mechanistic theory of society never arrives at an understanding of society as a whole.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 4.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 23.

It is precisely this epistemic insight into the dynamic, dialectical relations that is coupled with the possibility of political action. “But the class consciousness of the proletariat, the truth of the process ‘as subject’ is itself far from stable and constant; it does not advance according to mechanical ‘laws.’ It is the consciousness of the dialectical process itself: it is likewise a dialectical concept.”¹⁰⁹ In rejecting mechanistic analysis in favor of a dialectical one, Lukács emphasizes the dynamic and often volatile process by which the proletariat comes to understand and realize its place in society, as well as its relation to society as a whole.

This process of the proletariat itself becoming subject is not a straight line from unconsciousness to full consciousness. In this indeterminacy, both the epistemic and agential dimensions of the proletariat come into relief:

For the active and practical side of class consciousness, its true essence, can only become visible in its authentic form when the historical process imperiously requires it to come into force, i.e., when an acute crisis in the economy drives it to action. At other times it remains theoretical and latent, corresponding to the latent and permanent crisis of capitalism: it confronts the individual questions and conflicts of the day with its demands, but as ‘mere’ consciousness, as an ‘ideal sum,’ in Rosa Luxemburg’s phrase.¹¹⁰

The agential capacities of the proletarian class only reveal themselves in moments of (economic, political) crisis. No revolutionary vanguard, no matter how well organized or devoted to the cause can ‘make’ or ‘create’ revolution *ex nihilo*. Rather, the agential capacities of the class are revealed *through* the vanguard as the highest expression of proletarian class consciousness. As for periods of relative calm, the ‘latent’ periods between crises, the vanguard does not merely

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p 40-41.

¹¹⁰ Ibid., p. 40-41.

wait, but prepares and organizes so that it will be ready for the next opportunity for revolutionary action.

The (epistemological) standpoint of the proletariat, as we saw above, is superior to that of the bourgeoisie because it can incorporate the unity of theory and practice. This unity facilitates the possibility of action. Importantly, however, this unity should be best understood at the level of the class rather than the individual. “The scientific superiority of the standpoint of class (as against that of the individual) has become clear from the foregoing. Now we see the reason for this superiority: *only the class can actively penetrate the reality of society and transform it in its entirety.*”¹¹¹ The transformational agency of the proletariat is thus a class characteristic, and not necessarily an agency of the individual, or even a revolutionary party or vanguard. Only the class is capable of transforming society, and only if it understands its relation to society as a whole. Lukács continues: “In dialectical unity it is at once cause and effect, mirror and motor of the historical and dialectical process. The proletariat as the subject of thought in society destroys at one blow the dilemma of impotence: the dilemma created by the pure laws with their fatalism and by the ethics of pure intentions.”¹¹² The dialectical view of the relation between the proletariat as a class and society as a whole allows Lukács to overcome the duality of the dilemma between fatalism and voluntarism.

The Party, then, is not the instigator of revolution, nor does it have, by itself, this transformational agency. Rather, it is the highest expression of this (latent) capacity of the proletariat. “In this process which it can neither provoke nor escape, the Party is assigned the sublime role of *bearer of the class consciousness of the proletariat and the conscience of its*

¹¹¹ Ibid., p. 39.

¹¹² Ibid.

historical vocation.”¹¹³ As the bearer of this class consciousness, the party actively mediates between the actions of individuals or groups and the revolutionary situation in which they find themselves. It coordinates, develops, and maintains revolutionary energy, directing rather than generating it. Thus, the agential dimension of class consciousness is expressed through the party, however, the capacity of the party to engage in political action does not exhaust the potential of the class as a whole to act.

The standpoint of the proletariat as the epistemic position of the class as a whole is directly connected to the capacity of the class to act. The class consciousness of the bourgeoisie, while retaining a similar dialectical structure, cannot arrive at a position that motivates transformative action. At best, it motivates conservative action that supports the status quo, but can only understand society in its immediacy.

For the proletariat, however, this ability to go beyond the immediate in search of the ‘remoter’ factors means the *transformation of the objective nature of the objects of action*...For the change lies on the one hand in the practical interaction of the awakening consciousness and the objects from which it is born and of which it is the consciousness. And on the other hand, the change means that the objects that are viewed here as aspects of the development of society, i.e., of the dialectical totality, become fluid: they become parts of a process.¹¹⁴

This ability to see the whole of society means that the standpoint of the proletariat entails seeing society as a process. Further, as the proletariat becomes conscious of its own role in society, it understands its own agency, and is able to actualize what was previously only potential. The movement of the development of proletarian class consciousness entails its own self-understanding of these latent potentialities. Lukács continues: “And as the innermost kernel of

¹¹³ Ibid., p. 41.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., p. 175.

this movement is praxis, its point of departure is of necessity that of action; it holds the immediate objects of action firmly and decisively in its grip so as to bring about their total, structural transformation and thus the movement of the whole gets under way.”¹¹⁵ Action is a necessary component of proletarian class consciousness for Lukács because insofar as the proletariat understands its own class position, it also understands that it has the tools to overcome itself through active, consciousness intervention of society.

Despite this agential component of class consciousness, it is important to note that on Lukács’ account, a successful revolution is not guaranteed. No (theoretical) analysis, no matter how rigorous, leads directly to the success or failure of revolutionary action. The certainty that the proletariat will be victorious does not mean that successful revolutionary action is inevitable. “There can be no ‘material’ guarantee of this certitude. It can be guaranteed methodologically – by the dialectical method. And even this must be tested and proved by action, by the revolution itself, by living and dying for the revolution.”¹¹⁶ Dialectical method can reveal the epistemic and agential components, and thus show how a successful revolution might unfold. That the revolution will unfold in this or that way is not determined in advance. Further, the class consciousness of the proletariat does not develop uniformly, such that the (political, social, economic) context in which members of the proletariat find themselves concretely embedded is crucial to the deployment of revolutionary tactics and strategy.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., p. 175.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., p. 43.

Conclusion

The concept of class consciousness plays an important role in Lukács' understanding of society, as well as the way in which society can develop or transform. While *History and Class Consciousness* has been widely criticized (even and perhaps most strikingly by Lukács himself), this text has remained a core text of Marxist scholarship throughout the 20th century. Certainly Lukács' own Hegelian tendencies are apparent throughout, and his concept of class consciousness is no exception. From the way in which he mediates the insights of both Lenin and Luxemburg, to the way in which proletarian class consciousness mediates the relationship between the class and society as a whole, Lukács' is clearly thinking dialectically. This dialectical relationship, I argue, is crucial to understanding the kind of agency at the heart of proletarian class consciousness.

We must, following Lukács, reject the dilemma of fatalism or voluntarism. While successful revolutionary action is never guaranteed in advance, we must go beyond this one-sided thinking. Certainly, during Lukács' own time, the possibility of a successful Communist revolution seemed much closer on the horizon than it does today. I will pick up on this thread below in Chapter 2. In his book on Lenin, Lukács makes the following remark about the relationship between Lenin and Marx's thought: "*The actuality of the revolution: this is the core of Lenin's thought and his decisive link with Marx.*"¹¹⁷ Finding this actuality today is difficult, maybe impossible – society has changed considerably in the century after the Bolshevik Revolution. Nevertheless, the task remains; capitalist society continues to exploit workers all over the globe, and those workers continue to come together in order to contest capital's power.

¹¹⁷ Lukács, *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of His Thought*, p. 11.

Following Lukács, our task must be to continue to theorize and organize, seeking out the actuality of the revolution wherever and however we can.

Summary of Chapter 1

The early Marxist tradition may not have a fully developed account of the relationship between consciousness and agency – however from the early Marx all the way to Lukács, each of these thinkers is clearly concerned with this problem. From Marx and Engels, we see that while the agency of the individual worker under capitalism is limited through systematic alienation of her labor, a class that comes together not only in itself but against capital, has some kind of agency to change society. From Lenin we see that following the spontaneous ‘embryonic’ trade-union consciousness is almost never sufficient for large scale social transformation. Conscious intervention is necessary, not necessarily through isolated individuals acting by themselves, but through a highly organized vanguard of professional revolutionaries. From Luxemburg, we see that the heart of revolutionary action is the class struggle, and class consciousness cannot be something imposed, but must arise through revolutionary experience. From Lukács, we see that class consciousness is ‘imputed’ (not imposed) and entails not only an epistemic standpoint from which to critique bourgeois society, but also entails the agency through which that society can be changed.

Underlying these insights is an adherence to a Marxist methodology of dialectical, historical materialism. For these early Marxist thinkers, this methodology was not merely a conceptual tool to be used however one pleases. There is a constant worry about opportunism, or vulgar Marxist – a mechanistic adaptation of Marx’s insights that lead away from revolutionary

action, and toward maintaining the status quo. Lukács states that: “Materialist dialectic is a revolutionary dialectic.”¹¹⁸ Theory cannot be separated completely from practice – he reminds us of the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach that our job is to change the world, not merely to interpret it.¹¹⁹ Philosophy in a vacuum, separated completely from the material conditions of society, is at best benign bourgeois fiction, at worst, debilitating false consciousness that forecloses the possibility of revolution. What unites these thinkers is an unwavering commitment to changing society – whether this change happens in theory or in practice.

Given the historical moments that generated these ideas, especially those of Lenin, Luxemburg, and Lukács, this change appeared inevitable. Despite our own historical vantage point, and the understanding that there was no successful global Communist revolution, we should be able to see why such optimism was warranted. Since bourgeois society was not overthrown, it continued to develop and adapt to its own historical moment. As we will see below, in Chapter 2, Adorno has a very different vantage point, only twenty or thirty years later. To him, after witnessing the atrocities of the Holocaust, and a healthy mistrust of both Soviet ‘Communism’ and American consumer capitalism, such optimism is clearly unwarranted. At that time, social possibilities were heavily restricted, and the palpable revolutionary spirit waned.

Today, our task must also include taking stock of our current historical moment. This interrogation into the relationship between class consciousness and political agency constitutes the theoretical aspect of such a task. By itself, such a task remains necessarily incomplete. The practical conditions of society are a moving target. When I started this dissertation project, it

¹¹⁸ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 2.

¹¹⁹ Marx, “Theses on Feuerbach” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 145: “The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to *change* it.”

would have been impossible to predict the material conditions of society today. By the same token, it is impossible to predict what those conditions will be in a month, a week, or even a day. The task, then, is not to prepare for every possible outcome, but rather take stock of where we are, and understand, to the best of our ability, where we can go from here. Such a purely theoretical account of class consciousness cannot be given in advance, and so the work here remains necessarily incomplete. However, a more detailed understanding of the relationship between class consciousness and political agency may provide tools with which to do justice to Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach.

CHAPTER 2 LUKÁCS AND ADORNO ON POSSIBILITY, AGENCY, IDEOLOGY

As we saw in Chapter 1, early Marxist theorists are interested in the relationship between class consciousness, and the agency through which social transformation becomes possible. While Marx and Engels may not have provided a fully defined account of this relationship, Lenin, Luxemburg, and later Lukács all develop accounts of this relation in their own way. Finally, with Lukács, we get a fully formed concept of class consciousness. His account, as we will see in this chapter is not without its own shortcomings. It is for this reason that turning to Theodor Adorno, and his critique of Lukács is important. While Adorno's work is often taken to be pessimistic, I argue that his arguments about historical progress and social transformation are better understood as a commentary on the social conditions of his own historical moment. Specifically, the absence of a communist party that plays a mediating function seems especially problematic. In this chapter, I will use Adorno's arguments to deepen Lukács' account of class consciousness, arguing for an account of agency that incorporates nonidentity.

In *Minima Moralia*, Adorno discusses ideology, cultural criticism, and deception in a chapter entitled "Baby with the bath-water." He argues that the notion of culture as ideology involves a critique that reveals the deception of the illusion of culture that covers over the material conditions of society. Adorno does not deny the deceptive nature of culture; however, he warns that reducing the relations of society to their material origins misses something important. Indeed, in principle, analysis of the modes and processes of production should be sufficient to understand it completely.

But to act radically in accordance with this principle would be to extirpate, with the false, all that was true also, all that, however impotently, strives to escape the confines of universal practice, every chimerical anticipation of a nobler condition,

and so to bring about directly the barbarism that culture is reproached with furthering indirectly.¹

While not mentioned explicitly, this critique is plausibly directed at the Soviet Union, Stalinism, mechanical or vulgar Marxism, or any other reductive materialist or positivist² accounts of his time. While these kinds of criticisms might get at a real problem within capitalist society, they throw out the proverbial baby with the bathwater. In critiquing culture produced in or under capitalism, they inadvertently do away with culture *as such*, ushering in similar, or even worse dangers than it attempts to address.

It is in this spirit that Adorno critiques Lukacs' account of reification in *Negative Dialectics*. As we saw in Chapter 1, Lukács introduces this concept in his account of the standpoint of the proletariat. Prioritizing concepts like reification and alienation in one's critique of capitalist society, Adorno argues, pales in comparison to its true horrors, such as those committed by the Nazis during the Holocaust. In the wake of the atrocities of the Second World War (as well as the collapse of the German Socialist Party and the descent of the Soviet Union into Stalinism), the concept of reification seemed inadequate to describe the ills of contemporary society. At best, it betrays a certain naiveté. Not only were socialist movements in decline at the time, but the communist Party, at least as it was initially theorized by the early Marxist thinkers, did not exist anymore.

¹ Adorno, *Minima Moralia* p. 44.

² It should be noted here that standard critiques of Lukacs (including, perhaps, Adorno's own critique) attack his account as *idealist* rather than reductively materialist, although his position is also criticized as defending Stalinism. The nuances of Adorno's critique of Lukacs are discussed in Hall, "Reification, Materialism, and Praxis: Adorno's Critique of Lukacs."

Horkheimer asks Adorno "...in whose interest do we write, now that there is no longer a party and the revolution has become such an unlikely prospect?"³ Indeed, when this conversation happens in 1956, global communist revolution seemed difficult, if not impossible. This is due in large part because the groups who initially showed promise of carrying out successful revolutionary action either failed or disappeared. In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno develops an account of negativity/nonidentity/difference that while drawing on Hegelian insight, departs from his idealism in substantial ways. "Dialectics," as Adorno understands it, "is the ontology of the wrong state of things."⁴ This is to say, his project does not concern the "concrete utopian possibility" or the 'right' state of affairs. It is in this light that we should understand the opening lines of the introduction: "Philosophy, which once seemed obsolete, lives on because the moment to realize it was missed."⁵ This moment, I argue, is the moment of the 1920s, where Europe seemed on the brink of revolution. It stood poised to follow the Soviet experiment, and usher in an age of unparalleled freedom and prosperity. As Adorno sees it in 1966 when he publishes *Negative Dialectics*, this moment has passed. Not only did Europe bear witness to the atrocities of the Holocaust, but even the socialist experiment in Russia had become a totalitarian dictatorship.⁶ It is in this context that we should understand Adorno's critique of Lukács.

In this chapter, I will reconstruct Adorno's critique of Lukács, as well as provide an analysis of a conversation between Adorno and longtime friend and mentor Max Horkheimer about the relationship the role the communist party plays in establishing revolutionary social

³ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Towards a New Manifesto*, p. 33-34.

⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 11.

⁵ Ibid. p. 3.

⁶ Ibid., p. 322: "Marx and Engels...could not foresee what became apparent later, in the revolution's failure even where it succeeded: that domination may outlast the planned economy...the antagonism of economics toward mere politics, is extended beyond the specific phase of that economics."

conditions. I argue that Adorno does not completely reject Lukács' analysis of history, reification, or class consciousness, but rather that the idealist moments in Lukács are still too Hegelian. Instead of understanding the agency of the proletariat as the unified reconciliation, the agent of history as identical subject-object, Adorno's work provides the conceptual tools to develop an alternative account of agency that attends to the unreconciled and nonidentical aspects of the proletariat. Then, I engage the discussion between Horkheimer and Adorno on the absence of the party, relating their judgment concerning the possibility of social transformation to this absence. One way to understand how the proletariat in their time (and in our own as well) has not become a unified agent of history is see the function of the communist party. In the absence of the party, mediation breaks down and reconciliation is impossible. A new understanding of this agency is required to rework the concept of class consciousness, such that it can be relevant today. Before addressing this question of agency in Chapters 3 and 4, we must first see why Adorno cannot accept Lukács' analysis wholesale. As Adorno warns, we must not throw the baby out with the bath water.

Adorno's Critique of Lukács

Adorno, while certainly drawing on insights from Lukács' work, sees his account of reification and the standpoint of the proletariat as a form of Romanticism, and ultimately too idealist. According to Adorno, Lukács reproduces the same idealist problems found in Hegel's thought. Specifically, he relies on the proletariat as the 'subject-object of history' to have the capacity to transform society once it overcomes all of its own internal contradictions. Adorno critiques this position in theory, but we might also say that the failure of a global proletarian

revolution shows the practical limitations of this view.⁷ These limitations, however, do not constitute grounds for complete rejection of Lukács' position. Rather, I argue that by following Adorno in his critique, we can develop an account of agency that avoids these idealist charges and stays true to the spirit of Lukács' account of class consciousness. Despite Adorno's supposed pessimism, he provides the conceptual resources to think differently about the agency involved in class consciousness. Rather than being the unified agent of history, the proletariat is disjointed and nonidentical. It is through Adorno's nonidentity, rather than Hegelian identity, that this agency should be understood. Before turning to a closer look at agency in Chapters 3 and 4, I will first provide some conceptual groundwork by reconstructing Adorno's critique of Lukács, then argue that one important reason that revolutionary conditions no longer held for Adorno was the absence of the party.

Below, I reconstruct Adorno's critique of Lukács from *Negative Dialectics*. Adorno is wary of understanding development of society through history as 'progress' and develops a critique of Lukács' account of reification that charges it with being both Romantic and idealist. I reconstruct the argument against Lukács' 'subject-object of history' arguing that in order to address this charge of idealism, we must rethink the kind of agency that the proletariat possesses. Next, I turn to Adorno's discussion of 'the spell' to show that Adorno does not foreclose the possibility of the spell breaking, although he is certainly not as optimistic as Lukács is about the result. The path away from barbarism is not through the predetermined unity of reconciliation, but rather the nonidentical difference that remains in tension.

⁷ For example, Feenberg, while defending Lukács' against a critique from Habermas, still argues that his theory of class consciousness has been "falsified by history." Cf. Feenberg, Andrew, "Why Students of the Frankfurt School Will Have to Read Lukács."

Reification in *Negative Dialectics*

While Lukacs' name is hardly mentioned in *Negative Dialectics*, it is clear that Adorno is still drawing on his thought even as he critiques it. In order to trace out Adorno's position with respect to Lukacs, in this section I will reconstruct Adorno's critique of reification. Adorno traces the history of the concept of reification from its subjective idealist origins in Fichte through Marx to Lukacs' own use in *History and Class Consciousness*. Marx, he argues, shows how a barter system necessarily produces false consciousness through the principle of exchange. At first glance, one might assume that Marxism holds the key to the "dissolution of reification" as a kind of philosopher's stone that solves the problem entirely.⁸ This simplistic approach, which Adorno ascribes to the early Marx (in 'contradistinction' to the later Marx of *Das Kapital*), misses the fact that "reification itself is the reflexive form of false objectivity."⁹

Reducing dialectics to reification, as Adorno charges Lukacs, remains ideological insofar as it glosses over the actual causes of human suffering. "Considering the possibility of total disaster" Adorno asserts "reification is an epiphenomenon, and even more so is the alienation coupled with reification, the subjective state of consciousness that corresponds to it."¹⁰ The implicit charge against Lukács in this passage is that alienation and reification are no longer the underlying problem of capitalism. There is human suffering that is more fundamental to this problem, and Lukács' account risks missing it. Moreover, Lukács offers an abstract, ideal solution through the unity of the subject-object form embodied by the proletariat. For Adorno,

⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* p. 190.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

this unity falsely promises a new immediacy as the overcoming of capitalism – a promise that at best remains unfulfilled, and at worst no longer possible.

Ultimately for Adorno, the central role of the concept of reification in Lukacs reveals his latent Romanticism. These Romantic tendencies glorify preindustrial society, medieval towns, and a life yet unmarred by industrial production. “The meaningful times for whose return the early Lukacs yearned were as much due to reification, to inhuman institutions, as he would later attest it only to the bourgeois age.”¹¹ In response to the horrors of the modern age, the Romantic finds refuge in the past. For Adorno, however, these conditions are only glamorous insofar as they are lost.¹² Previous societies (as Marx notes in the *German Ideology*) had their own contradictions, and it is only through the rose-tinted glasses of history that one could possibly find these societies preferable to our own. Adorno’s point here is to show that even where Lukacs points to the possible future unification of subject-object, theory-practice, etc., he in fact is looking back at pre-industrial society.

Looking beyond the category of reification, Adorno is pessimistic about social transformation for the better, as well as the society’s historical progress.¹³ According to Adorno, there can be no moral certainty, since any idea of goodness that is supposed to guide action always risks that it “unwittingly take orders from the reified consciousness, from that which society has approved.”¹⁴ Politically, this insight is particularly pessimistic with respect to the possibility of transformative agency. Adorno continues: “Whatever an individual or a group may

¹¹ Ibid., p. 191.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ For a detailed account of Adorno’s critique of historical progress, see Allen, Amy. *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*.

¹⁴ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 242.

undertake against the totality they are part of is infected by the evil of that totality; and no less infected is he who does nothing at all.”¹⁵ Even the proletariat constituted as a class for itself, as the subject-object ‘agent of history,’ is still produced by the totality of capitalist society, and thus infected by it.

Since capitalism has produced the proletariat as a class, it is shot through with the very problems it seeks to solve. Following this argument to its limits, Adorno argues that it is no longer possible to believe in world-historical progress, since the history is written by the victor through force and violence, rather than a morally superior spirit.¹⁶ “The unity of world history which animates the philosopher to trace it as the path of the world spirit is the unity of terror rolling over mankind; it is the immediacy of antagonism.”¹⁷ This is not to say that progress is impossible – just that the dialectic of historical process does not always overcome itself in order to achieve a higher state. Contra Hegel,¹⁸ nothing in the logic of the unfolding of history guides society towards the victory of good over evil, of freedom over suffering.

Lukacs and the ‘Subject-Object of History’

Through these twin charges of idealism and Romanticism, Adorno ultimately rejects the central place of reification in his negative dialectics. He argues that “the category of reification, which was inspired by the wishful image of unbroken subjective immediacy, no longer merits the key position accorded to it, overzealously, by an apologetic thinking happy to absorb

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 341: “Yet world history can no longer be trusted to make progress in its passage from nation to nation, in a phase in which the victor is no longer bound to occupy the higher level that was probably always credited to him only because he was the victor.”

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*

materialist thinking.”¹⁹ Those who insist on the category of reification, such as Lukács, Adorno argues, still cling to Hegel’s problematic identitarian and idealist dialectics. Specifically, this category of reification posits an immediate subjectivity – the proletariat as ‘subject-object’ of history – that has overcome the antinomies of bourgeois thought. This critique suggests a serious shortcoming of an account of political agency based in Lukács’ concept of class consciousness. If the proletariat cannot (or has failed to) overcome this antinomy in order to (re)establish a subjective immediacy capable of transformative capacities, then the proletariat does not seem to be a good candidate to be the ‘agent of history.’ Specifically, it means that an account of class consciousness might not be able to do what Lukács hopes it can do: provide a standpoint (the standpoint of the proletariat) from which one can understand society as a concrete totality, as well as show the capacity for social transformation inherent in a class analysis. In this section, I outline Lukács’ position on the proletariat as the agency of history, noting where Lukács himself is critical of his own analysis. I argue that rather than completely rejecting Lukács’ analysis, Adorno offers a different way of looking at the political agency of the proletariat. Focusing on what remains negated, rather than the immediacy of a newly established unity, he develops an alternative way of understanding the political agency at work in the concept of class consciousness.

It should be noted that Lukács himself, in the 1967 preface to *History and Class Consciousness* admits that his earlier position in this text is flawed.²⁰ He admits that the absence

¹⁹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 374.

²⁰ This self-criticism in 1967 should be distinguished from the self-criticism published in the wake of the reception of *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács highlights the fact that the initial self-criticism was a political necessity. Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. xxxviii: “Tactically it was, however, necessary to distance myself publicly from *History and Class Consciousness* so that the real partisan warfare against official and semi-

of labor as mediator leads to the disappearance of the objectivity of nature; that there is an unintended, but overriding subjectivism in his account of the contradictions of capitalism; that ‘imputed’ consciousness and revolutionary praxis are not directly related; that concerning reification, alienation and objectification are not identical; and that to think that the proletariat can become the identical subject-object of history created via self-knowledge is an idealist impulse to ‘out-Hegel’ Hegel.

Despite these criticisms, Lukács does not completely disavow this text, instead arguing that there are still lessons to be learned. In the first place, he suggests that these problems with *History and Class Consciousness* are due to the time and place in which it was written, rather than his own errors or personal failures.”²¹ Even if his theory failed to do justice to the historical moment, it succeeded in capturing a typical view of the time period, and so is, at the very least, important for that reason. Moreover, it is important to take into account the context in which *History and Class Consciousness* was written. In order to combat the vulgar and mechanistic ‘Marxisms’ of opportunists and revisionists like Eduard Bernstein and Karl Kautsky, Lukács understood the importance of a return to Hegel. “For anyone wishing to return to the revolutionary traditions of Marxism the revival of the Hegelian traditions was obligatory.”²² Despite the latent Hegelianism, Lukács clearly remained convinced that Hegelian dialectics

official theories of literature would not be impeded by counter-attacks in which my opponents would have been objectively in the right in my view, however narrow-minded they might otherwise be.” His later relationship, as he describes in the preface, is much more nuanced than simple endorsement or rejection.

²¹ Ibid., p. xxv: “The very fact that all the errors listed here have their source not so much in the idiosyncrasies of the author as in the prevalent, if often mistaken, tendencies of the age gives the book a certain claim to be regarded as representative. A momentous, world-historical change was struggling to find a theoretical expression.”

²² Ibid., p. xxi.

should not be completely purged from Marxist analysis. That the revolutionary traditions of Marxism owe a deep debt to Hegel is a point of agreement for both Lukács and Adorno.

Given this self-criticism, as well as Adorno's critique of reification in *Negative Dialectics*, we can now reconstruct a poignant critique of the political agency at work in the concept of class consciousness. Lukács admits that the overcoming entailed by the identical subject-object of history cannot be overcome through self-knowledge. "For even when the content of knowledge is referred back to the knowing subject, this does not mean that the act of cognition is thereby freed of its alienated nature."²³ Lukács concedes that Hegel saw this in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* – for the identical subject-object to transcend its own limitations in the form of objectification and alienation, it must also transcend the object as well, and would entail "the end of objective reality and thus of any reality at all."²⁴ The identical subject-object of history would not be an agent, because it would have already resolved all of the contradictions within itself. Lukács' account risks making the potential agent impotent of the very thing it is called by history to do.

Adorno picks up on this impotence by highlighting the conditions under which the agent is intended to act. "The trouble is with the conditions that condemn mankind to impotence and apathy and would yet be changeable by human action; it is not primarily with people and with the way conditions appear to people."²⁵ Even though reified or false consciousness make the conditions of society appear necessary, they are in fact contingent: the fundamental problem is with the conditions themselves, rather than the consciousness that fails to understand. However,

²³ Ibid., p. xxiii.

²⁴ Ibid., p. xxiii-xxiv.

²⁵ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 190.

this (subjective) consciousness is also itself an objective condition of society, and thus the agency of an individual or even group within society is still bound to these conditions. Adorno's argument here is that if overcoming of the problem of alienation must happen before overcoming it, such an overcoming will never happen.²⁶

To address this, Adorno argues that one should not attempt to expunge every instance of the alien 'thingness' in our consciousness. Dialectics, as negative dialectics of the 'wrong state of things' must incorporate this otherness. "We cannot eliminate from the dialectics of the extant what is experienced in consciousness as an alien thing: negatively, coercion and heteronomy, but also the marred figure of what we should love, and what the spell, the endogamy of consciousness, does not permit us to love."²⁷ An initial reading of Lukács might assume that the political agency entailed by class consciousness would entail the complete overcoming of alienation in the proletariat as the subject-object of history. Here Adorno shows that this kind of simple reconciliation is neither possible, nor desirable.²⁸ Instead, Adorno defends an alternative approach which emphasizes the nonidentity of the relation, rather than covering over difference. The "reconciled condition" would instead find happiness "in the fact that the alien, in the proximity it is granted, remains what is distant and different, beyond the heterogeneous and beyond that which is one's own."²⁹ While the type of agency indicated by Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* might not be achievable, here Adorno points toward the possibility of

²⁶ Ibid., p. 190: "Alienation is reproduced by anxiety; consciousness – reified in the already constituted society – is not the *constituens* of anxiety."

²⁷ Ibid., p. 191.

²⁸ What remains in the reconciliation inherent to Hegel's idealism is an allusion to agency as mastery, as pure unification, ipseity, or sovereignty; autonomous action independent from the material conditions of one's society or world. This type of reconciliation is typical of the Enlightenment thinking and technical, instrumental reason that Adorno criticizes with Horkheimer in the *Dialectics of Enlightenment*.

²⁹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 191.

another kind of agency – one that implies not a complete rejection of the alien other, but includes it and allows for its difference.

Adorno and ‘The Spell’

Despite this critique of Lukács’ Hegelian tendencies, Adorno offers a different approach to these issues concerning agency by moving away from Hegel’s (idealist) insistence on reconciliation. Adorno argues that while Hegel’s prioritization of universality over particularity is true, his instantiation of the universal’s substantiality in the individual adheres to a certain kind of subjective ‘spell.’ “The spell” Adorno argues, “is the subjective form of the world spirit, the internal reinforcement of its primacy over the external process of life.”³⁰ The spell acts on those who have internalized this world spirit, creating obstacles that obscure material conditions of society. Adorno clearly believes that human beings today (in his own time, as well as our own) are under this spell. For a capitalist society, this spell takes on the fetish character of merchandise.³¹ In the process of production, something self-made becomes a thing-in-itself, from which the self cannot escape. Echoing Marx’s account of commodity exchange,³² Adorno affirms the Marxist analysis of the contradiction inherent in capitalist economy, and the resulting fetishism of the commodity. “Spell and ideology are one and the same...Its content is the tautology of identity: what ought to be is what is anyway.” The spell, as ideology, inhibits the possibility of overcoming itself by insisting that no other form of society is possible. Commodity fetishism arises from ‘objective’ economic laws, and while perhaps unfortunate, according to the logic of the spell such a situation is unavoidable.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 344.

³¹ Ibid., p. 346.

³² Cf. Marx, *Capital*.

Adorno's account of the spell as ideology³³ relates directly to the discussion of reification and Lukács above. While not citing Lukács directly, it is clear Adorno has *History and Class Consciousness* in mind. "In the spell, the reified consciousness has become total. The fact of its being a false consciousness holds out a promise that it will be possible to avoid it – that it will not last..."³⁴ That false consciousness can be transformed into proletarian class consciousness via the standpoint of the proletariat is clearly the view Adorno ascribes to Lukács. False consciousness³⁵ as reified consciousness need only be cleansed of its reification in order to be true. However, Adorno is not convinced that such a process is easy, or even happening at all. Certainly, there is a tendency within capitalist society to turn in on itself. This is the tendency found in Marx³⁶ and echoed by Lenin³⁷ that capitalist society produces the tools needed for its own destruction. Lenin realizes, however, in contrast to Luxemburg, that capitalist society creates its own tendencies, tendencies that are often taken up (unconsciously or unknowingly) by the proletariat. Adorno recognizes this worry, arguing that the outcome of the tensions within capitalist society are not, and cannot be determined in advance. History does not unfold according to a set of discoverable laws, thus "there is no telling yet whether it will be a disaster

³³ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 197: "The task of criticizing ideology is to judge the subjective and objective shares and their dynamics."

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 346.

³⁵ Adorno's account of false consciousness also appears to mirror, or perhaps invert, the structure of *ressentiment* in Nietzsche. Adorno writes "the will turns back upon the willing; as a mere means of itself it becomes an end. This turn is already a turn to the false consciousness. If the lion had a consciousness, his rage at the antelope he wants to eat would be ideology." Compare with *On the Genealogy of Morals*, Essay 1, section 13.

³⁶ The Communist Manifesto speaks of this tendency in powerful metaphors. Marx and Engels, "The Communist Manifesto" in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 478: "Modern bourgeois society with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer, who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells;" or again, p. 483: "The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave diggers."

³⁷ In *What is to Be Done?*

or a liberation.³⁸ The possibility of liberation is not foreclosed, although it cannot be guaranteed in advance.

Following this logic of uncertainty, Adorno argues that regress as well as progress can occur under the spell. The risk of regression appears because under the spell, anything alien or nonidentical is expelled. Here Adorno diverges sharply from the Hegelian principle of unity. “Whatever nonidentity the rule of identity principle will tolerate is mediated in turn by the identitarian compulsion.”³⁹ Nonidentity must be transformed, through mediation, into and through identity, or else “extirpated”⁴⁰ from subjectivity, the self, or society. Contra Hegel, Adorno defends the power of the negative, of the nonidentical. This difference gets at the heart of the dialectics Adorno is engaging in. For Hegel, Adorno argues, dialectics aims at overcoming tension or contradiction. This overcoming (*aufheben*) appears as a new unity – specifically an identity that incorporates that which has been overcome. Since for Hegel, this movement happens in and through world history, the working out of contradiction happens in spirit. A materialist dialectic, Adorno argues, cannot proceed in this way. “What is negated is negative until it has passed. This is the decisive break with Hegel. To use identity as a palliative for dialectical contradiction, for the expression of the insolubly nonidentical, is to ignore what the contradiction means.”⁴¹ In order to break the spell, we must attend to the nonidentical, unreconciled elements within society.

³⁸ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 346.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 347.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*: “But Hegel pledges allegiance to extirpation, his pathos grants the world spirit the only reality, echoing a hellish laughter in heaven.”

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

While Adorno maintains that it is possible for the spell to be broken,⁴² the effects of breaking the spell are not determined in advance. As we saw above, liberation is possible, but so is disaster. Following Adorno's argument, any agency we have to transform society is similarly uncertain. What is certain, however, is that by understanding agency that requires reconciliation, or the unity of identity, remains an abstract idealism. Following Adorno, we must not ignore the contradiction and attend to what has been negated but not yet passed. This means that the political task is less about determining an 'agent of history' whose actions guarantee the overthrow of global capitalism. Rather, it means recognizing the elements of society that remain unreconciled. There is a kind of agency in these moments of strain and struggle, albeit agency of a different kind. Adorno describes these moments theoretically: "The universal that compresses the particular until it splinters, like a torture instrument, is working against itself for its substance is the life of the particular."⁴³ Concretely, we see this splintering in moments of crisis or social upheaval. These are openings in an otherwise closed and total system – we must first do our best to understand these moments, if we are ever going to transform society.

Conclusion

Despite Adorno's critique, he is clearly influenced by Lukács' thought. What is problematic, on his view, is Lukács' latent idealism. Adorno is pessimistic about 'world-historical' progress, arguing that while there may be forces within capitalism that resist it, there is no guarantee that the future will be better than the past. Lukács' account of the proletariat as the agent of history seems to optimistic not because progress is impossible, but rather because

⁴² Ibid., p. 346: "It is not altogether unlikely that the spell is thus breaking itself. For the time being a so-called pluralism would falsely deny the total structure of society, but its truth come from such impending disintegration, from horror and at the same time from a reality in which the spell explodes."

⁴³ Ibid.

the (contingent) conditions of society do not allow for it. Following Adorno, I argue that in order to understand agency directed towards social transformation, one must look to difference and nonidentity that remains unreconciled. The spell, as the subjective, ideological dimension, according to Adorno, is also not impossible to break; his warning, however, is that breaking the spell can lead to either liberation or destruction – the result cannot be determined in advance.

In what follows, I will argue that one reason Adorno might think that the social conditions are not revolutionary is because there is no longer a Communist Party; or to be more precise, there is no longer a group that functions as the Communist Party is supposed to function. I will develop an account of the agency of such a group in Chapter 3, however for now, it is important to highlight the continuity between Adorno's position and those of the early Marxists covered in Chapter 1. Just as Marx drew on Hegelian insights in order to develop his arguments for the relationship between consciousness and agency, so too does Adorno rely on a critique of Hegelian dialectics. Thus, I read Adorno's critique of Lukács' as deepening and expanding on his underlying argument, rather than its outright rejection.

Politics Without a Party

As with the early Marxist thinkers, Adorno also agrees that the party plays an important mediating function in society that is necessary for a revolutionary situation. As we saw above, social progress is never guaranteed, especially in the absence of a party. I will return to a detailed account of the function of the party, focusing in particular on the account of agency at work. Before turning to this analysis, however, it is important to understand what Adorno and longtime friend and mentor Max Horkheimer have to say about the role of the party. In a private

conversation only recently published as *Towards a New Manifesto*, the two thinkers discuss what can be done given their contemporary historical moment. While they maintain that the conditions of their own society are decidedly not revolutionary, they hold out hope that conditions could change. They discuss the possibility of a new manifesto – one that does “justice to the current situation”⁴⁴ and stays “faithful to Marx, Engels, and Lenin.”⁴⁵ Establishing a new party, a socialist or communist party that rejected both the consumer capitalism of America and Europe as well as the authoritarianism of Russia and China would open new political possibilities. They offer no guarantees, but I argue that their discussion can help us today rework the concept of class consciousness, especially by focusing on the role of the party and the kind of agency it would have.

Below, I outline the context of the discussion between Horkheimer and Adorno concerning the absence of the party. We must consider the historical moment in which the discussion takes place. Theory and practice have become disconnected, they argue, and they do not entirely agree on what is or even could be done to remedy it. Next, I argue that despite their differences, Horkheimer and Adorno agree that while the ‘spell’ of ideology could be broken, no successful revolution is guaranteed. Specifically, the two thinkers disagree about whether history can be successful. Even if in their own historical moment, they can still send theoretical ‘messages in a bottle’ to generations in the future. Finally, I consider some remarks Adorno made about the concept of class consciousness in his *Lectures on Sociology*, arguing that rather than reject the concept completely, Adorno maintains its usefulness, as long as it takes into

⁴⁴ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Towards a New Manifesto*, p. 63.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

account the way in which capitalist society has changed since Marx's time, so that it can be reworked for our present historical moment.

Theory and Practice in Trying Times

Even though the conditions of society were not revolutionary, Adorno did not give up completely on the possibility of political progress. In a recently published transcript of a series of conversations from the spring of 1956 between Adorno and Horkheimer, it is clear that Adorno does not completely give up on the possibility of politics. While at times disjointed and unsystematic, the conversation reveals that Adorno and Horkheimer were interested in sending 'messages in a bottle' into the future in the form of theory. They admit that politics in an era without the (communist) 'Party' is difficult, if not impossible, they do not (or at least I argue that Adorno does not) acquiesce to quietism in the realm of politics. In this section, I will explore these conversations in order to reconstruct Adorno's position with respect to the possibility of politics without the party and discuss what impact this might have on our contemporary historical moment.

In the context of their discussion of the relationship between theory and practice, Horkheimer asks an important and guiding question related to the possibility of political action and agency. Despite his (theoretical) insights into social structure, Adorno worries that it would be difficult, if not impossible to put those insights to practical use. Horkheimer asks: "What is the meaning of practice if there is no longer a party? In that case doesn't practice mean either reformism or quietism?"⁴⁶ Horkheimer's point here is that practice must have some connection

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 52. See also *ibid.*, p. 33-34: "Horkheimer: Our question is, in whose interest do we write, now that there is no longer a party and the revolution has become such an unlikely prospect? My answer would be that we should

with theory, and as we saw in Chapter 1, the early Marxist thinkers saw an important connection between the party and the how social transformation happened. Without this mediation, Horkheimer's worry is that political practice can no longer be transformative. This is to say, even armed with the most advanced social theory, we are seemingly faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, we could reform the current system by trying to make life more livable. On the other hand, we could accept the futility of the political struggle, and refuse to engage in political action. Either way, he argues, the possibility of social transformation, not merely reform, no longer appears possible. This agency to transform rather than reform society no longer exists, if it ever existed at all.

Although Adorno protests that the concept of practice must be different, he seems generally in agreement. Horkheimer provides this reformulation: "By practice we really mean that we're serious about the idea that the world needs fundamental change."⁴⁷ As Marx emphasizes in the eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, interpretation of the world is not enough; fundamental social change is needed. Horkheimer ties this to a notion of difference. What is needed, he argues, is to think and act differently. However, without a party, there is no organizational structure to guide these changes. Absent revolutionary conditions, society will never transform. Theorizing in such a society seems to present itself with the dilemma above. Ultimately, however, Horkheimer's point seems to be that the choice between reform and

measure everything against the idea that all should be well. We shall probably be unable to do anything else. It is all tied up with language. Everything intellectual is connected to language. It is in language that the idea that all should be well can be articulated."

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 53: "This has to show itself in both thought and action. The practical aspect lies in the notion of difference; the world has to become different. It is not as if we should do something other than thinking, but rather that we should think differently and act differently. Perhaps this practice really just expects us to kill ourselves? We probably have to start from the position of saying to ourselves that even if the party no longer exists, the fact that we are here still has a certain value."

quietism is a false one, since neither leads to practical action. The capacity for fundamental change is radically transformed without a party to organize and guide it.

Perhaps one reason Horkheimer and Adorno see their contemporary social conditions as hopeless⁴⁸ is due in part to the historical moment during which the conversation takes place. In the spring of 1956, the two thinkers find themselves faced with a difficult political dilemma. To the West, the neoliberal societies in Europe and the USA have developed a form of capitalism they clearly reject. To the East, the so-called communist regimes in China and the USSR are not much better. Without erasing the differences between the two,⁴⁹ Horkheimer and Adorno see little reason for hope in either direction. Contemporary theory coming out of the Soviet bloc, according to Adorno, “is more reified than the most advanced bourgeois thought.”⁵⁰ The two thinkers occupy a kind of liminal space between these two existing societies; neither society offers the real possibility of revolutionary action, and yet Horkheimer and Adorno persist in their search for just such a possibility. Further, they warn against the impetus to establish ‘theory’ as a recipe for generating it. Despite such a dire situation, Adorno maintains that he has “always wanted to rectify” this problem, in order to “develop a theory that remains faithful to Marx, Engels and Lenin, while keeping up with culture at its most advanced.”⁵¹ While Horkheimer appears more convinced of the hopelessness of producing revolutionary writing in a non-revolutionary time, Adorno indicates that something of the sort is possible.

⁴⁸ Horkheimer laments, *ibid.*, p. 70: “If you produce revolutionary writings in a non-revolutionary situation without engaging with the positive aspects of a culture, it always seems somehow hopeless.”

⁴⁹ Horkheimer clarifies, *ibid.*, p. 44: “We will have to include a sentence or two to the effect that even if American TV programs are very similar to Russian ones, they do not directly advocate murder. We have to distinguish clearly between our attitudes towards the different countries.”

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

In response to Horkheimer's apparent quietism with respect to politics, Adorno suggests that not all political theory must connect directly to a contemporary revolutionary moment. "When Marx and Engels wrote the *Communist Manifesto*," he argues, "there was no party either. It is not always necessary to join up with something in existence."⁵² Here perhaps Adorno overstates the claim. Staying in line with the Marxist tradition, certainly it is necessary to join up with *something* in existence. Clearly Marx himself engaged with the political, economic, and social struggles of his time.⁵³ Adorno is not advocating for theory as independent from the material conditions of society, no matter how ideologically purified.⁵⁴ Rather, Adorno's point is that it is not always necessary to join up with an actually existing revolutionary movement or political action in order to engage in revolutionary theory. In any case, Adorno's example of Marx and Engels writing in the absence of a party is a crucial point with respect to the possibility of doing theory in an historical moment devoid of explicitly revolutionary action.

Marx and Engels did in fact 'join up' with something in existence; they closely followed the political struggles of their time and wrote about them from the standpoint of class struggle. Marx did not have, in Adorno's words, "the aura of someone godforsaken,"⁵⁵ which in turn indicates that neither should he and Horkheimer (or, for that matter, should we). Granted, the development of Marxist theory and practice from Marx's time to their own had developed through and by party politics. The advancements made in the 1920s came in large part using the Communist Party as political vehicle of social and economic transformation. However, and this seems to Adorno's point, this is not the only way in which social transformation happens. The

⁵² Ibid., p. 70.

⁵³ See the section on Marx's *18th Brumaire* in Chapter 1.

⁵⁴ See the section on *The German Ideology* in Chapter 1.

⁵⁵ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Towards a New Manifesto*, p. 71.

party, like any other form of social organization rooted in history, came into existence at some point. That it no longer exists is politically problematic, and certainly makes revolutionary engagement more difficult, but cannot, on Marxian logic, mean that it will never exist again. This means that a new form of political organization could arise that has similar function. Despite Horkheimer's repeated protests, Adorno argues that social transformation is still possible, even if in their own historical moment, it is not.

Hope, History, Ideology

The one disagreement between Horkheimer and Adorno concerns political action and the role of history. Horkheimer states that the disagreement is about faith in progress on the one hand (Adorno), and the view that history cannot achieve it (Horkheimer). In response, Adorno restates the disagreement: "Our disagreement is about whether history can succeed or not. How are we to interpret the 'can?'" On the one hand, the world contains opportunities for success. On the other hand, everything is bewitched, as if under a spell."⁵⁶ The disagreement here turns on the interpretation of 'can.' Horkheimer looks out at his own historical moment and does not see the objective possibility of revolution. That is, history cannot succeed, or achieve the desired political results, given the current state of affairs. Adorno agrees that the situation is dire, and that the 'spell' that bewitches society is a strong force. However, as we saw earlier in *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno is committed to the possibility that the spell can be broken.

While difficult and possibly disastrous, ideology, even hegemonic ideology is not without the possibility of being overcome. Adorno continues: "If the spell could be broken, success would be a possibility. If people want to persuade us that the conditional nature of man sets

⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 14.

limits to utopia, that is simply untrue. The possibility of a completely unshackled reality remains valid.”⁵⁷ Despite the bewitching spell of ideology, history can ‘succeed’ in casting off this ideology, which would open new social, political, and economic possibilities. Horkheimer is quick to point out that regression is always a possibility – that a relapse into barbarism is just as conceivable as utopia. Adorno agrees, however implicit in his responses is the position that the possibility of the former does not foreclose the possibility of the later. The tension within society that persists within capitalism does not allow for the equilibrium required to destroy the possibility of spontaneity. Adorno cannot imagine a world so intensified such that objective oppositional forces would not be unleashed.⁵⁸

Despite the piecemeal, and at times disjointed nature of this conversation, it is clear that Horkheimer and Adorno remain unwilling to give up⁵⁹ on the possibility of revolution, in theory or in practice. Towards the end of the conversations, Horkheimer argues that in the absence of the party, there are certain uncertainties involved in the relationship between theory and practice. In the realm of theory, he argues, “what is produced...no longer has anything in common with Marx, with the most advanced class consciousness; our thoughts are no longer a function of the proletariat.”⁶⁰ Horkheimer’s point here is that the production of (revolutionary) theory in a non-

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 26: “Adorno: My innermost feeling is that at the moment everything has shut down, but it could all change at a moment’s notice. My own belief is as follows: this society is not moving towards a welfare state. It is gaining increasing control over its citizens, but this control grows in tandem with the growth in its rationality. And the combination of the two is constitutive. As long as this tension persists, you cannot arrive at the equilibrium that would be needed to put an end to all spontaneity. I cannot imagine a world intensified to a point of insanity without objective oppositional forces being unleashed.” Adorno cannot imagine such a world, but Horkheimer can, *ibid.*: “The world is mad and will remain so.”

⁵⁹ Ibid.: “Horkheimer: ...Perhaps this practice really just expects us to kill ourselves? We probably have to start from the position of saying to ourselves that even if the party no longer exists, the fact that we are here still has a certain value.”

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 67.

revolutionary situation is disconnected from the practice of the current historical moment. Nevertheless, Adorno responds, saying that “In the best case, it is theory as a message in a bottle.”⁶¹ That is, theory can move beyond the historical moment in which it is produced, and speak across generations to a time and place where it might again be useful and connect to practice.

Their hope is that theory, as a message in a bottle, will connect back up with ‘the most advanced class consciousness’ such that thoughts may again be a function of the proletariat. Despite the nonrevolutionary situations the two thinkers find themselves in, Adorno still wants to develop a new Leninist manifesto. He has not given up on the world, or the possibility of social transformation, even if that possibility is foreclosed during his own historical moment. I argue that it is our job, as theorists in Horkheimer and Adorno’s future, to (re)discover these ‘messages in a bottle’ in order to think critically in a way that engages the political practices of our time. Today, perhaps we are not in a revolutionary situation;⁶² however, our own historical moment is decidedly different now than it was sixty years ago. The practical and political task, then, is to look at our own historical moment in order to determine whether the conditions are ripe for revolution. For Horkheimer and Adorno, as we saw for the early Marxists, the party plays a crucial role, particularly for understanding what can be done to transform society. I will return to the function of the party organizational structure in Chapter 3. Equipped with these messages,

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Considering recent developments, perhaps, our own historical moment is beginning to look more revolutionary than it did even a couple months ago. Given the spread of the COVID-19 virus, as well as neoliberal capitalism’s severely mismanaged response, especially in the United States, we may be entering into a new revolutionary situation. While an in-depth analysis of the existing conditions unfortunately goes beyond the present scope, I will return to this question in the conclusion of the dissertation.

perhaps we will be able to do what Horkheimer and Adorno could not – reconnect theory with practice.

Adorno and Class Consciousness

Even during the 1968 student protest movement,⁶³ it appears that Adorno maintained throughout his life that his own historical moment was not a revolutionary situation. Despite this position, however, Adorno continued theorizing, demonstrating that there was still some benefit to philosophical and sociological critique. For example, Adorno talks about class consciousness in the context of his *Introduction to Sociology* lectures. In this section, I argue that while at first it might appear that Adorno rejects use of the concept of class consciousness, he is still interested in the kind of political agency at the heart of the concept. Any indication that Adorno wants to abandon the concept of class consciousness reveals more about his own historical moment than about the theoretical usefulness of the concept as social category. Reading Adorno against himself, further interrogation into the concept of class consciousness is required, rather than its rejection altogether.

In the *Introduction to Sociology* lectures, Adorno discusses class consciousness in the context of the relationship between sociology and the essential laws of society. One might be tempted, he argues, to treat the empirical fact of diminishing class consciousness in advanced industrial nations as proof that a class analysis is no longer useful. He states “Class-consciousness is a secondary product, but it is not produced automatically by the historical process. Contrary to Marx’s prognosis and to the situation in the middle of the last century, class-

⁶³ Adorno disagreed vehemently with his longtime friend Herbert Marcuse about the revolutionary potential of the student movement in particular, and the New Left movement in general. See Adorno, Theodor and Herbert Marcuse. “Correspondence on the German Student Movement,” *New Left Review*, 123-136.

consciousness is tending to diminish.”⁶⁴ Adorno uses this example in order to explain the distinction between sociology as investigating fundamental or essential laws of society, and sociology as mere observation of social facts. He continues: “There comes a point – and I believe that this is a case in which the empirical aspect of sociology comes into its own – where a concept such as class-consciousness must be simply confronted with the reality of individual consciousness.”⁶⁵ At first, this might appear to sound as though Adorno’s position is to do away with the concept of class consciousness altogether. The reality of his current historical moment is showing the opposite historical tendency that Marx, or traditional Marxists thinkers would have expected to see. In the face of this reality, Adorno is arguing here that traditional Marxist theory cannot continue as it is or was, since material conditions have changed. However, confronting the concept of class consciousness does not necessarily entail its rejection.

Despite the trend of diminishing class consciousness in advanced industrial countries, Adorno is not advocating the retreat of theoretical considerations to “take refuge in the mere observation of facts.”⁶⁶ One might reject the appeal to class consciousness, arguing that it is simply ‘metaphysics’ and has no place in sociological knowledge. Adorno, however, is unwilling to take this step. “Rather, one ought to try to explain the non-appearance of class-consciousness, or the disappearance of the proletariat, in terms of the objective laws of society, from its essential regularity.”⁶⁷ What is crucial here is that Adorno refuses to give up on social theory in the face of positivist sociology. That is to say, he does not reject the usefulness of the concept of class consciousness as such; rather, he is arguing that it cannot play the same role that it has

⁶⁴ Adorno, *Introduction to Sociology*, p. 23.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 23.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 24.

traditionally played. The material conditions of Adorno's historical moment are not the same as in the 1920s – class consciousness in his day was diminishing rather than expanding. In its most general form, this kind of social dialectics goes as follows:

All I mean to say is that, on one hand, sociology should hold fast to certain essential definitions, such as that of classes, which continue to exist, decisively, in the dependence of most people on anonymous and opaque economic processes. On the other hand, however, sociology should deduce from this developmental tendency, or at least understand in relation to it, those modifications which are causing such a fundamental datum as that of classes no longer to manifest itself in the traditional form.⁶⁸

Put another way, we should not reject a class analysis, but rather reformulate it in order to better understand and describe our contemporary social phenomena. In the context of the discussion of class consciousness above, this means that the relation or mediation between the actually existing consciousness of individuals (the individual, psychological consciousness), and the 'imputed' consciousness is still an important sociological question. Focusing on either one side or the other leaves us in the dilemma of positivistic, descriptive sociology versus normative, ideal sociology. Adorno's point here seems to be that we must understand the mediation between these two forms of sociology dialectically.⁶⁹ This means that we cannot simply accept or reject the traditional frameworks, but rather rework them for our own historical moment.

Today, reworking the concept of class consciousness entails an in-depth analysis of agency, as well as a closer look at the difference between the empirical and 'imputed' class consciousness of our current historical moment. Chapters 3 and 4 engage contemporary accounts

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 24.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 25: "What is important is that in abandoning some traditional categories we remain true to the tradition they represent, instead of thinking we have to join the big battalions and jettison the ballast of troublesome concepts which cannot easily be verified."

of agency and argue for adopting a more dialectical approach. A purely theoretical approach, however, is not sufficient for understanding how the concept of class consciousness might be useful both politically and intellectually. As we saw above, the kind of agency required for social transformation is not independent from the material conditions of society. The way society is organized at least in part determines what is socially possible. In addition to this theoretical reworking, practical engagement with contemporary political struggles is also necessary. This requires insight into what makes a situation revolutionary, as well as what can be done during such a situation in order to maintain and develop class consciousness in society. The analysis of contemporary social conditions would be too complex to engage with here; however, it is important to note that it is an essential component

Conclusion

In this section, we saw that while Horkheimer and Adorno do not see their own historical moment as revolutionary, they do not abandon all hope of the possibility of social transformation. One key feature of the social conditions required for a revolutionary situation is the existence of a properly organized communist party. Without the party to generate, develop, and maintain revolutionary energy, no social movement will be able to establish the agency required to transform society. The party functions to mediate between theory and practice; without this mediation, Horkheimer and Adorno see no possibility for successful revolutionary action. At best, revolutionary thought in non-revolutionary times can be a message in a bottle – a message sent forward in time to be read and understood by revolutionaries living in a society where the material conditions are more favorable.

There is perhaps revolutionary work to be done in nonrevolutionary times that goes beyond sending messages to future generations. We could imagine labor organizing or policy

work that provides conditions more favorable to change. Horkheimer and Adorno might decry this as reformism – and perhaps it is. However, we might also see this as preparatory work, work not ultimately aimed at reform, but rather getting ready for social transformation when or if it ever appears. A revolutionary movement must start somewhere; today just as during the rest of the history of capitalism, workers are suffering, and their labor is exploited. Horkheimer and Adorno right to be aware of their role as theorists. They recognize the limits of intellectual engagement, while holding out hope for the conditions of society to change.

Summary of Chapter 2

As we saw in this chapter, there is an important relationship between the possibility of social transformation, and the agency through which it happens. Adorno clearly follows the early Marxist theorists from Chapter 1 in maintaining that cultural and ideological factors are not independent from the material conditions of society. Even in his criticism of Lukács, Adorno is clearly following in this Marxist tradition. Adorno may not be as optimistic as the early his predecessors, and with good reason. Whereas Lenin and Luxemburg were on the front lines of a political struggle at a time when society was in a revolutionary situation, Adorno witnessed not only the eventually failure of these revolutions, but also the horrors of the Holocaust. From Adorno's historical position in society, there was no real possibility of social transformation. Nevertheless, he continued to theorize, sending messages in a bottle to future generations of revolutionaries.

Drawing on Adorno's insight in *Negative Dialectics*, looking to the proletariat as the agential 'subject-object' of history is at best naïve, at worst risks damaging the changes of social

transformation. History does not progress in a straight line, and social transformation that promises progress and liberation can also lead to suffering and total disaster. The proletariat is not messiah, whose development will usher in a perfect utopian society. Following Adorno's negative dialectics, I argue that the differences within the proletariat are not just stages to be overcome, but rather part of the process that generate its agency. The proletariat is not a homogenous entity – it is not a 'plural subject' in the way that Margaret Gilbert describes, as I discuss in Chapter 3 below. To a greater or lesser degree, the early Marxist theorists from Chapter 1 recognize this fact. However, Adorno's critique helps to center the analysis on the present, unreconciled conditions, rather than future conditions of unity. Prioritizing identity remains idealist. Thus, I argue that Adorno stays true to Marx's materialist dialectic, to a method of "Orthodox Marxism" as Lukács defines it,⁷⁰ even as he deepens and transforms it.

Attending to the differences within the working class, I argue, follows directly from the standpoint of the proletariat in Lukács, and what it really means to see society as a concrete totality. The early Marxists understood that the division of society between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie was not the only struggle in capitalist society. Insofar as the focus was on capitalism as an economic system of alienation and exploitation, the proletariat as the group or class through which to understand the issue. As Fredric Jameson notes⁷¹ the Marxist tradition in general, and Lukács' work in particular, has resonated with theorists engaged in scholarship addressing other oppressive dimensions within society today. This is what I take to mean to understand society as a concrete totality – an analysis of contemporary capitalist society that focuses exclusively on economic class without taking into account the other aspects and

⁷⁰ See the introduction to Chapter 1 above.

⁷¹ Jameson, "History and Class Consciousness as an 'Unfinished Project,'" *Rethinking Marxism*, p. 68.

institutions, without accounting for the problem of suffering in general would be to understand society abstracting away from all of the other complexities of life. To understand society as a concrete totality is to attend to these complexities, to all of these differences.

Following Lukács' arguments in *History and Class Consciousness*, and Adorno's arguments in *Negative Dialectics*, I argue for a concept of class consciousness that is neither deflationary nor reductive with respect to class. Class is a necessary component to any analysis of contemporary society, but it can neither explain the totality of human suffering, nor be explained in turn by an analysis of other forms of oppression. In abstraction, there may be a particular form of agency that relates directly and only to class; however, in its abstraction it remains in a purely idealist form. Rather than a purely class analysis, I argue for an analysis of the political agency entailed in class consciousness must remain open to other analyses of oppression. According to a materialist analysis that takes the standpoint of the proletariat and understands society as a concrete totality, the agency at work in social transformation must be equally complex. Such an analysis that accounts for each of these oppressive structures goes beyond the scope of the current project. For now, I hope to gesture towards the openness of such an approach, highlighting the possibilities of collaboration that intersects with important scholarship being done on other forms of social domination beyond class.

In what follows, I will develop a dialectical account of group agency that draws on the insights of Adorno from Chapter 2 and the early Marxist theorists from Chapter 1. By dialectical account of group agency, I mean that the agency of the group cannot be fully explained either as a mere aggregate of individuals, or as a unified whole. Rather, the agency of the group is generated by both of these aspects. In Chapter 3, I will engage with contemporary theorists in the analytic tradition in order to discuss the kind of group agency that arise when individuals come

together to form a group. Methodologically, the approach understands group agency through an understanding of the individual. Rather than investigate the agency of the proletariat as a whole, I will focus on the agency of a vanguard party. As we saw above, the existence and structure of the party plays a crucial role in the possibility of social transformation. In Chapter 4, I will engage with contemporary theorists in the French post-structural tradition in order to discuss the kind of group agency that arises from the collectivity and interdependency of the group. Methodologically, this approach understands individual agency through an understanding of the group. I hope to develop an account of group agency that prioritizes this mediation and relationality in order to better understand the kind of political agency entailed in reconstructing a dialectical account of class consciousness. In order to understand the collective agency by which society changes, I argue we must first understand how this agency works in both aspects.

CHAPTER 3

GROUP AGENCY: VANGUARD, PARTY, PROLETARIAT

In the previous two chapters, we saw the development of the relationship between class consciousness and political agency in the early Marxist theorists and first-generation Frankfurt School theorists. The concept of class consciousness as it was developed by Lukács, as Adorno shows, is in need of conceptual reworking. Specifically, Adorno shows that the account of agency it entails remains too idealist. It requires the proletariat to overcome its own differences in order to be the subject-object of history. Following Adorno, the concept of class consciousness, as well as the political agency it entails, should not focus exclusively on the possibility or actuality of the proletariat's self-reconciliation. Rather, it requires careful attention to nonidentity and the differences within the proletariat itself. I argue that what is needed is a dialectical account of group agency – an account of agency that prioritizes the mediation between the individual and group. This requires that we understand group agency insofar as the group is made up of separate individuals, as well as how individuals can be separated from the group. In chapter 4, I will address the kind of agency involved in separating individuals from the group. In the present chapter, I will focus on group agency insofar as the group is made up of separate individuals, drawing on recent sources from the tradition of analytic philosophy.

One concern about drawing from philosophers in the analytic tradition is that most, if not all of them are methodological individualists. As Deborah Tollefsen notes “methodological individualism is the thesis that social phenomena (facts, objects, events, states, etc.) should be explained solely in terms of individual intentional states and the relations between those

individuals.”¹ Methodological individualism is contrasted with methodological holism,² which holds that social phenomena should be explained in reference to something other than individual psychological states. I argue that while both approaches have their merits, neither is able to arrive at a complete view, specifically with respect to the question of group agency. In order to understand the agency of a group, I argue that we must look at both the members and the relations between them, as well as understand the group as a whole irreducible to its constituent members. This does not mean that either methodological individualism or methodological holism is wrong, only that each is one-sided. In order to develop a dialectical account of group agency, I argue we must employ the insights of both. In this chapter, I discuss methodological individualist accounts of group agency, showing that the way individual members of a group come together affects the kind of agency that group has. In chapter 4, I discuss a more methodologically holist view, showing how the separation of the individual from the group affects possible forms of agency. Ultimately, I prioritize the mediation between the individual and the group, arguing that in order to have an adequate understanding of group agency, we must be able to understand the relationship in both directions. As opposed to an individualist or holist account, I call this a ‘dialectic’ account of agency. A dialectic account of agency, I argue, follows directly from the insights of the early Marxist theorists in chapter 1, and Adorno’s insights in chapter 2.

In order to understand the kind of political agency involved in class consciousness, I will focus my analysis in this chapter on three crucial groups: the vanguard, the party, and the proletariat. The aim in this chapter is not to give an adequate description of these groups in their

¹ Tollefsen, “Collective Intentionality and Methodology in the Social Sciences.” *The Routledge Handbook of Collective Intentionality*, p. 391.

² In contemporary sociology, methodological individualism is credited to Max Weber, whereas methodological holism is credited to Emile Durkheim.

entirety, but rather to analyze the kind of group agency they may or not possess. First, I address Lenin's account of the vanguard of professional revolutionaries, arguing that it is a plural subject according to Margaret Gilbert's account. Next, I address the role of the Communist Party, arguing that it is a group agent according to Christian List and Philip Pettit's account. Finally, I argue that while the proletariat as a whole may not have group agency, Deborah Tollefsen and Shaun Gallagher's account of we-narratives offer a conceptual tool that can help us identify with the proletariat. Despite analytic philosophy's methodological individualism, I argue it has useful conceptual tools, even if their analyses are ultimately one-sided. In order to arrive at a broader conception of agency, I will turn to contemporary theorists from the continental tradition in chapter 4.

Vanguard and Plural Subjects

Lenin, in *What is to Be Done?* develops an argument for the political usefulness of developing a small band of professional revolutionaries to engage in the political struggle of his time. The task of this revolutionary vanguard is to agitate, educate, and organize the working class, and ultimately build toward a transformation of social conditions. While Lenin does not say that the vanguard can transform society on its own, it plays an important role on the process. Membership to the vanguard is not restricted by class position. Rather than class position, voluntary combination is a more important criterion. I argue that Margaret Gilbert's account of plural subjects in *A Theory of Political Obligation* is useful for determining what Lenin means by a vanguard of professional revolutionaries. These individuals have shared goals and commit to joint actions. First, I outline the key features of the vanguard as Lenin describes, focusing on the voluntary way in which they come together. This group is on the front lines of the class

struggle and is meant to lead the revolutionary political movement. Then, I reconstruct Gilbert's account of plural subjects, arguing that her emphasis on shared goals and joint action fits well with Lenin's account of the vanguard. While the proletariat as a class may not be a plural subject (as Adorno's insights from chapter 2 would seem to suggest), I argue that the vanguard is.

Key Features of the Vanguard

As we in Chapter 1, Lenin develops an account of a vanguard of professional revolutionaries: a small dedicated group of individuals, who are jointly committed to (1) the development of class consciousness among the working class, and (2) changing the material conditions so as to overthrow our current capitalist mode of production. Lenin describes the more spontaneous trade-unionist consciousness as embryonic.³ Riots and strikes express an awakening of consciousness but require revolutionary Socialist theory to become fully developed. While this theory must "come from without,"⁴ the members of the vanguard can come from any class, granted they are committed to the cause. Lenin briefly discusses forms of political education,⁵ however agitation and organization of the working class are also important factors.

On Lenin's view the vanguard of professional revolutionaries is not determined by objective social conditions. Certainly, the individual members might decide to join the vanguard because of the problems of society, or in order to transform it. However, Lenin clearly does not attribute the development of the vanguard to these objective factors. He provides a description of the path of struggle with vivid imagery:

³ Lenin, *What is to Be Done?* p. 36.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 70.

We are marching in a compact group along a precipitous and difficult path, firmly holding each other by the hand... We have combined voluntarily, precisely for the purpose of fighting the enemy, and not to retreat into the adjacent marsh, the inhabitants of which, from the very outset, have reproached us with having separated ourselves into an exclusive group and with having chosen the path of struggle instead of the path of conciliation.⁶

The vanguard is made up of individuals who combine voluntarily. They freely choose to band together, each individually deciding in advance to engage in political struggle. They do not decide haphazardly or spontaneously, but with this specific purpose in mind. The ‘marsh inhabitants’ Lenin refers to are opportunists and reformists – those who propret to defend the ideas of progress and liberation, but in fact stand in its way. Specifically, Lenin criticizes the way they defend the ideal of freedom, but in reality, do just the opposite. He speaks about the ‘freedom of criticism’ but today we might think of a ‘free market’ or ‘right to work’. The concept of ‘right to work’ demonstrates this idea: this ‘right’ is in fact the right to be exploited, the right to work two or three part time jobs to barely afford rent. To these inhabitants of the marsh Lenin says, “don’t besmirch the grand word ‘freedom’, for we too are ‘free’ to go where we please, free to fight not only against the marsh, but also against those who are turning toward the marsh!”⁷ While a lot turns on social conditions, from the way capitalism alienates the worker from their labor in Marx, to the ‘spell’ of capitalist society in Adorno, Lenin does not reject outright the capacity of the individual to struggle in association with others. There is still an appeal to freedom, which is shown in his call for a voluntary combination of revolutionaries.

⁶ Ibid., p. 10.

⁷ Ibid.

Lenin calls this group of professional revolutionaries a vanguard because it is meant to be on the front lines of the class struggle, not bringing up the rear. “For it is not enough to call ourselves the vanguard; we must act like one; we must act in such a way that *all* the other detachments shall see us...”⁸ Lenin cares little for labels, only for action. The vanguard must act like a vanguard by being the furthest advanced, in both theory and practice. It must not hide⁹ behind other movements or ideas. Lenin emphasizes that above all, this vanguard should not hide behind the spontaneity of the masses, only to defer to embryonic, trade-unionist consciousness. “A ‘vanguard’ which fears that consciousness will outstrip spontaneity, which fears to put forward a bold ‘plan’ that would compel universal recognition even among those who think differently than us.”¹⁰ Such a vanguard is one in name only, and in actuality only follows the developments as they are generated by the class struggle. Such a group does not intervene consciously in the class struggle and would be more properly called a ‘rearguard’.

Lenin’s focus on the voluntary nature under which the vanguard combines is meant to highlight the fact that individual members are conscious or aware of the group they form. Their choice to join the vanguard is not voluntary if by voluntary we understand as completely free of any coercive conditions whatsoever. Under a capitalist

⁸ Ibid., p. 103.

⁹ Lenin does, however, discuss the importance of secrecy. Even this secrecy, he argues, still aims at the development of class consciousness, and is for the protection of the vanguard, *ibid.*, p. 138: “Such an organization must of necessity be not too extensive and as secret as possible;” or, again, p. 154: “The centralization of the secret functions of the *organization* by no means implies the centralization of all the functions of the *movement*. The active participation of the widest mass in the illegal press will not diminish because a ‘dozen’ professional revolutionaries centralize the secret functions connected with this work; on the contrary, it will *increase* tenfold. In this way, and in this way along, will we ensure that reading of illegal literature, writing for it, and to some extent even distributing it, will *almost cease to be secret work*, for the police will soon come to realize the folly and futility of setting the whole juridical and administrative machine into motion to intercept every copy of publication that is being broadcast in thousands.”

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 104.

economic system, workers are, in some sense, forced to keep working, or they will die. Insofar as the vanguard combines with the explicit goal of overthrowing capitalism, it must work from within its coercive limits. Thus, the vanguard, as a group against the conditions of capital, has certain obligations (to other members of the vanguard, to the proletariat as a class, etc.). Lenin does not hesitate to use moral language to describe the duties of a comrade, or the blame for not doing enough for the cause.¹¹ Further, there might also be a normative claim that is generated by the oppressive economic conditions themselves. In addition to these, however, there does seem to be a specific normativity inherent in the combination of individual members of the vanguard. That is to say, that as a member of the vanguard, I would be in a position to rebuke another member if she did not do her part in furthering the revolution. Members of the vanguard have this obligation of conscious intervention, and thus their action is voluntary insofar as it does not merely conform to the spontaneity of the masses.

The vanguard of professional revolutionaries comes together voluntarily, in order to promote class consciousness, and promote revolutionary social transformation. The vanguard does not hide behind the spontaneity of the masses but intervenes consciously in the political struggle. In what follows, I argue that this vanguard of professionals can be described as a plural subject, following Margaret Gilbert's account. Gilbert's account is useful because it focuses on the way in which individuals come together in order to

¹¹ For example, see *ibid.*, p. 164: "As we are directly to *blame* for doing too little to 'stimulate' the workers to take this path, common to them and to the 'intellectuals', of professional revolutionary training, and that we too frequently drag them back by our silly speeches about what 'can be understood' by the masses of the workers, by the 'average workers,' etc."

form a subject that is itself not reducible to its individual members. Her account focuses on joint commitment and intention, which the vanguard clearly must have.

On Plural Subjects

For Gilbert, a joint commitment is a commitment of the will that involves two or more people. A joint commitment has, as its object, accepting a certain goal,¹² e.g. committing to intend or believe something. “The general form of a joint commitment, then, is this: the parties jointly commit to *X as a body*.”¹³ By the phrase ‘as a body’ Gilbert argues that the individual members or persons need not personally believe exactly the same thing as the body itself believes. She argues that a body is constituted by individuals who hold a shared goal in common. “This constitution of a single body, with the belief in question will be achieved by a suitable concordance of the several actions and expressions of the individual parties.”¹⁴ Thus actions, not beliefs, of the involved parties determines the constitution of the body. More specifically, actions that advance the common goal are more important than the personal beliefs of individual parties. Gilbert argues that a joint commitment to believe *X* does not entail each individual party constituting the body personally believes *X*.¹⁵ This allows for the possibility of different members to believe different things as long as they are all committed to the same goal.

¹² Cf. Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation*, p. 137: “People may jointly commit by accepting as a body, a certain goal.”

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 137. Italics in original.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ *Ibid.*: “It is worth emphasizing that a joint commitment to believe that such-and-such as a body does not –as I understand it – require that parties to the commitment personally to believe anything. The commitment is, after all, together to constitute as far as is possible, a single body that believes that such-and-such. None of the individuals in question is that body. It is reasonable, then, to deny that their personal beliefs are not in question.”

Gilbert gives the following definition of a plural subject: “A and B (and...) (or those with feature F) constitute a *plural subject* (by definition) if and only if they are jointly committed to doing something as a body – in a broad sense of ‘do’.”¹⁶ When speaking of the intentions or beliefs of a plural subject, particularly if one includes oneself in said plural subject, the first person plural ‘we’ or ‘us’ is used. I would use the term ‘we’ when describing not my own thoughts or feelings about a particular subject, but when I want to include others in those thoughts or feelings as well. For example, I might say to an invited speaker: “We really enjoyed your talk.” The ‘we’ involved here refers to the collective of individuals who attended the talk, or to the philosophy department as a whole. By saying “We really enjoyed your talk” I am not stating a personal belief – I am rather stating a belief of a group of which I happen to be member.¹⁷ Perhaps I, for independent reasons, am not feeling well that day, and so I personally was not in the proper mentality to fully appreciate the talk; or perhaps I was not well versed in the relevant literature to derive proper ‘enjoyment’. Despite all this, I am still capable of making the judgment that ‘we’ really enjoyed the talk as a group.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 144-145.

¹⁷ My own personal beliefs might not match up exactly with the beliefs of the plural subject. Extending the example, I personally might believe that the talk was lack-luster, or that the speaker did not stay on topic. Nevertheless we (the audience or the department) *as a whole* might have really enjoyed it.

¹⁸ If, however, I absolutely hated the talk, and moreover if I could see or imagine others hating the talk as well, one might say that the statement “we really enjoyed the talk” would be disingenuous. While such a case might be true, it does not threaten Gilbert’s theory as such, since we might more aptly describe two plural subjects: a body whose collective belief would be “we really enjoyed the talk” and a second body whose collective belief would be “we actually hated the talk” or some variant. Distinguishing these two groups does not in itself constitute a critique of Gilbert’s theory, but rather a misapplication to the situation. Moreover, distinguishing between these two groups does not entail that a plural subject consisting of ‘talk attendees’ or ‘the philosophy department’ does not exist – it merely means that such plural subjects could not accurately be attributed the belief “we really enjoyed the talk.”

Gilbert argues that a plural subject is capable of acting together to accomplish a shared goal. She gives three necessary and sufficient conditions for acting together. People act together when:

- (1) they are jointly committed to espousing as a body the appropriate goal; (2) they are fulfilling the behavioral conditions associated with the achievement of that goal; [and] (3) their satisfaction of these conditions is motivated in each case by the existence of the joint commitment.¹⁹

In essence, parties to a plural subject can be understood as acting together if they express a readiness to act with respect to their joint commitment. This is what Gilbert means by “in a broad sense of ‘do’.” Returning to the example, take the plural subject whose reference is the ‘we’ in the statement “We really enjoyed your talk.” I can be considered to be acting together with the other members of this plural subject if I fulfill the three conditions stated above.²⁰

Thus, Gilbert’s account of plural subjects captures the subjective aspect (or lack thereof) of an economic class. Interestingly, Gilbert footnotes Marx,²¹ insisting that there is an important difference between a class that is aware of its social position, and one that is not. This distinction points to the fact that there are other factors involved in determining class membership and constitution outside of the subjective factors Gilbert highlights. In the following section, I will

¹⁹ Gilbert, *A Theory of Political Obligation*, p. 146.

²⁰ Perhaps the goal of this plural subject is to get a drink with the speaker after the talk (an appropriate goal for the plural subject that expresses the belief “We really enjoyed your talk”). We act together when we are (1) jointly committed to saying we will go get a drink; (2) walking over to the bar; and (3) motivated to do so because we really enjoyed the talk. I, along with other parties of the plural subject, can express our readiness to act by asking when and where people are meeting up.

²¹ Footnote 2, *ibid.*, p. 167. As an aside, Gilbert indicates towards the distinction between a class in itself and a class for itself, which she cites the Communist Manifesto as its source. In fact, Marx and Engels do not make this distinction in the Manifesto, and such a dichotomy deserves further scrutiny. Cf. Andrew, Edward. “Class in Itself and Class against Capital: Karl Marx and his Classifiers,” *Canadian Journal of Political Science*, p. 577-584.

argue that an economic class is (also) determined by the objective aspects of class interest and struggle.

On Gilbert's view, the members of a plural subject can be obligated to act in a certain way even if the plural subject formed under conditions of coercion.²² This entails that certain normative obligations may still hold even if individual members were coerced to be a member of the plural subject in question. Specifically, she appeals to a certain ambiguity in the term 'voluntary' with respect to whether or not someone intentionally does something:

Consider now the claim that one's entry into an agreement...must be voluntary. Suppose one allows, plausibly, that this is true if 'voluntary' is interpreted in the intention sense: the claim that one agreed can be defeated if one can show that one did whatever is alleged to have constituted one's entry into the agreement without any intention to agree. One must be careful not to slide from this plausible claim to the quite different point that one's entry into an agreement must be voluntary in the sense of un-coerced.²³

It must be true that a member of the plural subject in question intends to join and does not join accidentally. I cannot trick someone into joining the vanguard, and still expect her to fulfill the obligations of membership. However, Gilbert leaves open the possibility that even under conditions of coercion, obligations between members of a plural subject still hold. We could imagine a situation in which someone is coerced into being a member of the vanguard by one's dire economic conditions. Thus, on her view, this does not negate the obligation or duty to other members, even if this normativity is not morally normative.

Gilbert discusses this distinction in reference to obligations to "morally suspect political institutions."²⁴ She affirms the possibility of conflicting duties – I might still be obligated, in

²² Gilbert talks about this in Chapter 5 of *A Theory of Political Obligation* p, 75-82.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 78-79.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 82-83.

some sense, to perform an immoral promise even in those situations where I might have a (moral) obligation not to do so. To add to this discussion, we might even imagine being part of multiple plural subjects, which obligate us to take contradictory actions, such that cannot even appeal to a moral/amoral distinction in order to resolve the contradiction. To be a part of a plural subject commits its constituent members to act a certain way, even under conditions of coercion. The vanguard is a good example of a plural subject because this kind of normativity seems to hold. Certainly, one might have moral reasons, or even reasons determined by (objective) economic factors to act a certain way with respect to other members of the vanguard. However, simply by virtue of membership in the vanguard, there are also certain normative standards that hold despite coercive conditions. Once agreeing to be a part of the vanguard, one has certain obligations to fulfill, and members hold each other accountable for fulfilling them.

An economic class on the other hand, particularly the proletarian class in our current historical moment, is not a plural subject in this way. As we saw in chapters 1 and 2, there are many obstacles for the proletariat as a class to unite in this way. The current members of the proletariat are not 'jointly committed to doing something as a body' even in the broadest sense of 'do'. According to Marx, the proletarian class might have a shared or common interest (i.e. revolution and overthrowing capitalist modes of production), but its members did not jointly commit to it. It is difficult to say that the proletariat in its current state even has beliefs held in common. As it exists today, the working class has certainly not espoused a readiness to act, or fulfilled any behavioral conditions, in even the broadest sense of 'do'. However, there is nothing in Gilbert's account that forecloses the possibility of the proletariat becoming a plural subject. If the members of the working class developed a joint commitment to some goal and expressed a

readiness to act on it, there is no reason why that group would not be a plural subject in the way Gilbert describes.

Conclusion

In this section I have argued that Gilbert's account of plural subjects is a useful way of understanding the vanguard group of revolutionaries as described by Lenin. For Gilbert, a plural subject jointly commits to an action in order to accomplish a shared goal. While the proletariat as a class might not be best seen as a plural subject, a small, dedicated group of professional revolutionaries would be. Lenin describes this vanguard group as coming together voluntarily in order to engage in revolutionary action. They establish a shared goal, social transformation, and commit to doing something, in the broadest sense of 'do'.

Lenin does not clearly distinguish between this vanguard group of professional revolutionaries and a vanguard party. It is unclear whether he sees the agency of the vanguard as different than the agency of the party. In what follows, I will discuss the group agency of the Communist Party as conceptually distinct from that of the vanguard. The main difference is that the party has a particular organizational structure, as well as institutionalized methods of making decisions. While this distinction is helpful conceptually in order to better understand the kind of agency involved, it is important to keep in mind that these two groups overlap, especially considering that the professional revolutionaries of the vanguard were and are often also party members. When these individuals act, it would be difficult, if not impossible to distinguish whether they were acting strictly as party members, professional revolutionaries, or even as members of their social class. In what follows, the aim is not to offer hard and fast rules for determining these distinctions; rather, it is to look closer at different accounts of group agency in

order to better understand how they might help us in understanding what kind of agency is at work in the concept of class consciousness.

The Corporate Agency of the Communist Party

In this section, I argue that the Communist Party is a group agent. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels describe the Communist Party as having no separate interests of its own, but rather engages in the political struggle by taking on the interests of the proletariat as a whole. Christian List and Philip Pettit develop a realist account of group agency that resists reducing the agency of the group to the agency of its constituent members. I argue that the Communist Party meets the conditions for corporate agency as List and Pettit describe.²⁵ Specifically, I argue that the party meets both the conditions of joint action, as well as conditions for functionally inexplicit institutional structure. List and Pettit's account seeks to find a middle way between eliminativism and emergentism. I argue that the party structure pushes against their methodological individualism and opens the possibility of thinking beyond it.

Below, I discuss the role of the party in the *Communist Manifesto*. While Marx and Engels do not provide necessary and sufficient conditions for a concept of the party, they outline the role and function of the party. Importantly, the party does not have its own interests separate

²⁵ It is perhaps more than a little ironic to be describing the Communist Party as having corporate agency. I retain the language of corporate agency, however, in order to follow the recent trend in analytic group agency set by Peter French in *Corporate Ethics*. French uses the corporation as his example, however subsequent thinkers, such as List and Pettit, have a wider scope of what might count as a group agent. In what follows, I understand corporate agency not strictly as the agency of a corporation, but rather the agency of any group that is determined at least in part by its organizational structure. For those who still resist this use of the term corporation, I would note that Hegel discusses the 'corporation' (*Korporation*) in paragraphs 250-256 of the *Philosophy of Right*, although his conception is quite far from our modern use of the term. While an extended discussion of the Hegelian notion of the corporation and its relation to Marxist theory would be interesting, is beyond the scope of the present work. Cf. Tollefsen, *Groups as Agents*

from the proletariat and does not fight the class struggle in its place. Then, I discuss List and Pettit's account of group agency, showing that the party meets conditions for joint action and has a functionally inexplicit organizational structure. List and Pettit identify four factors of joint action: having a shared goal, individual contribution, interdependence, and common awareness.

Functionally inexplicit groups do not make decisions according to mechanistically determined rules in advance but incorporate feedback mechanisms. Through a critique of their account of autonomy of the group agent its supervenience relation, I show that their account is in fact much closer to that of the early Marxist theorists than it might first appear. As we saw in Horkheimer and Adorno's discussion above, the party function is an important aspect with respect to the possibility of social change. This account of the group agency of the party thus sheds some light onto why the party is so important to the concept of class consciousness.

The Role of the Party in the *Communist Manifesto*

In the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* Marx and Engels lay out the most general principles of the party. These principles relate less to the organizational structure, and more specifically to the position the party should take in general. Section two of the *Manifesto* begins by asking the question of the relationship between Communists and the proletariat as a whole. Marx and Engels answer: "The Communists do not form a separate party opposed to other working-class parties. They have no interests separate and apart from those of the proletariat as a whole."²⁶ They do not set up any sectarian principles of their own, by which to shape and mold the proletarian movement."²⁷ The Communist Party is not intended to have its own attitudes,

²⁶ I go into more detail about class interest below.

²⁷ Marx and Engels, "The Manifesto of the Communist Party," in *The Marx Engels Reader* p. 483-484.

beliefs, or desires apart from those of the proletarian class as a whole.²⁸ As we saw in chapter 2, however, determining these attitudes, beliefs, desires is difficult because of the spell of ideology – nevertheless, it is clear that on Marx and Engels’ view, the party does not establish its own interests over and against the working class, or other working class parties. On the contrary, it is the function of the party to express the interests of the proletariat as a whole. It would seem that the reason for establishment as a party precisely in order to facilitate revolutionary action.

Marx and Engels continue by distinguishing the Communist Party from other working-class parties²⁹ in two ways. First, they hold that, “In the national struggles of the proletarians of the different countries, they point out and bring to the front the common interests of the entire proletariat, independently of nationality.”³⁰ National struggles in different countries around the world, in virtue of their different material conditions and geopolitical situations, inevitably play out differently. The goal particular to the communist party is to prioritize the common interests of the global proletariat as a class, not just the proletarians of a particular nation state. National workers parties, for example, might have the narrower goal of improving worker conditions in that particular nation state. The Communist Party, on the other hand, is explicitly tasked with finding the common interests across national difference. This is not to say that support of a national workers party would never be acceptable – in certain situations such action would be beneficial to the proletariat as a whole. Marx and Engels’ point here is that context matters with

²⁸ See Chapter 1 for Marx’s account of the difference between general and particular interests.

²⁹ Other working-class parties would be other political parties that fight for the interests of the working class, but do not adopt the values, tactics, or end goals of the Communist Party. These parties often fight for a reform of the system that benefits the working class, such as an increase in the minimum wage, or safer working conditions, but might not advocate revolutionary transformation of the social structure. Today, we might consider the Democratic Party such a party (although it is perhaps unclear whether the Democratic Party truly has the interests in mind, or only serves the interests of its capitalist donors). The Democratic Socialists of America (DSA) might be another, more progressive working-class party. While the DSA advocates for the interests of the proletariat as a class, it does not advocate seizing the means of production, or the abolition of private property.

³⁰ Marx and Engels, “The Manifesto of the Communist Party,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, p. 484.

respect to supporting particular worker movements, and that it is the job of the communist party to always keep the common interests of the entire proletariat in mind.

Second, they hold that, “In the various stages of development which the struggle of the working class against the bourgeoisie has to pass through, they always and everywhere represent the interests of the movement as a whole.”³¹ According to Marx and Engels, capitalist society does not develop evenly or uniformly across different countries. At times this means that the particular interests of proletarians in one country are different than the particular interests of proletarians in another. In order to avoid dividing the working-class movement, Marx and Engels’ position holds that the task of the Communist Party must be to in all cases represent the interests of the proletariat as a whole, not merely sections of it. The Communist Party is thus practically the most advanced³² section of working-class parties, which pushes forward all others. Theoretically, they have the clearest understanding³³ of the movement of society and are thus in the best position to determine where aid is needed and lend that aid.

Ultimately, however, Marx and Engels hold that the aim of the communist party and those of other, national workers parties are in alignment: “The immediate aim of the communists is the same as that of all other proletarian parties: formation of the proletariat into a class, overthrow of the bourgeois supremacy, conquest of political power by the proletariat.” They say little else, either in the *Manifesto* or elsewhere, about specific party organizational structure. Party organizational structure becomes a question for Lenin and Luxemburg (among others) as seen in Chapter 1. In this sense, it is not primarily the task of the communist party to *determine*

³¹ Ibid.

³² Lenin draws on this notion in order to develop a concept of the vanguard discussed above.

³³ We saw in Chapter 1 that Lukács argues for the epistemological superiority of the standpoint of the proletariat.

what is to be done in order to achieve revolution; rather, it is to keep the interests of the class as a whole in mind, and act in such a way as to act in alignment with those interests. Following Lukacs, “The struggle of the Communist Party is focused upon the class consciousness of the proletariat. Its organizational separation from the class does not mean in this case that it wishes to do battle *for* its interests *on its behalf and in its place*.”³⁴ In order to better understand this organizational separation, while not acting on behalf of the class, I will now turn to List and Pettit’s account of group agency.

List and Pettit’s Account of Group Agency

In *Group Agency*, List and Pettit defend a position that groups meet the conditions for agency by having intentional states and engage in decision making processes. In this section, I argue that this kind of group agency maps onto the kind of agency described above in the party structure. While the party structure described above has many features, I will focus on two key features I see as central to the party structure: the joint intention of the group and its organizational structure. Despite methodological differences, I broadly agree with List and Pettit’s description of group agency as it applies to the organizational structure. This is to say, the Communist Party, as it is understood by the early Marxists theorists, meets the conditions for corporate agency as List and Pettit describe. After turning to each feature in detail, I will give a brief sketch why these features are salient to the party structure.

Joint Intention: Joint intention is an important feature of group agency. In the party, as well as the vanguard, joint intention is an important aspect of this kind of group agency. List and Pettit identify four features of a collection of individuals who jointly intend some action: they

³⁴ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 326.

have a shared goal, each individual contributes, there is interdependence between the members, and they have a common awareness of each other's beliefs concerning the group. As is consistent with their methodological individualism, List and Pettit focus on the conceptual movement from individual level to group level. After going over each feature in turn, I will suggest how we might also think of the conceptual movement going in the opposite direction as well.

Before turning to the four features of joint intention required for group agency, I would like to note that List and Pettit briefly consider the possibility of group agents without joint intention. They suggest two possible ways in which individuals could combine into group agents absent joint intention. The first involves "a process of natural or cultural evolution in which members are selected for possessing traits that lead them to act as required for group agency."³⁵ In a situation such as this, they argue that the individuals might not be aware that group agency was achieved, but would still be able to adjust their desires and beliefs to one another, as well as the circumstances. Crucially, they admit the possibility that such a situation could result in "group acts in service of common desires according to common beliefs."³⁶ I will return to the possibility of such a situation in the section below, however for the present purposes, it is enough to say that List and Pettit do not consider such a situation plausible. They admit that cultural features such as competition shape commercial corporations, however they are unaware of such a process happening among human beings.³⁷ Specifically, they are concerned with individuals, absent any joint intention, organizing or continuing to intervene, sustain, and enact group-level beliefs or desires other than, or even contrary to, their own individual ones. Indeed, this is

³⁵ List and Pettit, *Group Agency* p. 33.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., p. 33. They cite Nelson and Winter in support of the claim that "competition shapes commercial corporations."

perhaps the central question of the development of class consciousness. For the present purposes, I will leave this question aside. For now, I follow List and Pettit insofar as the group agency of the party is concerned. It is highly implausible that the group agency of the party would be able to function absent joint intention. As we saw in chapter 1, Luxemburg's position with respect to the spontaneous organization of the party structure seems lacking. It is not enough to have members of the proletariat self-organize spontaneously – instead, some form of conscious intervention is required. Again, the tendencies of capitalism seem to push back against the spontaneous organization of the masses such that their coalescing into a group agent is improbable at best, impossible at worst.

List and Pettit consider a second way in which a group agent might form absent joint intention. This situation involves “one or several organizational designers co-opting others into a structure underpinning group agency, without making them aware of their agency at the group level and without seeking their intentional acquiescence in the arrangement.”³⁸ They use the example of a terrorist cell in the dark about the full nature of their operation or overall purpose. Taking an example from the Marxian tradition, such a group might be instrumentalized for Blanquist reasons. If only a few Blanquist coordinators have full knowledge of society, it would be possible for them to direct other members of the proletariat so as to engage in social, political, or economic action. Those being directed need not have full class consciousness – discipline and the willingness to follow orders might be sufficient for a successful action. As we saw above, however, there are also more general problems with this position. While List and Pettit consider this second way more plausible, it is less appealing for our purposes.

³⁸ List and Pettit, *Group Agency* p. 33.

Four Features of Joint Intention: Setting aside questions of the possibility of the formation of a group agent absent joint intention, I follow, broadly speaking, List and Pettit's account of group agents in the party case. While perhaps not sufficient for describing the agency of the party, joint intention does seem to be necessary. That is, in order to understand the kind of agency the party has, it is necessary to understand the requirements of joint intention List and Pettit outline. In what follows, I will discuss each feature, and suggest how it might apply to the formation, development, and/or continuation of the party.

Shared goal: The first feature of joint intention is having a shared goal. For List and Pettit, members of a group³⁹ jointly intend to do something if “they intend that they, the members of a more or less salient collection, together promote the given goal.”⁴⁰ Individual members of the group must have a common goal. This is not to say that members might have different interpretations of the goal, or even different strategies on how to attain this goal. As we will see below, the internal organization of a group can have decision making mechanisms in order to resolve differences. Indeed, it would be an exceedingly high bar if all members of a group must agree absolutely on the stated goal. Rather, it seems this feature of having a shared goal can be described in more general terms. For the party, that it has a shared goal appears quite clear: to develop and maintain revolutionary energy for the sake of social transformation. Each member of the party, insofar as they are party members, must intend this goal. That is, entry into the party seems to require intending individually the promotion of this shared goal.

³⁹ List and Pettit employ the phrase ‘collection of individuals’ in their discussion of joint intention. In my discussion below, I have changed this language to ‘group’ since I argue that the party as a group does have a joint intention and is more than a mere collection of individuals.

⁴⁰ List and Pettit, *Group Agency*, p. 33.

Individual contribution: The second feature of joint intention is individual contribution. Members of a group jointly intend to do something if, “they each intend to do their allotted part in a more or less salient plan for achieving that goal.”⁴¹ Individual members of the group must each intend individually to do their part in order to achieve their goal. Again, the members of the group need not agree absolutely about what ‘doing their part’ entails. However, each must be willing to do their part, otherwise the group would not be able to function as a group. For the party, doing one’s part might include many different things – engaging in organizing work, building power for the movement, or any other such action that moves towards the goal of social transformation. Insofar as individuals are party members, they must be willing to act in this way. That is, membership in the party seems to require something more than just signing up, but rather a willingness to act for the sake of the goals established by the party.

Interdependence: The third feature of joint intention is interdependence. Members of a group jointly intend to do something if, “they each form these [individual] intentions at least partly because of believing that others form such intentions too.”⁴² Individual members of the group must each form their intentions believing that everyone else has similar intentions. For the party, this feature seems clear as well. Individual members of the party believe that other members form similar intentions with respect to their overall goal. There are perhaps situations in which one member might suspect other members of not having such intentions. It is in these situations, however, that it would appear that the joint intention, and even the group agency of the party would break down. In fighting and accusations of revisionism and opportunism, at least historically, threaten the unity of the party, and thus its agency as a group. Proper functioning of

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ibid.

the party as a group agent, it would seem, thus requires this kind of interdependence between its members.

Common awareness: Members of a group jointly intend to do something as long as, “this is all a matter of common awareness, with each believing that the first three conditions are met, each believing that others believe this, and so on.”⁴³ Individual members of the group must each know that the first three features hold. This knowledge need not be absolute – it may be very difficult, or even impossible, to guarantee that each member knows each other member well enough to believe their intentions, and so on. It seems reasonable to suggest that common awareness would be achieved with a relative level of group transparency, such that members know other members, and are able to talk freely and openly. For the party, this final feature seems important as well. Again, it is precisely when common awareness is not present, that we see the historical break down of the party structure. When party members stop believing that other members are acting in the interest of the proletariat, or worse, accusing others of inadequate levels of conviction for the cause, do we see the inability of the group to form a joint intention, and thus act effectively as a group.

As we have seen, the party meets the conditions for forming a joint intention, which in turn supports the claim that it is a group agent. The party must have a shared goal – social transformation. Each of the individual members must contribute in some way to achieving that goal. Each member must believe others have similar intentions, as well as believe all others believe these things as well. Break down of this structure, at least historically, suggests that party structure, if it is to function effectively, must follow this structure of joint intention. Without

⁴³ Ibid.

joint intention, it would appear that the party could not properly function as a group agent. The party is not only a group with a joint intention but also follows a particular organizational structure.

Organizational Structure

In addition to forming joint intentions, List and Pettit argue that the organizational structure of a group agent (at least in part) grants the group a kind of agency. They distinguish between different organizational structures of group agents as functionally explicit or functionally inexplicit organizational structures. In this section, I will argue that the party as group agent has (or is at least closer to) a functionally inexplicit organizational structure. Based on this assessment, I will weigh in on List and Pettit's discussion on two related topics: holistic supervenience between individuals and groups; and the autonomy of the group agent with respect to its members. Where they offer supervenience as an adequate explanation, I will suggest that the organizational structure of the party, as described by the early Marxists theorists in chapter 1, offers a more complicated (and perhaps nuanced) view.

List and Pettit distinguish between functionally explicit and functionally inexplicit group structures. A functionally explicit group structure is one that, "uses a given aggregation function, such as majority voting, applies it mechanically to the attitudes of its members, and then enacts the resulting group attitudes in an equally mechanical way."⁴⁴ One example of this kind of mechanical aggregation function would be a simple majoritarian voting system in order to determine the preferences and judgments of the group. Under such an aggregate model, the preferences or judgments of the group would be directly reducible to the preferences or

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 60.

judgments of the individual members of the group. A functionally inexplicit group structure, on the other hand, does not rely on this direct model of aggregation in order to determine the preferences or judgments of the group. Rather, it, “involves a heuristic for determining, from proposition to proposition, the way for the group to go on, perhaps through deliberation, giving the group the flexibility to adjust its attitudes whenever appropriate.”⁴⁵ While this process may mimic some aggregation function, List and Pettit admit that it would be an exceedingly complex aggregation. They hold that even with a functionally inexplicit group structure, the group attitudes generated (assuming non-random mechanisms of attitude formation) are still a function of the individual members of the group.⁴⁶ In short, they identify an advantage in functionally inexplicit group structures, since it allows for more flexibility with respect to the mode in which group-level attitudes are determined.

While it may be that the organizational structure of the party is not exactly one of a functionally inexplicit group structure (as we will see by the end of this section), it is certainly closer to it than a functionally explicit group structure. This is, in part, because of the possibility of feedback mechanisms that accompany the functionally inexplicit model. List and Pettit identify two points about feedback mechanisms. First they, point out that feedback mechanisms allow individuals, when determining an group attitude (about some proposition ‘p’), to be driven by preferences and judgments about whether it would be better for the group to adopt an attitude with respect to ‘p’, and not just their own personal preferences or judgments about the issue in question. This means that individual members of a group are able to take group level attitudes and beliefs into account when making their individual decisions. Second, feedback mechanisms

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 62.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

introduce a causal relationship between individual-level and group-level phenomena. The attitudes of the individuals can cause the attitudes of the group to change, and vice versa.⁴⁷

As an example, let's think about feedback mechanisms in the context of a group of workers considering whether or not to go on a wildcat strike.⁴⁸ Let's assume that their organizational structure is functionally inexplicit – there are no mechanistic rules that they follow, and their decision will not be implemented mechanistically. Rather, they are simply sitting around a table in the break room weighing their options. One of the workers has a family to support and is in a dire financial situation. While the other workers could support themselves for a few months if they get fired, this worker could not. When the workers are deciding whether or not to strike, they will consider not only their own individual position, but also the position of the group. The worker with financial difficulties, if deciding only with their own individual situation in mind, might decide against a strike, since losing their job would cause a lot of suffering. However, establishing that there is a feedback mechanism means that the worker is also about to take group-level attitudes and beliefs into account. The group, after enduring years of mistreatment by management, is fed up and angry with the situation. The worker with financial difficulties might take this into account, deciding to strike with the rest, despite the possibility of individual hardship. This means that there is a causal relation between the individual and group level attitudes and beliefs. In our example, the worker with financial difficulties ultimately decides to strike because the group wants to, or because the group has been

⁴⁷ List and Pettit hold that the presence of sophisticated motives and causal relations do not contradict their claim that the group ultimately implements some aggregation function that member attitudes are mapped onto group attitudes.

⁴⁸ A wildcat strike, as opposed to a regular strike, is one that has not be officially organized by a union or sanctioned by management. I use this type of strike as an example because it involves decisions that are clearly not mechanistic.

mistreated. The way that the group feels about the situation affects their decision – and the worker uses this feedback in order to make their final decision concerning the strike.

I argue that that the organizational structure of the party would be functionally inexplicit. The party, on Lukács' view, must not be a mechanistically determined group, but rather be always flexible insofar as it can respond to the material conditions of society. Consider the following quote, "Thus the ability to act, the faculty of self-criticism, of self-correction and of theoretical development all co-exist in a state of constant interaction. The Communist Party does not function as a stand-in for the proletariat even in theory."⁴⁹ Here Lukács focuses on the reflexive properties of the party, arguing that even theoretically, the party cannot stand in for the thoughts and attitudes of the proletariat. Rather, the party must maintain an internal faculty of adjustment or self-alteration. Lukács continues: "If the class consciousness of the proletariat as a function of the thought and action of the class as a whole is something organic and in a state of constant flux, then this must be reflected in the organized form of that class consciousness, namely in the Communist Party."⁵⁰ The party, as the organized form of proletarian class consciousness, cannot be rigidly or mechanistically determined, even by its own organizational structure. It must remain open, not only to the changing attitudes of its individual members, but also to the preferences and judgments of the proletariat as a whole. Here, the 'heuristic' involved is indeed complex – involving not only members of the group in question (the party), but also members of another group (individual members of the proletarian class), as well as the group

⁴⁹ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 327.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

attitudes of that group as a whole (attitudes of the proletariat⁵¹). At the very least, this heuristic pushes up against the limits of calling it an ‘aggregation function’ since it seems difficult, if not impossible, to reduce the attitude of the party to the attitudes of the individual members of the party. That is to say, the attitudes of the party members may be necessary, but not sufficient in determining the attitude of the group. As I will suggest below, we perhaps need other factors in order to determine this group attitude.

Holistic Supervenience and the Autonomy of the Group Agent

List and Pettit hold a supervenience view of group agents. They reject both the Emergentist and Eliminativist views, arguing for a kind of middle position between the two. They hold that a supervenience view of the relationship between individual members of a group and the group as a whole. This view allows them to reject the eliminative view of groups, which would hold that groups are a metaphysical fiction, and all our talk of group phenomena is metaphorical. It also allows them to reject the emergence view of groups, which would hold that a group is a new metaphysical entity over and above its individual members. In this section, I will consider List and Pettit’s account of supervenience, especially insofar as it relates to the autonomy of the group agent. Taking the party as an example of a group agent, I will push on the limits of this view, arguing that holistic supervenience is necessary, but not sufficient for describing the role or function of the party. Ultimately, I hold that List and Pettit’s view on group

⁵¹ Whether or not the proletariat, as a group, can have attitudes is an important question. However, it is not one that I can explore here. For our purposes here, one need only admit that individual members of the party *believe* the proletariat as a whole to have attitudes, not that they *in fact* have them. We can thus remain agnostic with respect to the question of whether the proletariat can have an attitude, while at the same time affirming the claim that individual members of the party believe the proletariat to have an attitude, and this belief (individual, shared, collective, etc.) can motivate the rational decision making of that individual *visa vis* the group attitude of the party. In any case, as I have shown above/will show below, it is not unreasonable to ascribe to the proletariat a group interest – whether this group interest translates into a group attitude, on the other hand, is another matter.

agency is not incorrect, but merely incomplete with respect to particular complex group agents whose role and function develop overtime.

List and Pettit defend a supervenience relation between individual-level and group-level phenomena. Supervenience is a mode of determination in which lower-level patterns relate to higher-level patterns in multiple and complex ways. The notion of supervenience is a key concept for List and Pettit because it, “leaves open the possibility that while the ‘lower-level’ pattern determines the ‘higher-level’ pattern, the higher-level pattern may be realized in a number of lower-level ways.”⁵² This leaves open different arrangements or possible complex or nuanced combinations of individual group members in order to explain group level phenomena. Specifically, they defend a holistic account of supervenience. “Holistic supervenience. The set of group attitudes across propositions is determined by the individual sets of attitudes across these propositions.”⁵³ This kind of supervenience goes beyond proposition-wise supervenience, where the group attitude on a proposition is directly determined by the individual attitudes on the proposition, even if the mode of determination differs from proposition to proposition. Holistic supervenience is a relation in which the sets of individual attitudes determine the set of group attitudes, but there is not necessarily a one to one correlation between the individual and group attitudes. This implies that knowing individual attitudes towards a proposition p is neither sufficient nor necessary for determining the group’s attitudes towards p, resulting in weak autonomy or strong autonomy respectively.

Before turning to this notion of autonomy of the group level phenomenon, one aspect to note in List and Pettit’s account is that the organizational structures they identify that give rise to

⁵² List and Pettit, *Group Agency*, p. 65.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

a holistic supervenience relation between the attitudes of individual members and those of the group are still homogeneous insofar as each member of the group plays the same role in determining the group's attitudes. While at first this may seem at odds with an account of the party, since different members will inevitably play different institutional roles within the organizational structure. While this may be true, there is a kind of homogeneity across party members that keeps true to the kind of holistic supervenience List and Pettit describe. Lenin, for example, maintains that a certain level of homogeneity among party members is required: "In view of this common feature of the members of such an organization, all distinctions as between workers and intellectuals, and certainly distinctions of trade and profession, must be utterly obliterated."⁵⁴ That is, while different members may fill different institutional roles, distinctions between so-called 'specialists' must be dissolved in order for the party to function properly.

As seen above, the vanguard of professional revolutionaries must make a similar dissolution – whereas capitalist society seeks to divide revolutionary organizations, the aim must be for some kind of unity or homogeneity.⁵⁵ Or again, Lukács: "The party as a whole transcends the reified divisions according to nation, profession, etc., and according to modes of life (economics and politics) by virtue of its action. For this is oriented towards revolutionary unity and collaboration and aims to establish the true unity of the proletarian class."⁵⁶ Here the party as a group goes beyond (or aims at going beyond) divisions instilled through and by capitalist society. The party, as a whole, must have some kind of homogeneity unimpeded by these

⁵⁴ Lenin, *What is to Be Done?* p. 138.

⁵⁵ We should keep Adorno in mind here. The aim or goal is not complete unity or complete homogeneity. The party does not (or should not) seek to dissolve all distinctions – only those distinctions created by capital whose purpose is to divide, distract, and ultimately dismantle revolutionary activity.

⁵⁶ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 339.

divisions in order to function properly. Here, List and Pettit's account of holistic supervenience seems in line (at least in this aspect) with both Lenin's and Lukács' position on the organizational structure of the party.

Autonomy of Group Agents: Based on the notion of holistic supervenience, List and Pettit defend a moderate view of the autonomy of group agents. On their view, group agency that supervenes on its members is not “ontologically autonomous,” but rather epistemologically autonomous.⁵⁷ This is to say, knowing the attitudes, beliefs, or desires of the group in question cannot be easily determined by simply knowing the attitudes, beliefs, or desires of the individual members of that group. Ultimately, List and Pettit argue that the group's attitudes can be derived from the attitudes of individual members in principle, although they admit that there are serious practical difficulties in doing so.⁵⁸ However, they maintain that insofar as they put aside any mysterious forces as solutions to the problem, they need not put aside surprise. Indeed, for an account that maintains a methodological individualism, the robust account of group level phenomenon is surprising. By maintaining a middle ground between emergentism and eliminativism, I argue that they side closer to the Emergentist position, or at least what we might call an ‘Emergentist position’ that aligns very closely with the positions of the early Marxist theorists we considered in chapter 1.

What List and Pettit ultimately reject from the Emergentist position is an appeal to a *vis vitalis*, a life force or vital force (*élan vitale*) that is something added to a group that give it its ontological status over and above its parts, as well as its relative autonomy. “Taken at its word, emergentism holds that group agents are real entities whose properties as agents do not

⁵⁷ List and Pettit, *Group Agency*, p. 76.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p 77.

supervene on the contributions of their individual members...[They held] that the force by which a collection of individuals constitutes a group agent is an add-on to the individual contributions of the members; it is something that accompanies those contributions but does not logically derive from them.”⁵⁹ According to List and Pettit, the Emergentist view speaks in vague and elusive metaphors; it posits some mysterious force over and above the individual members.⁶⁰

Both with respect to the general case of group agency, as well as the specific case of the group agency of the party, I agree with List and Pettit insofar as I also reject any ‘add-on’ force that contributes to the agency of the group. As we saw in chapter 1, the Marxian account of dialectical materialism rejects the independence of some spiritual realm, over and against the material realm, operating completely apart from that of the material conditions. Thus, I am in complete agreement with List and Pettit in rejecting the appeal to some mysterious force that binds a group together on grounds that defy logic or reason. The account of group agency, particularly with respect to the agency of the party, however, does not appeal to some mysterious force. Rather, the kind of agency involved in the party is perhaps confusing because, according to the Marxian tradition, the party is not a fully formed group, but rather always in the process of becoming, evolving, and changing. “The party called upon to lead the proletarian revolution is not born ready-made into its leading role: it, too, *is* not but *is becoming*. And the process of

⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 74-75.

⁶⁰ Ibid., p. 75: “As we imagine a collection of agents assuming all the attitudes and undertaking all the roles associated with group agency, we cannot hold open the possibility that group agency might not materialize.” Here we see, perhaps as plainly as possible, the distinction we must make between agency in the narrow sense as described in the analytic tradition, and the kind of capacity to ‘enact’ social transformation at the core of the arguments of the early Marxist theorists. Narrowly speaking, I agree with List and Pettit on this point – we must say that such a group has agency in the way they have described it independent of the material conditions of society in which it finds itself. Taken in a broader sense, however, it is easy to see that the capacity to ‘enact’ social transformation could exist for the same group, same individuals with the same attitudes, in one situation, and not for another. We must disentangle these two notions in order to understand how social conditions themselves impact agency, whether at the individual or group level.

fruitful interaction between party and class repeats itself – albeit differently – in the relationship between the party and its members.”⁶¹ Here, with some interpretation, we might say that Lukacs agrees with List and Pettit’s position with respect to holistic supervenience. In the relationship between the party and its members, there is not strong ontological autonomy that implies complete independence of the group from its members. Rather, there is a reciprocal, dialectical relation between them. The party does not appear fully-formed – it is not, if the ‘is’ designates an ontological entity completely apart from its constituent pieces. The group as group is in a constant state of becoming – despite the uniformity and continuity granted to it through its organizational and joint intentional structure, it is constantly evolving and changing.

It is with this becoming of the party in mind that we might understand the following, seemingly paradoxical statement: ““Lenin’s concept of organization is itself dialectical: it is both a product of and a conscious contributor to, historical development in so far as it, too, is simultaneously product and producer of itself.”⁶² If the party is a group already fully formed, then the claim that it is both product and producer of itself makes no sense. If, however, it is the kind of group that is constantly changing, then it is continually developing and adjusting itself to its environment. This is another way of saying that there are feedback mechanisms at work in the organizational structure. Party members do not make decisions mechanistically – their organization is functionally inexplicit and entails complex feedback mechanisms that include the party, the proletariat as a class, and society as a whole.

This concept of the party in turn pushes against the explanatory limits of holistic supervenience, especially with respect to the kind of autonomy List and Pettit ascribe to it. On

⁶¹ Lukács, *Lenin, a study on the unity of his thought*, p. 37-38. Italics in original.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 37.

Lukacs' view, the party does achieve a kind of autonomy or independence from the proletariat, however it is not full or complete independence. Consider the following passage:

The communist Party is an *autonomous form* of proletarian class consciousness serving the interests of the revolution. It is essential to gain a correct theoretical understanding of it in its twofold dialectical relation: as both the *form* of this consciousness and the form of *this* consciousness, i.e. as both an independent and subordinate phenomenon.⁶³

Here again, we can see that the party also plays a productive role – both in terms of its own attitudes and beliefs, but also those of the class. The deeply relational, or mediated and mediating⁶⁴ nature of the party organizational structure, thus, seems to push at the limit of the account of autonomy described by List and Pettit, providing a possible example from which to extend their account of group agency even further.

Conclusion

In this section, I have attempted to argue that the organizational structure of the Communist Party has group agency in the way that List and Pettit describe. The party has both a joint-intention and an organizational structure that allow for the group to be an agent. Party members share intentions and make decisions through feedback mechanisms. Lastly, I have suggested that the party form, at least insofar as it is described by Lukács, Lenin, and others, pushes against the limits of List and Pettit's account, particularly with respect to the becoming, and not just being of the group in question. Certainly, List and Pettit would not hold that agency

⁶³ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 330. Italics in original.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 299: "Organization is the form of mediation between theory and practice. And, as in every dialectical relationship, the terms of the relation only acquire concreteness and reality in and by virtue of this mediation. This ability of organization to mediate between theory and practice is seen most clearly by the way in which it manifests a much greater, finer and more confident sensitivity towards divergent trends than any other sector of political thought and action."

arises magically or mysteriously all of a sudden – it is something that is developed, continued, and maintained over time. Thinking of the party as having a kind of agency that is becoming, rather than already fully formed, pushes against the limit of their account in interesting ways. This is not to say that their account is wrong or misguided – just that more work is perhaps warranted in order to better understand the process of the development of group agency as not already fully formed, but continually becoming.

In order to apply these abstract concepts to our own historical moment, the next practical move would be to look at our own society and ask: Where is the party today? Just as Horkheimer and Adorno were pessimistic in the absence of the party, at first glance the party, at least in the organizational structure described above, indeed seems to be lacking. What would be required, however, in order to apply these concepts to our own society, would be to identify the *function* the party form is intended to play, and see if there are organizations that are continuing this struggle. Perhaps today there is no one, unifying organization that fulfills all the roles the party function is supposed to play. However, if we look to labor unions, NGOs, and other non-profit organizations, one might see the possibility of uniting these disparate groups under one common fight or struggle – the class struggle of the proletariat. In what follows, I will outline one way of thinking of the proletariat today.

Section 3: Identifying with the Proletariat

In this section, I will explore the biggest, and perhaps the most difficult group to account for this chapter – the proletariat. Unlike the vanguard and party, the proletariat is a much larger group, and on the whole is much less homologous. The (potential) unity of the proletariat as a

class is also much less clear. Whereas the vanguard and the party initially form into groups intentionally and voluntarily, the proletariat is formed by its position within capitalist society. Thus, it does not have agency as defined by List and Pettit, and others from the group agency literature. What binds the proletariat, at least initially, is a common situation, that leads to a common interest. As we will see, this common interest can be described objectively; that is to say, does not depend on the subjective views of the individual proletarian members. Then, I will explore List and Pettit's account of the problem involved with identifying with group agents. Specifically, they suggest that we may be able to identify with a group agent in an aspirational sense, meaning that we can identify with a group agent absent the strict requirements of agency. Lastly, I suggest that one way to do this is the use of we-narratives. We-narratives, on my view, with respect to the proletariat as a class, give us new resources to shape, build, and understand the proletariat as an agent, and lend to the creation of a sense of agency. Finally, I will explore who the proletariat might be today, and briefly note that while the proletariat of our current historical moment may not fulfill the requirements for agency in the strictest sense, it may still have a capacity for social transformation that is not reducible to agency as described by List and Pettit, and others.

Below I discuss a Marxist account of class interest. Following Allen Wood, I argue that class interest is not generated through an aggregate of individual proletarians. Rather, this class interest is objective determined by an analysis of class struggle. First, I look at List and Pettit's account of identifying with group agents. They use the example of a pilot's engagement with their navigational instruments in order to think about the way we use information from and about our environment. I argue that adopting the standpoint of the proletariat might operate in a similar fashion. Then, I argue that one strategy one could use in order to develop an account of the

standpoint of the proletariat is to use we-narratives. I follow Gallagher and Tollefsen in arguing that groups as well as individuals can have narratives. While establishing proletarian we-narratives will not be sufficient for successful revolutionary action, they provide a helpful conceptual tool for political organizers.

Class Interest

According to the Marxist account of class, class interest is not determined subjectively through the psychological states of individuals within that class, but rather objectively through the material conditions and the modes and relations of production of a given society. The proletarian class must come together and constitute itself not just as a class in itself, but as a class against capital. As we saw for Lukács and Adorno, the process by which this happens, both on the individual-level and group-level is a complex process, and one that does not happen spontaneously or on its own. Setting aside this question of awareness for the moment, class determination via objective, economic conditions also generates certain class (individual and collective) positions, as well as a general class interest. Following Allen Wood, in this section I will outline a concept of a class interest apart, but not completely separated, from the individual, subjective attitudes of the (individual members) of the class. Put in another way, class interests cannot be determined through any aggregate function – they are determined rather by the material interests of society.

Allen Wood argues that Marx’s account of a general class interest holds for the class as a whole and is not simply a shorthand or metaphor for talking about the aggregate of the individual interests. “The concept of something’s interests, it seems to me, is closely connected to several other concepts: what benefits it, what is good for it, what makes it well off. Something can be

said to have interests if these other things can be said of it.”⁶⁵ On Wood’s view, the fact that we ascribe an interest to a thing is enough to say that it indeed has an interest. One might object, however, saying that such ascription is merely a shorthand of talking about the interests of the individual members of the class, and does not describe something other than these individual interests. Wood addresses this kind of objection, arguing that it is Marx’s account of a general class interest is warranted not only because we have the practice of ascribing interest to groups, but also because they may be ascribed to the political movements on which Marx’s theory of class is based.⁶⁶

I would add to this account by saying that it is at least plausible to ascribe a general interest to a class because, following List and Pettit’s argument above, there is not a direct correlation between the interests of the members and the group or movement as a whole. For example, it may not be in the interest of an individual proletarian to go on strike – they might have a family to feed, or bills to pay.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, it might be in the interest of the group on the whole that they strike. Such participation might further long-term goals of the proletariat such as increased wages or safer working conditions. At the very least, there must be a kind of holistic supervenience relation between the individual and the group with respect to interest.

As we saw in Chapter 1, Marx’s theory of class also involves class determination through class struggle. That is, one’s class position is not something determined subjectively – one’s class is not ‘up to you’ but rather is determined by the mode of production and social relations of

⁶⁵ Wood, *Karl Marx*, p. 97.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 95: “The historical potency Marx ascribes to general class interests thus presupposes not only that people tend to organize to promote the individual interests they share, but also that they sometimes tend to sacrifice these interests for the sake of the organizations they create and for the sake of the ideal values which serve to unify and strengthen these organizations.”

the society you live in. Even though class position is determined objectively, we saw from both Lukács and Adorno that subjective identification with one's class position is often confused or obscured by capitalism itself through reification. In what follows, I will offer an approach, building off of List and Pettit's account of (individually) identifying with group agents, as well as Gallagher and Tollefsen's account of we-narratives that sketches the outlines of possible ways in which workers might align (or more properly realign) with their class position and class interest.

List and Pettit on Identifying with Group Agents

List and Pettit argue that as individuals, we can identify our individual attitudes with group attitudes to such an extent that those group-level attitudes can become second nature individual attitudes. They use the example of a pilot using the instruments in a cockpit. They also highlight the role particular members of a group can play in realigning individual attitudes with group attitudes. I agree with this practice of group identification, arguing that it fits nicely with the picture of political action and agency I develop in Chapters 1 and 2.

List and Pettit use the example of an expert pilot who navigates a plane by developing a direct connection with the plane's instruments. Rather than treating the instruments as evidences that counts in their own reasoning process, they incorporate⁶⁸ these measurements and readings directly. "Just as pilots can connect in this direct way to the instruments on the cockpit panel, so the members of a group may connect themselves directly to the attitudes of the group...their individual attitudes are under the automatic guidance of the group, so that they can respond as

⁶⁸ Although it would go beyond the scope of the present argument, one might even say that this process indicates an extended mind, or enactivist approach. On the whole, I take List and Pettit's view, as well as my own, to be compatible with such approaches.

spontaneously as pilots do when they take their cue from the panel before them.”⁶⁹ In cases such as these, we take on a first-person plural, ‘we’ attitude towards the group. List and Pettit note that it is only metaphorically speaking that the group’s mind is instantiated in each of us insofar as we act automatically according to these group attitudes. It seems as though in the case of ideology, for example, this automatic adoption of group level beliefs, and the relative spontaneity with which we act on those beliefs indicate that this phenomenon is in fact more real than metaphorical. Leaving aside these questions of ideology, I broadly agree with List and Pettit that group attitudes link up with our responses without (conscious) mediation of a belief about our membership of that group.

In addition, List and Pettit hold that individuals stand to benefit, in certain situations, from adopting a group attitude, as well as from the actions of a group. Conversely, we stand to lose, and perhaps even risk the dissolution of the agency of the group agent, when we fail to assume a group attitude. This kind of situation includes failing to “assume an appropriate, group standpoint; we may fail to identify as the group that our collective attitudes should activate. And so we may fail to perform appropriately as a group agent.”⁷⁰ One reason we might fail to adopt the appropriate group standpoint that comes from the Marxian tradition might be because of reification, or false consciousness. Reified consciousness, on Lukács’ view, understands individual members of the proletariat as atomized individuals, disconnected completely from each other and from society. Indeed, the proper attitude for Lukács would be precisely to do as List and Pettit suggest: adopt the appropriate group standpoint, vis. the standpoint of the proletariat.

⁶⁹ List and Pettit, *Group Agency*, p. 192.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 193.

List and Pettit go on to suggest that certain, activist members can play impactful roles in sustaining a group agent. In moments where we may fall out of the group attitude and revert to an individual, first person mode, someone can help us remember our shared identity and (re)adopt the appropriate group standpoint. “They may reconnect us with those attitudes, transforming our way of thinking in the way in which the thinking of beginner pilots is transformed when the cockpit instruments assume control over their responses. Social activists often describe this shift, in Marxist terms, as one of raising ‘group consciousness’.”⁷¹ I agree wholeheartedly with List and Pettit, although I hold that the process is not as simplistic as they describe. The process of raising consciousness is a complex and nuanced one, involving multiple individuals and groups across society. Moreover, this ‘consciousness raising’ is not without difficulties and barriers. However, given Adorno’s concerns about the totalized nature of capitalist society in Chapter 2, it is precisely this process of dislodging certain (individualistic) beliefs, and facilitating the adoption of the appropriate group beliefs that is of the utmost importance.

Strategic Use of We-Narratives

One approach we could use to develop this kind of group identification with the proletariat is the implementation of we-narratives. Broadly speaking, this is in line with the task of the vanguard. Granted, the approach is almost certainly not sufficient for developing the kind of class consciousness outlined in chapter 1. Nevertheless, it may be a useful political organizing strategy. In this section, I will first describe the we-narrative as Gallagher and Tollefsen describe it and show what they expect it can do. Then I will suggest a way we could implement a

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 193.

proletarian we-narrative and explore possible benefits of the approach. On the outset, it must be said that no single approach is likely to be a cure-all solution of the problem of reified consciousness under capitalist society. That said, hopefully this (re)description of ideology critique in terms of a we-narrative will offer helpful insights into the problem.

Gallagher and Tollefsen use we-narratives as a way to address a problem of stability and depth in the shared agency literature. The reason individuals might participate in a joint action, particularly over long periods of time, might differ from person to person. Especially in the absence of an institutional or organizational structure that provides a stable framework in which to deliberate, a group agent risks dissolving into merely its individual members.⁷² On the individual level, we often talk about narrative as framework in which to understand individual authorship, particularly of one's actions. Gallagher and Tollefsen suggest that we often use narratives about groups in addition to individual narratives. These we-narratives, or narratives about groups, they argue offer another way of addressing the stability and depth problem of shared agency. "Our proposal" they state, "is that when these narratives are shared, in the sense that the narrative is endorsed by each party, they can play a significant role in stabilizing and deepening shared agency."⁷³ Conversely, they add, conflicting we-narratives that are not shared by members of a group decrease the stability and depth of shared agency.

One important distinction to keep in mind is the distinction between agency and a sense of agency. Gallagher and Tollefsen admit that it is possible that the 'we' in question might not have first-person phenomenological status.⁷⁴ That is to say, it may be that the group in question

⁷² Gallagher and Tollefsen, "We-Narratives and the Stability and Depth of Shared Agency" *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*, p. 99.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 103.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

might not be capable of having a sense of agency, even if we can plausibly ascribe to it some sort of group agency, whether that is corporate agency or joint-agency. Nevertheless, we can, and often do, talk about the narrative of a ‘we’ that need not have this kind of status. Thus, the use of a we-narrative can avoid certain problems about group minds, or the need to establish something like group qualia. Further, a we-narrative can instill in the individual members of a group a *sense* of agency independent from the actual or perceived agency of the group. “The narrative allows for a coherency of shared understanding – our joint actions either fit or do not fit the narrative, and the sense of joint agency in individual participants may depend in part on this – which may also relate to collective responsibility.”⁷⁵ Further, the use of a we-narrative can play a regulatory role with respect to individual action, especially insofar as the individual identifies strongly with the group.

With respect to a proletarian we-narrative, this approach offers a couple of potential benefits. First, while other approaches require the group in question to already have some sort of agential or intentional structure, the we-narrative approach need not require this. That is, it is possible to have a we-narrative about a mere collection of individuals who are not already united in any strong, subjective sense. Building on this, since we-narratives do not appear to be tied to the subjective dimension in the same way other approaches are, they open onto the possibility of including objective factors, such as class interest discussed above. That is, a proletarian we-narrative built around a shared sense of disenfranchisement and common goal of liberating ourselves from conditions is completely consistent with the relative disunity and nonagency of the disenfranchised group as a whole. Given the relative disunity of the working-class movement

⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 104.

in our own historical moment, an approach like this offers a potentially beneficial framework from which to begin or continue building power. Using a we-narrative could offer a different approach when thinking about our common interest as a class. As the history of the 20th century has shown, simply having a shared objective class interest is not sufficient for successful revolutionary action. Perhaps the addition of proletarian we-narratives (rather than reified bourgeois narratives that focus exclusively on an individual, atomized ‘I’), along with other political strategies, will help activists be more effective organizers.

Conclusion

The contemporary proletariat is not a homogenized, unified whole. Today, we are perhaps no closer to an organized proletariat capable of social transformation than we were in Adorno, or even Marx’s time. However, class interest, analysis, and struggle continue to be important concepts with which to understand society and organize political action. List and Pettit offer an account of how we might individually identify with a group. They provide an argument that perhaps surprisingly lines up with the insights we saw in the early Marxist theorists in chapter 1. With the strategic use of we-narratives, perhaps political organizers can be better equipped to engage in the revolutionary struggle. While this chapter certainly does not provide a fully formed account of the proletariat, it hopefully sketches out the outlines of how arguments from the analytic tradition of group agency might intersect with the insights from the Marxist tradition.

Slavoj Žižek ends his postface to Lukács’ *Tailism and the Dialectic: a defense of history and class consciousness* with a discussion of who today is a social agent. Žižek is less interested in asking how Lukács’ work stands in relation to today’s society, and more interested in how Lukács might stand in relation to us. Specifically, Žižek asks about our possibility to commit to

revolutionary action, to the act proper as Lukács describes. Zizek asks: “Which social agent is, on account of its radical dislocation, *today*, able to accomplish it?”⁷⁶ As we saw in chapter 2, the project of establishing the proletariat as a subject-object agent of history has its problems. Zizek’s question follows directly from this problem. Who is the proletariat today? A complete answer to this question goes well beyond the scope of this current investigation. However, I hope that the discussion in this section works towards developing the theoretical and conceptual tools required to ask it. Certainly, in order to ask who can act today requires a practical analysis of our own contemporary moment that takes into account the social conditions of our time. I argue that a class analysis of the proletariat has a role to play in that account, and that even though society has changed considerably since the time of the early Marxist theorists, their insights are still useful.

Summary of Chapter 3

In Chapter 3, we saw how agency plays out in three different social groups: the vanguard, the party, and the proletariat. Gilbert’s account of plural subjects captures the voluntary combination of the vanguard, as well as its joint commitment to social transformation. List and Pettit’s account of group agents captures the organizational structure and joint action of the Communist party. While the proletariat may not be an agent, particularly according to the way in which the term is used in analytic philosophy, it is an important social group. Using Tollefsen and Gallagher’s account of we-narratives offers a useful conceptual tool in order to think the proletariat as more than a mere collection or aggregate of individuals. As we saw in chapters 1

⁷⁶ Lukács, *Talism and the Dialectic*, p. 178.

and 2, an understanding of the political agency of these different social groups is not always clear. The conceptual clarification offered in this chapter hopefully shows how the agency of these particular groups plays out. Reworking the concept of class consciousness requires understanding not only how the agency of these different groups works on their own, but also how they might interact with one another. For example, a worker considering whether or not to strike might be a part of all three. They might have a small group of dedicated friends who are working toward organizing their fellow workers. In addition to this, they might also be part of a political party, or some other political organization that has the organizational structure of a group. Finally, they are also part of the proletariat, and must also consider their own particular interests, as well as those of the class. The analysis above is not intended to provide a totalizing picture of agency; but it hopefully moves towards understanding it in its complexity.

Throughout the chapter, I have provisionally adopted the methodological individualism of contemporary analytic philosophy in order to highlight the important ways that individuals come together (or could fail to come together) to form a group agent. I argue that this is a necessary aspect to consider in order to understand how group agency functions in society. As we saw in chapter 1, capitalism isolates us from each other and alienates us from our labor. This separation is not merely a psychological delusion to be overcome through proper Marxist theory. The fact of this separation must be taken into account, in order to better understand the agency, we have when we jointly commit to take some action, or jointly decide on some goal. How we understand what a group can do shows us the social conditions we live under, as well as what can be done to change them. Starting with individuals in order to understand the agency of the group they constitute is a necessary aspect of understanding class consciousness; however, it is not sufficient. As we saw above, List and Pettit's account of holistic supervenience pushes up

against the limits of their methodological individualism. As the complexity of the social phenomenon increases, the more difficult it is to adhere to a strict individualist methodology. Methodological individualism, on my view, is not wrong, only incomplete. It shows only one part of the picture: the movement from the individual to the group. In addition to this, I argue we also need to understand the movement from the group to the individual. Putting both these dimensions together, I argue that we arrive not at an individualist, or holistic view of agency, but a dialectical one.

In what follows, I draw on resources from two contemporary theorists from the continental tradition: Jodi Dean and Judith Butler. Rather than focus on individuals as preexisting entities in order to understand how they combine to form groups, these thinkers emphasize that we are already part of a group, that our interdependence as individuals takes priority. For Dean, this understanding comes through an analysis of the crowd. The nature of the crowd is not that it is made of up individuals, but rather that one loses one's individuality in the crowd. For Butler, this understanding comes from the embodied, interdependent, and ultimately precarious nature of our existence. Both thinkers highlight the capacity of a group to engage in political action that is irreducible to the capacities of its constituent members. The task is not to understand the agency of the individuals first, or even understand the agency of the group as generated through the relations between individuals. Rather they point to social phenomena that resists the prioritization of the individual. The groups they discuss might not have 'agency' in the strict of the term as it is used in contemporary analytic philosophy. Nevertheless, there is a kind of capacity at work in these groups. The group does something and is able to effect political change on a massive scale. In addition to the agency discussed in this chapter, I argue we must also take this other form of agency into account. In order to develop a dialectical account of

group agency, we must also interrogate how agency works as understood as moving from the group to the individual. Instead of a building up of agency, it will constitute agency as a kind of lack, as pointing to something that is missing. Following Adorno, we must not fall back into an idealist romanticism that focuses exclusively on unity, reconciliation, and identity. In order to understand the political agency entailed by the concept of class consciousness, we must now turn to an understanding of the group as a whole, paying attention to the political capacities of what remains.

CHAPTER 4

THE CAPACITY OF THE COLLECTIVE

As we saw above, the agency of a group can be understood through an analysis of its individual members. The way in which individuals come together in part determines the kind of agency the group has. We saw this using the vanguard and the party as examples of successful joint action, and the proletariat as a group that does not have ‘agency’ in the narrow sense used in the tradition of analytic philosophy. While this methodology of building up group agency through an analysis of its constituent members is one aspect of understanding group agency, I argue that it remains incomplete. The other aspect requires an understanding of the collectivity and interdependency of the group. Methodologically, I argue that we must be able to understand group agency by starting with the group and moving to the individual. In this chapter, I look at two examples of this from Jodi Dean and Judith Butler in order to show how the collectivity of the group affects the possibility of group agency. This, coupled with the discussion above in Chapter 3, aims at understanding agency in both directions: from the individual to the group, and from the group to the individual. This ‘dialectical’ account of agency builds on the methodological resources from Chapters 1 and 2, and I argue it develops an account of agency that helps to explain what is at work in the concept of class consciousness.

Both Dean and Butler draw on very different conceptual resources than Gilbert or List and Pettit. While both are American, they draw heavily from conceptual resources developed in contemporary French Theory. In *Crowds and Party*, Dean draws on a wide variety of resources, from the Structural Marxist tradition of Louis Althusser and Alan Badiou, to other post-structuralist thinkers such as Giles Deleuze and Michel Foucault. From these thinkers, Dean develops an account of the crowd based in an account of political subjectivity that is

fundamentally collective. On her view, ideology individuates us. What it means to be a political subject, then, prioritizes collectivity, and explains individuality in reference to this collectivity. In *Notes Toward a Performativity Theory of Assembly*, Butler makes more explicit reference to Hannah Arendt than French theorists, but her approach clearly follows thinkers like Foucault and Jacques Derrida. Butler's account of embodiment and precarity blurs the clear conceptual lines between action defined in a narrow sense, and the conditions that make that action possible. Her position emphasizes our own interdependence, which leads to an expanded account of political action.

Both Dean and Butler, I argue, take an approach more aligned with methodological holism than methodological individualism. It is perhaps unfair to squeeze these thinkers into methodological boxes. A complete discussion of each of their methodologies, and their relation to methods developed in the analytic tradition would get very complicated very quickly. For now, my argument here is that both Dean and Butler take a different approach to group agency, emphasizing the collectivity of the whole as opposed to the individuality of its members. As I said above in Chapter 3, this approach is not wrong, just one-sided. Understanding the way in which the collective determines the individual is a necessary component to understand group agency, but it is not sufficient. Ultimately, I argue, both are important aspects of what I have been calling 'dialectical' agency. In order to understand the kind of political agency at work in the concept of class consciousness, I argue we need to prioritize mediation, rather than the individual or the group. Putting the insights of chapter 3 together with the insights of the present chapter, I argue we arrive at a more complete view of group agency.

This perhaps goes beyond 'agency' in a narrow sense but might be better described as a capacity to effect change. Society changes and transforms according to a complex set of forces.

Some of these forces can be traced to groups that might not have agency in the traditional sense. There might not be joint commitment or action between the individual members of a crowd or demonstration – they might not have a shared goal or intention. Nevertheless, they are capable of transforming society. If we restrict our analysis to a methodological individualism, we risk misunderstanding these social phenomena. In this chapter, I hope to establish an argument for broadening our conception of agency.

Below I take a look at Dean’s account of crowds in *Crowds and Party*. I discuss her critiques of 19th century crowd theorists and show that her position highlights the collectivity of political subjectivity. While I worry that her position on the ‘egalitarian discharge’ of the crowd might be too broad, I generally agree with her approach, and argue it goes a long way in helping to understand the irreducible collectivity and nonidentity of certain groups. Next, I take a look at Butler’s account of precarity and embodiment in *Notes Toward a Theory of Assembly*. I discuss her account of vulnerability and interdependence, arguing that her approach to group action blurs the line between action in a narrow sense and the conditions that make action possible. I argue that her emphasis on the capacity to be affected, rather than on the capacity to affect others or the world compliments and complicates our understanding of group agency as dialectical.

Dean and the Theory of the Crowd

In *Crowds and Party* Jodi Dean provides a psychodynamic account of groups. She provides an account of group political action where the agency of the group is not reducible to the agency of its individual members. Specifically, she draws on Canetti’s account of crowds in *Crowds and Power* in order to develop a ‘gap theory’ of subjectivity; on her view, the individual

is individuated as political subject insofar as she is singled out from the crowd. In order for this process to happen, she must be, first, part of the crowd, and only then called to be an individual. The crowd, on Dean's view, has a potential or capacity for effective political action that is irreducible to the capacities of its individual members. In this relation or 'gap' Dean defends what she calls the "egalitarian discharge of the crowd." While I agree with Dean with respect to the political capacity of the crowd, I argue that her account is ultimately too utopian. In this section, I will argue for a more neutral conception of the crowd that hopefully better addresses our contemporary populist movements on the right as well as on the left.

This section takes an extended look at Dean's *Crowds and Party*. First, I discuss Dean's critique of Louis Althusser's account of ideology as interpellation. Dean reverses Althusser's position, arguing that interpellation is better understood as the individuation of subjects that the subjectivation of individuals. Then, I discuss Dean's account of the crowd, arguing that she develops a 'gap' account of subjectivity. This gap or split within the people demonstrates that the collective political subject is not identical with itself. This opens new possibilities for action. In Lastly, I give a critique of Dean's account of the 'egalitarian discharge' of the crowd. I worry Dean sides too much on the side of fidelity to the crowd event and offer an example to show why fidelity to the crowd risks being problematic as well as progressive.

Individuals and Subjects

Drawing on a wide variety of authors and disciplines, Dean articulates an account of the crowd that serves to decenter the individual as the primary unit of political analysis. In contrast to thinkers from the analytic tradition considered above, she develops an account of groups that

finds collective possibilities in the “ruptures of the fragile individual form.”¹ The “interlinked psychic and economic problem” Dean documents is “the incapacity and contradictions of the individual form as a locus for creativity difference, agency, and responsibility.”² She traces the development of the changes in the individual form from the rugged individual of the frontier to the gamblers of the corporation.³ Even the figure of the ‘survivor’ falls into this logic of the individual form, since it places ultimate responsibility on the individual, and need not acknowledge one’s own insufficiency as an individual.⁴ Even on the Left, Dean argues, formulations of the heroic, self-producing individual are ubiquitous.⁵ Against these positions that prioritize the primacy of the individual with respect to political analysis, Dean provides an account of the individual that prioritizes collectivity by appealing to Louis Althusser’s account of ideology as interpellation.

On Althusser’s view, the function of ideology is to constitute the concrete individual as a subject. his example, cited by Dean, involves a police officer calling out to an individual on the street. Before the call, the person called blends in with the crowd. Once called or hailed, they are picked out as distinct from the crowd. “Interpellation, then, is a process of subjection. Becoming subject the individual both takes on and comes under ideology’s structure of beliefs and expectations.”⁶ For Dean, what is important here is that the individual has not been individuated

¹ Dean, *Crowds and Party*, p. 32.

² Ibid.

³ Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism*, p. 235.

⁴ Dean, *Crowds and Party*, p. 46-47.

⁵ Ibid., p. 46: “The fight to survive is the key feature of an identity imagined as dignified and heroic because it has to produce itself by itself;” compare with Dean, “Left Individualism,” *Comrades*, p. 50-55.

⁶ Dean, *Crowds and Party*, p. 76. Compare this to the discussion of ideology from Chapter 1, and Adorno on ideology critique and ‘the Spell’ from Chapter 2.

as a political subject prior to the individuating call of ideology.⁷ Ideology, as we saw with Adorno's account of the 'spell', functions to single someone out in order to exert control over them. Our goal, however, is not to discover some primordial state before ideology in which everything and everyone is indistinguishable. Seeking out a perfect prior state is at best utopian, and risks falling back into romantic idealism, or even totalitarianism. Rather, the goal is to understand the way in which ideology individualizes us in our own contemporary society in order to show its effect on possibilities of agency.

While Dean draws heavily from Althusser's account, she argues that he got the process of interpellation backwards. "Ideological interpellation makes more sense as a theory of individuation than as a theory of subjection."⁸ This reversal is important for Dean's view, since "the individual form itself becomes a problem, the coercive and unstable product of the enclosure of the common in never-ceasing efforts to repress, deny, and foreclose collective political subjectivity."⁹ Rather than building up from the aggregation of individuals in order to form a group, Dean's Althusserian account of interpellation starts from the fact of the crowd, then provides an account of the process by which someone becomes an individualized political subject. Further, this process of individualizing interpellation restricts the full power of collective political subjectivity by breaking the crowd up into its component parts. This division seeks to nullify the collective and relational aspects of collectivity, which in turn reduces the whole into merely the sum of its parts.

⁷ This is not, of course, to say that human beings, absent a figure of authority, meld into one another such that their being is indistinguishable from one another

⁸ Dean, *Crowds and Party*, p. 79.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

Dean appeals to the process of commodity fetishism as an analogous case to the process of individualization. “But just as collective experience of antagonism – the ‘social substance’ – underlies what Marx calls the ‘phantom-like objectivity’ of the commodity, so too does it underlie the phantom-like subjectivity of the individual.”¹⁰ While Dean does not cite Lukacs here, the resemblance to his critique of the reification of the proletariat from *History and Class Consciousness* is striking.¹¹ The “phantom-like subjectivity of the individual” for Lukacs is reified consciousness. Dean gets to her analysis via Althusser’s account of interpellation in a similar fashion as Lukacs gets to his via Marx’s account of the commodity form. Reified or ‘phantom-like’ consciousness of the individual (proletarian) under capitalism is generated by and through these structures of society, as well as the real processes of production. We could say, then, that Dean follows Lukács’ critique of subjectivity via her critique of Althusser. In contrast to the arguments from the analytic tradition from Chapter 3, Dean prioritizes the collective in her analysis.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 81.

¹¹ Dean cites Foucault and Federici as examples of theorists who explore the production of the individual via disciplinary power. For example, Ibid., p. 86: “Bourgeois ideology, manifest in the disciplinary techniques that make individuals, hails the collective subject, the mass of workers, vagabonds, soldiers, and students, as individuals (even as the capacity of the common people for individuated self-discipline in the service of capital accumulation and liberal order will persist as a problem). It singles out and separates, producing the very individuals it extracts.” While it would go beyond the limitations of the present argument, this question of discipline, particularly with respect to the way in which party discipline functions in Lenin’s account of the party form, is a crucial one. As we saw in chapter 1, Luxembourg criticizes Lenin on precisely this point – relying on the ‘discipline’ of the working class learned under capitalism risks reproducing similar conditions. Dean’s argument on interpellation here seems to support Luxembourg’s worry. Reproducing, or even relying on current forms of disciplinary power risks re-individualizing the subject, and thus reinscribe the problems of capitalism within the party cadre (or, to use Lukacs’ language, to reify false consciousness in the individual proletarian workers).

The Power of the Crowd

Building on Allthusser's account of ideology as interpretation, Dean develops a collective account of the subjectivity. She focuses on the subjectivity as a 'gap' – the split within the collective that makes certain kinds of political action possible. On her view, subjectivity is at its most fundamental level, not a characteristic or property of individuals. It is not the site of individual freedom, decision or choice. Through a discussion of the Paris Commune, Dean develops a 'gap' account of subjectivity that I argue helps understand group agency, or at least a capacity to effect change, that cannot be explained by an appeal to its individual members.

Dean's gap account of subjectivity relies on the psychodynamic fact that the people do not know what they want. This gap is not something that can be explained by the idea that some are excluded from the people, or that their exclusion can be expressed merely as a problem of political representation. Rather, Dean argues that the plurality or multiplicity of the group generates differences within it. "Conflicting and contradictory desires and drives render the people a split subject perpetually pushing to express, encounter and address its own non-knowledge."¹² This conflicting and contradictory tension constitutes a kind of non-identity of the group with itself. For Dean (and as we will see with Butler below), this non-identical self-relation is the heart of subjectivity. The (collective, political) subject is able to do things because of this relation, because of this 'gap' within and between itself.

The people, as the collective political subject, is always changing and never fully present. This nonidentical self-relation means that somethings the political collectivity splits, creating

¹² Ibid., p. 91.

ruptures and divisions among the people.¹³ “This split” Dean argues “is practical and material, the condition of our physical being.”¹⁴ Consider a large public demonstration. Everyone does not arrive or leave at the same time. Some come early, others stay late. While the demonstration might last throughout the day, it is always comprised of different people. The fact that the crowd is constantly changing, on Dean’s view, does not mean that it is a mere aggregation. As the crowd continually changes and divides itself, it splits and creates gaps within itself. A split in the collective subject creates a gap – a generative negativity in the form of lack. Dean’s emphasis on the gap indicates a capacity of the group that is not reducible to the capacities of its individual members.

This gap is revealed in the Althusserian call or hail. The call of the police officer singles the individual out, separating them conceptually (and often physically) from the others in the crowd. On Dean’s view, this separation instantiates the individual as a subject, not the subject as individual. The subjective is the collective and has been shifted by the call. The person who called is cut off from the rest of the group and is constituted as an individual political subject who is required to account for herself and her actions. “Politics takes place in the non-identity, gap, or torsion between people and their self-governance. Political subjunctivization involves forcing this non-identity, making it felt as an effect of a subject.”¹⁵ Reversing the Althusserian notion of interpellation helps address a problem in political thought, namely, what can the subject do in the face of the difficulty, if not impossibility of transformative political action. Dean argues that understanding ideology as the interpellation of the subject as an individual

¹³ Ibid., p. 89: “The people can never be politically (or, differently put, the ‘people’ is not an ontological category). They are only present as parts, as subsets.”

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

means that, “the subject emerges where ideology fails because the subject is collective...Correspondingly, the subject is a gap in the structure because the people are the subject of politics.”¹⁶ The people, as the subject of politics, are constantly changing, creating gaps and ruptures. Rather than understanding these gaps as incapacities and limitations, Dean emphasizes what it allows the crowd to do.

Dean’s ‘gap’ account of political subjectivity, and thus her account of the capacity of the crowd to engage in political action, is grounded in a reading of Le Bon’s *The Crowd*. On Dean’s view, Le Bon is less interested in how or why crowds form, but rather what they can do once formed. According to Dean:

Insofar as Le Bon conceives the crowd in terms of a dynamic wherein energies are concentrated in a single direction, he sees the force of crowds expressed in races, castes, classes, nations, juries, parties, and parliamentary assemblies. All these can override individual judgement and opinion, eliciting effects that exceed what an individual would rationally decide to do on his own. These are psychological crowds where ‘crowd’ names the novel consistency temporarily formed from interlinked processes.¹⁷

The power or force of the crowd, Dean argues, demands illusion.¹⁸ This power blurs the distinction between the true and the false; motivation for action is not decided on by rational deliberation. Because of this power, the crowd is able to do things that no individual member is able to do.

Dean explores this possibility through a reading of the multiplicity of the Paris Commune. While the political experiment of the Paris Commune of 1871 may have been short

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 88.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 104.

¹⁸ Compare this with Lukács’ discussion of the ‘necessary illusion’ in Chapter 1, or Adorno’s account of ‘the spell’ in Chapter 2.

lived, it holds a special place in the imaginary of the Marxist tradition. In her reading of the political events, Dean highlights different, and often contradictory elements, arguing that the multiplicity of the event indicates a kind of fidelity to the rupture of the crowd. Depending on the author, even the name ‘Paris Commune’ refers sometimes to the voices of the council, sometimes to the working-class voters who elected them, or even sometimes to the people of Paris in general. “While a politics can and should be traced in these shifts...we might also note that the fact of shifting indexes an irreducible feature of the people as non-all, non-totalizable, and never fully present to itself. The people is only present as few, some, or many...neither people nor class (nor movement nor mass) exists as a unity. Every attempt to invoke, create or speak in behalf of such a unity comes up against an ineliminable, constitutive division.”¹⁹ The commune, as political even in which the ‘people’ are never fully present (even or particularly for themselves), serves as a helpful representation of the kind of group Dean is talking about. In particular, the commune holds a kind of power or capacity in virtue of this inability to be totalized or fully present.

Dean connects this account of the Paris Commune with Badiou’s account of subjectivity. Insofar as the event of the Paris Commune²⁰ represents a new political possibility,²¹ the multiplicity of the event are not merely indications of a new or different political form, or

¹⁹ Dean, *Crowds and Party*, p. 133-134. See also *ibid.*, p. 135: “The people resist and evade the very forms on which their political subjectivity depends. When it appears which isn’t often, the movement for the majority isn’t necessarily in the immediate interest of the majority. Since they can never be fully present, no revolution or revolutionary movement can actually *be* that of the people. It always entails the imposition of the ideas of some upon many.”

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 133: “Marx, faithful to crowd rupture, presents the Commune as a continuation of the egalitarian moment.”

²¹ See *Ibid.*, p. 135: “Because it is a form for the expression of the people’s desire, the Commune is necessarily lacking.” This lack seems to imply a dialectical determinate negation (Hegel), or a present absence (Derrida). The lack of the Commune implies an openness to the future, to the futurity of the event, and/or the *a-venir* of politics.

reflections of a specific time and place. “Rather, they underscore the irreducibility of the *gap between the people and their political forms, the gap constitutive of the people’s subjectivity.*”²²

This gap account of subjectivity entails a kind of power generated by the psychodynamics of the crowd. The gap represents the irreducibility of the group or collective subjectivity to the individualized subjectivities of its members. This gap constitutes the power or the capacity of the group – it is what allows the group to act as a group, and not simple as an aggregate of individual members. Crucially for Dean, it is important not to fetishize this this rupture. The power of the crowd does not, and cannot, solve all of our political woes. The gap opens onto the possibility of new and different kinds of political action; however, it does not guarantee a leftist or progressive politics. It is the role and function of the party (as described in 3.2 above) to respond to the event of the crowd.

Dean’s account does not take the gap to be sufficient for transformative political action. It does, however, offer another model of understanding group agency. In contrast to the account of group agency discussed above in chapter 3, Dean prioritizes the collectivity, defending a view that understands the individual as individual as separated from the group. This is a different way of understanding political action and would perhaps not be considered ‘agency’ in a strict sense. Nevertheless, it a kind of capacity to effect change. Crowds are able to do things, even and especially when there is no explicit intention or joint action involved.

The Egalitarian Discharge of the Crowd

The political force of the gap to which one must respond is grounded in what Dean calls the “egalitarian discharge of the crowd.” Drawing on Elias Canetti’s account of crowd dynamics

²² Dean, *Crowds and Party*, p. 135.

in *Crowds and Power*, Dean develops an account of this discharge as a kind of *jouissance*.²³ The crowd dynamic deindividuates the subject and opens onto new possibilities and capacities of political action. After describing this egalitarian discharge, I consider a potential worry about her view. While there certainly seems to be revolutionary potential in the event of the discharge of the crowd, I worry whether such a discharge is ‘egalitarian’ by definition. Further, how might Dean address crowds whose explicit reason for coming together is division and hate? At the very least, the ‘egalitarian’ nature of the crowd does not always extend universally. A lynch mob, or a Trump rally, for example, may indeed contain some element of an egalitarian discharge, but the scope of its egalitarian nature does not extend beyond a particular subset of human beings.

On Dean’s view, the process of forming a crowd breaks down the (ideological as well as physical) separation between individuals, such that within the crowd itself, no distinction between members remain. The crowd is no longer a mere aggregation of parts but becomes an entirely new, heterogeneous entity. “Conventional hierarchies collapse. In place of the distinctions mobilized to produce the individual form, there is a temporary being of multiple mouths, anuses, stomachs, hands, feet, a being comprised of fold upon fold of touching skin.”²⁴ Following Canetti, Dean’s account focuses on the ‘discharge’ as the moment of the crowd’s emergence as a group. While ultimately unstable, and prone to dissolution, the crowd has its own being or ontology apart from its individual members.

²³ *Jouissance* is a kind of libidinal energy that plays a central role in the thought of Lacan, as well as other French psychoanalytic thought.

²⁴ Dean, *Crowds and Party*, p. 120. Notice how Dean explicitly evokes the bodily aspects of the crowd. I will return to the body in the section on Judith Butler below.

As long as the crowd keeps moving, it is able to endure. “It will persist” argues Dean, “as long as it is moving towards a goal.”²⁵ Dean identifies two essential attributes of the crowd: growth and direction. For both Canetti and Dean, the crowd has desires – specifically, it has the desire to continue growing. In Lacanian terms, the desire of the crowd is a desire to desire. Dean describes the growth as, “a push to be more, to eliminate barriers, to universalize and extend the crowd feeling such that nothing is outside it.”²⁶ Before addressing the egalitarian aspects of this universal expansion, it is important to note here that the form of the crowd is inherently unstable. The crowd not only wants to continue to grow, but also ceases to be a crowd once it stops growing. Not unlike the systems or structures of capitalist production and accumulation, growth is an essential element of the crowd. Once the crowd gets what it wants, it begins to disappear. Thus the internal structure of the crowd is inherently unstable. The crowd must continue to increase its size and move in a particular direction. Insofar as its movement ceases, it is no longer a crowd.

In addition to its growth and direction, a crowd is an expression of a collective force. For Dean, in particular when a crowd comes together in a space authorized by neither capital nor state, the crowd breaches the given and installs a “gap of possibility.”²⁷ Dean describes this gap in a couple different ways. She describes it as a “positive expression of negation,” meaning that it exists as a particular kind of lack. This speaks to the gap as an opening or a clearing. It allows for something new or different to come into being and does not determine it in advance. This entails both negation of the given as what has existed in the past, as well as clearing the way for

²⁵ Dean, *Crowds and Party*, p. 122.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 124.

what could be in the future. Dean also describes this collective force of desire as pre-figuring this possibility. She argues that the collective force “mis-assembles” rather than assembles or disassembles what is present. This force takes what is given and assembles it differently. It combines the people in such a way that “differences between individual heads and arms are irrelevant.”²⁸ Out of previously separate individuals, the crowd emerges as the collective subject of a politics by impressing its own possibility for something new.

This un- or pre-differentiation of the crowd is not based in the interchangeability of its members, but rather constitutes the egalitarian nature of the collective force. While the crowd endures, there is no separation between individuals. “The libidinal energy of the crowd binds it together for a ‘blessed moment’, a moment Canetti renders as a ‘feeling of equality’ in the shared intensity of belonging.”²⁹ In this ‘blessed moment’ there is no distinction between individuals and constitutes “a state of absolute equality”³⁰ between its members. “Equality as belonging – not separation, weighing, and measure – is what gives ‘energy’ (Canetti’s term) to the longing for justice.”³¹ It is important to note that this equality is not the formal equality of bourgeois ideology; it does not constitute a common standard applicable to different people or objects. It is not the interchangeability reinforced by a capitalist logic of market exchange. It is rather a force of equality that breaks down the individual, bourgeois form and enables the collective to experience itself in its collectivity. For Dean, this force is a demand for justice because it emerges out of a radically egalitarian horizon. The members of the crowd who can no longer distinguish themselves from one another want to grow, expanding in all directions. It is this

²⁸ Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, p. 29; cited by Dean, *Crowds and Party*, p. 124.

²⁹ Dean, *Crowds and Party*, p. 121.

³⁰ Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, p. 29; cited by Dean, *Crowds and Party*, p. 121.

³¹ Dean, *Crowds and Party*, p. 122.

force, Dean argues, that constitutes the egalitarian possibility that is pre-figured by the crowd. The dynamics of the crowd, on her view, generate this egalitarian discharge.

It is important to note here that Dean does not equivocate between the energy of the crowd and political subjectivity. The egalitarian discharge of the crowd is necessary, but not sufficient on Dean's view, in order to constitute political subjectivity. She criticizes anarchists and autonomists for misconstruing this egalitarian discharge for the end or goal of politics. Dean directs her critique at the politics of the "beautiful moment" which simply imagines its goal to proliferate multiplicities, potentialities, and differences.³² The politics of the beautiful moment forget that any political struggle necessarily entails a divergence with respect to the meaning of the event. "The crowd's chaotic moment is indeterminate, but to fetishize this indeterminacy dematerializes the crowd, extracting the affective intensities rupturing a given setting from the rupture itself as if the crowd event were nothing more than semantic confusion."³³ Echoing Lukacs' critique of Luxemburg, Dean clearly does not place her faith in the spontaneous irruption of the masses. Rather, she argues that it is the role of the party form to maintain and direct the egalitarian discharge of the crowd. The goal of politics is not to simply observe the force of the crowd and help it to where it is going – the goal is to join in the crowd event in order to direct its energy and flow.

While I agree in general with Dean's account of the crowd, as well as her call for a return to the party as the political form to maintain, develop, and continue the crowd's egalitarian discharge, I worry that she is too quick to accept the egalitarian nature of the crowd's discharge. Certainly, there is a kind of egalitarian aspect to the undifferentiation inherent within the

³² Ibid., p. 125.

³³ Ibid., p. 126. Cf. Derrida's account of pre-political sovereignty as *Walten* in *The Beast and the Sovereign Vol 2*.

composition of the crowd. I follow Dean (and Canetti) insofar as I agree the crowd wants to grow. I disagree, however, with the move from the egalitarian discharge of the crowd to a demand or call for justice. More specifically, I argue that the ‘egalitarian’ nature of the discharge of the crowd is not always something to which we ought to maintain fidelity. While I agree that the crowd event, “provides an opportunity for the emergence of a political subject” I disagree that we should always maintain fidelity to the political subject that emerges. This is to say, the ‘egalitarian’ discharge of the crowd may not demand the kind of ‘justice’ worth defending.

Consider the example of a lynch mob. Certainly, there can be the kind of egalitarian discharge Dean and Canetti describe. There is even an explicit call to ‘justice.’ This kind of crowd event, however, is not something to which I (or I hope anyone on the left) wish to maintain any kind of fidelity to. I would argue that what the crowd wants is in fact inegalitarian – it demands ‘justice’ to maintain a white supremacist status quo. In addition to the task Dean assigns to the party of “maintaining fidelity to this sense of the many” I would also add the task of discerning the nature of the ‘egalitarian’ discharge of the crowd. The party must not only be affected by the crowd, but also affect it. That is, the party does not unreflectingly mirror the desires of the crowd but must mediate them through the standpoint of the proletariat. Otherwise, the party risks taking on reactionary tendencies of the crowd, tendencies which on Dean’s own view cannot be purged from the crowd event itself. Dean’s account does a good job describing what the crowd can do; however, more needs to be said concerning the normative component of the account. Put differently, Dean nicely describes the agential component, but neglects the epistemological component.³⁴ Perhaps one way to address this issue is by appealing to a

³⁴ Cf. chapter 1 on Lukacs and the two necessary aspects of his account of class consciousness.

particular we-narrative, as discussed in Chapter 3. The ‘we’ can demand conflicting, often contradictory accounts of justice. In any case, more work needs to be done in order to give an adequate account of *why* one should maintain fidelity to the crowd event, since its nature as ‘egalitarian’ is clearly not sufficient.

Conclusion

This theory of the crowd goes a long way to understanding the phenomena, however class should be more explicitly included. The party transforms the masses into the people, however, at least for Lenin, the proletariat must lead. The party form is not a party generated by the egalitarian discharge of the crowd event, but must also maintain fidelity to the class struggle, and as such adopt the standpoint of the proletariat in order to be the highest expression of class consciousness.

At times, Dean echoes the same non-identitarian logic that we saw was typical of Adorno in Chapter 2. Consider the following: “Some degree of alienation is unavoidable: making something ourselves, building collectives, creating new institutions cannot eliminate the minimal difference between the collectivity and the people” (CP 90). This is precisely Adorno’s point – alienation, at least on the individual level, is not something to be overcome because such alienation is not possible given current conditions of capitalism. Rather, the point is to build these groups which are capable of addressing the structural problems inherent in the system of capitalist production. I will now turn to Judith Butler’s performative account of political collectivity.

Butler and the Capacity of Relation

Judith Butler, in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* takes her performative account of gender, and her account of the precarity of the self, and applies each in order to develop an account of coalitional politics. Perhaps unsurprisingly, she draws heavily on a bodily account of performativity, emphasizing the role that the body, as well as the relationship between bodies within political spaces. At the same time, this embodied account is grounded in vulnerability – the capacity to be affected. This shared sense of precarity, Butler argues, constitutes the possibility for a particular kind of coalitional politics. For Butler, relation or mediation constitutes the opening in which politics can appear, or the way in which something or someone can appear as political. I argue that Butler’s account goes a long way toward developing an account of the group that describes the possibility of revolutionary action. In particular, her attentiveness to bodily precarity deepens the account given by Dean in the first section. However, like Dean, Butler does not go far enough in describing the capacity of the group to act politically. She stops short insofar as her account does not adequately address the relations of class – relations which are necessary, although not sufficient, for giving an adequate account of transformative or revolutionary action.

This section takes an extended look at Butler’s book *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*. First, I discuss Butler’s account of embodiment, focusing on her account of political appearance. On her view, the space between bodies is generative, and I outline how her account of group agency is affected by this. Then, I discuss how Butler’s view on vulnerability and interdependency deepen her understanding of the capacity of a group to act. She intentionally blurs the lines between action itself and the conditions that make it possible. Lastly, I look at Butler’s account of precarity, arguing that on her view, the capacity to act collectively is

predicated on these conditions of precarity. Rather than avoid precarity and vulnerability, Butler incorporates those features of human existence of her account.

Embodiment and Public Appearance

Since *Gender Trouble*, Butler's work has focused, either explicitly or implicitly on the body and its role or function. It is beyond the scope of the current project to trace the trajectory of the concept of the body throughout Butler's thought. It will suffice for our present purposes to take up the role or function of the body in her account of political collectivity. Not unsurprisingly, Butler takes the bodily aspects of a group assembled in public to play a pivotal role in understanding the dynamics of those assembled. In this section, I will focus on how, on Butler's view, a group assembled in public cannot be understood without engaging the very bodies assembled. This account of the body, particularly the body as vulnerable, grounds her account of what a group can do. While the precarity of the body leaves us vulnerable to trauma and pain, it is also a site that conditions the possibility of confronting the very system that refuses to address or reduce this precarity.

In two places in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Butler states explicitly the thesis of the project. In one place, she highlights the fact that (political) does not occur in a vacuum. "The thesis of this book is that none of us acts without the conditions to act, even though sometimes we must act to install and preserve those very conditions."³⁵ Butler recognizes the paradoxical nature of this statement: (political) action is sometimes required in order to condition the very action that is required. Rather than abandon this seemingly

³⁵ Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 16.

paradoxical statement, Butler chooses to begin with it, in order to better understand the phenomena of assemblies ‘in the street’.³⁶ For Butler, this action is always embodied and plural.

In a second statement of the thesis of her project, Butler explicitly connects the embodied nature of the group to its political possibilities. “The specific thesis of this book is that acting in concert can be an embodied form of calling into question the inchoate and powerful dimensions of reigning notions of the political.”³⁷ The point for Butler is that the embodied nature of the assembly is crucial to understanding the way in which the group resists dominant power structures. In order to better understand this relationship, I will first discuss the bodily aspects of the assembly, highlighting the ways in which Butler defends a view that holds its embodied nature as central to its capacity to act.

For Butler, the bodily component of the group is linked to its right to appear. On her view, the way individuals appear in a public space is not something completely determined by those individuals themselves. This is especially true with respect to political action: “So, for political action, I must appear to others in ways I cannot know, and in this way, my body is established by perspectives that I cannot inhabit but that, surely, inhabit me.”³⁸ When I go into public, I have, at least to a certain degree, a fair amount of control over different aspects of my

³⁶ Ibid., p. 125: “Though sometimes bodies assembled on the street are clearly cause for joy and even hope – and surging crowds sometimes do because the occasion for revolutionary hopefulness – let us remember that the phrase ‘bodies on the street’ can refer equally well to right-wing demonstrations, to military soldiers assembled to quell demonstrations or seize power, to lynch mobs or anti-immigrant populist movements taking over public space. So, they are neither intrinsically good nor bad; they assume differing values depending on what they are assembled for, and how that assembly works.” Cf. Dean’s account of the egalitarian discharge of the crowd, as well as my own critique of it above. Butler’s account is better than Dean’s insofar as it better takes into account the multiple forms the crowd event can take, admitting that while assemblies in the street might be cause for revolutionary hope, it is not necessarily so.

³⁷ Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 9.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 77.

appearance: I choose how to dress, where to go, who to be seen with, etc. Butler's point here, however, is that while I may choose certain aspects of my appearance, I in fact do not, and cannot, control how I am perceived, and thus the way in which I appear is not completely of my own choosing. "It is not the case" Butler argues, "that the body only established my own perspective; it is also what displaces that perspective and makes that displacement into a necessity."³⁹ On Butler's view, the way in which we appear bodily to others constitutes us not only (or even primarily) for ourselves, but rather for others.

When bodies come together on the street, they do so not in an ideal space, but rather in the space and time of the society in which they find themselves. When bodies appear in public, the force of their appearance is in part constituted, and in part constitutes, the conditions of their own appearance. This phenomenon is most clearly seen, Butler argues, in situations where bodies assemble outside of the explicit protection and legitimacy of the state. Using protests in Syria as her example, Butler defends a position wherein the appearance or expression of the bodies in public "speak" not only in language and gesture, but in the mere persistence of the body. "The body in its exposure calls that legitimacy [of the state] into question and does so precisely through a specific performativity of the body."⁴⁰ When protesters occupy public sites, their corporeal persistence contests the otherwise existing (and often explicitly or implicitly) military, or militarized police force. That one's body appears, Butler claims, makes it a site of resistance – and the nature of this site is not something completely up to us.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Ibid., p. 83.

Echoing Hannah Arendt's argument about political freedom and public appearance,⁴¹ Butler's position here seeks to establish a bodily account of political action and movement. In addition to one's appearance for oneself and others, Butler emphasizes the relation between bodies as they appear in public. "No one body establishes the space of appearance, but this action, this performative exercise, happens only 'between' bodies, in a space that constitutes the gap between my own body and another's."⁴² Both Dean and Butler rely on a gap, emphasizing the split nature of the collectivity. While Dean's account focuses on the separation of the individual from the crowd, Butler emphasizes the physical distance between bodies. On Butler's view, the space between bodies⁴³ in part constitutes the possibility of their appearance. This is to say, it is not the case for Butler that bodies exist first independently from one another, and only then come together in a public place.

To appear in public is to in part constitute the body as a site of political action or resistance. Especially when assembled without, or in spite of the legitimacy of the state, the appearance of the body is not constituted in advance of the assembly. Rather, bodies constitute each other's appearance, such that this space between bodies helps to construct the performance. "In this way, Butler continues, "my body does not act alone when it acts politically. Indeed, the action emerges from the 'between', a spatial figure for a relation that both binds and

⁴¹ Butler reads both with and against Arendt, *ibid.*, p. 88: "Here we can see that a certain topographical or even architectural regulation of the body happens at the level of theory. Significantly, it is precisely this operation of power – foreclosure and differential allocation of whether and how the body may appear – that is excluded from Arendt's explicit account of the political. Indeed, her explicit account of the political depends upon that very operation of power that it fails to consider as part of politics itself." Cf. Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

⁴² Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* p. 77.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 97: "The body is constituted through perspectives it cannot inhabit; someone else sees our face in a way that we cannot and hears our voice in a way that we cannot. We are in this sense – bodily – always over there, yet here, and this dispossession marks the sociality to which we belong. Even as located beings, we are always elsewhere, constituted in a sociality that exceeds us. This establishes our exposure and our precarity, the way in which we depend on political and social institutions to persist."

differentiates.”⁴⁴ According to Butler’s emergent theory of action, the performance of the (political) action cannot be separated from the space between bodies that emerges *against* an existing hegemonic regime of legitimacy and power. The space between our bodies, when we act together politically, is not simply a byproduct of atomistic individual bodies constituted before entry into the political space. The relation between bodies binds and differentiates them, such that the relationality cannot be separated from the action insofar as it appears in public. The body, then, for Butler, is not a site of politics because it can be determined before or independently from the political, but rather because it emerges as a site of politics through and via political action itself.

Towards the end of *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Butler offers the closest thing to a definition of the body that is to be found in the book. “My argument, in fact, is that it would be as mistaken to think of the body as primarily or definitionally active as it would be to think of the body as primarily and definitionally vulnerable and inactive. If we have to have a definition, it will depend, rather, on being able to think vulnerability and agency together.”⁴⁵ On Butler’s view, the embodied nature of the group is not some accidental property but must rather be seen as an essential aspect of its collectivity. The body is an important site for the possibility of political action because it must be at once vulnerable active. Put slightly differently, the body has a capacity both to affect and to be affected. Emphasizing one of these sides over the other is one-sided: Butler challenges us to think both together.

In order to do this, we must first consider the bodily capacities of the group. This is to say, the way in which the group can act politically is at least in part constituted by their bodies –

⁴⁴ Ibid., p. 77.

⁴⁵ Ibid., p. 139.

by the way their bodies appear and persist in public spaces.⁴⁶ Absent this analysis, Butler argues, we will miss crucial elements of the way in which the group acts, politically or otherwise. Collective forms of political resistance disrupt, or at least contain the possibility of disrupting, the hegemonic legitimacy of state power. “In those instances,” Butler contends, “bodies are themselves vectors of power where the directionality of force can be reversed; they are embodied interpretations, engaging in allied action, to counter force with another kind and quality of force”⁴⁷ When bodies gather in the street (especially when they gather without the protection, or even in direct resistance to, the legitimate power of the state), they constitute and are constituted by the space of their appearance. For Butler, we must not only contend with what the assembled bodies express, but also with their capacity to be affected in their vulnerability.

Interdependence and Vulnerability

Butler’s position emphasizes the bodily dimension of the political assembly because of the role vulnerability plays in her account of political action. Specifically, the body, as an interdependent⁴⁸ site of vulnerability, opens onto new possibilities of political action. On her view, action is not purely autonomous, or independent from the action of others and the infrastructure that supports it. This vulnerability as a capacity to be affected is not only a reason

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 73-74: “To rethink the space of appearance in order to understand the power and effect of public demonstrations for our time, we will need to consider more closely the bodily dimensions of action what the body requires, and what the body can do, especially when we must think about bodies together in a historical space that undergoes a historical transformation by virtue of their collective action: What holds them together there, and what are their conditions of persistence and of power in relation to their precarity and exposure?”

⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 84.

⁴⁸ Butler admits that she does not sufficiently clarify the term ‘interdependency’ in this work. See also, *ibid.*, p. 151: “We cannot presume that interdependency is some beautiful state of coexistence; it is not the same as social harmony. Inevitably, we rail against those whom we are most dependent (or those who are most dependent on us), and there is no way to dissociate dependency from aggression once and for all – this was perhaps the profound insight of Melanie Klein, but surely also Thomas Hobbes in another idiom.”

to act politically, but also constitutes the mechanism by and through which the group acts politically. According to Butler, we are often in the street because of this shared sense of precarity – because the fact of our precarity requires us to fight for social, political, and economic protection, but also because of what we are able to do via and through this shared precarity.

According to Butler’s account of political agency, one cannot simply focus on the particular agency of the individuals who act, or even the agency of the group. “Human action depends upon all sorts of supports – it is always supported action.”⁴⁹ Drawing on disability studies,⁵⁰ Butler argues that the capacity for action requires technological or societal scaffolding in order to be successful. Butler resists a hard and fast distinction between action itself, and that which makes such action possible.⁵¹ Since action never happens in a vacuum – that is to say action is impossible absent the necessary conditions for action – she includes these conditions in her treatment of action as such. For Butler, action is interdependent, such that my own action cannot be separated entirely from that which makes my action possible, as well as the action of others. On her view, the body is not constituted prior to politics, but is rather the site of this interdependence.⁵² The body is not constituted first, only then to appear in public. “On the contrary: precisely because bodies are formed and sustained in relation to infrastructural supports

⁴⁹ Ibid., p. 72.

⁵⁰ See also, *ibid.*, p. 72: “We know from disability studies that the capacity to move depends upon instruments and surfaces that make movement possible, and that bodily movement is supported and facilitated by nonhuman objects and their particular capacity for agency.” Butler references ‘disability studies’ here and elsewhere in this book. Her references are always in general terms like this, and it is unclear specifically whose work she is referencing.

⁵¹ Such a rejection of this distinction maybe itself be questionable. While such a distinction may be useful in certain circumstances, a full discussion of the usefulness of this distinction unfortunately goes beyond the scope of the present chapter.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 149: “Vulnerability implicates us in what is beyond us yet part of us, constituting one central dimension of what might tentatively be called our embodiment.”

(or their absence) and social and technological networks or webs of relation, we cannot extract the body from its constituting relations – and those relations are always economically and historically specific.”⁵³ It is important to note here that Butler resists giving an account of the body in the abstract. The conditions of action are economically and historically specific, meaning that action cannot be determined in advance. We must understand the specific conditions in order to give an accurate account of political action at all.

Butler draws heavily on Hannah Arendt’s account of (political) action, defending a position wherein human action is not only dependent on the support of nonhuman objects, but also the human action of others. She argues, following Arendt, that we must understand “the human as a relational and social being, one whose action depends upon equality and articulates the principle of equality...No human can be human alone. And no human can be human without acting in concert with others and on conditions of equality.”⁵⁴ The inherent relationality of the human is thus founded on conditions of equality; however, this is not the bourgeois equality between already existing individuals. It cannot be, since it is in fact this condition of equality that makes (political) action possible, and thus the individual cannot exist *qua* individual prior to it. It is important to emphasize that the relationality of the human as a social being in this sense means rethinking the relation between individuals as something other than a relation of equivalence. Equality here does not mean that any one individual can replace any other. It is rather that the conditions of equality must hold in order for there to be any political action at all.

Butler goes one step further than Arendt, arguing not only that these conditions of action constitute its possibility and thus cannot be separated completely from one another, but also that

⁵³ Ibid., p. 148.

⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 88.

the action itself grounds these conditions. Rather than understanding the conditions of equality that constitute the possibility of action as ideal conditions, she rather claims that the relation is reciprocal. “The claim of equality is not only spoken or written, but is made precisely when bodies appear together, or, rather, when, through their action, they bring the space of appearance into being.”⁵⁵ This is to say, we generate the conditions of equality precisely by assembling in the street. The appearance of our bodies in public not only allows for, but also demands this equality – especially in situations where the very principle of equality is contested or not guaranteed by state power. Like Dean’s account of the egalitarian discharge of the crowd, Butler’s account of group agency here is deeply committed to the foundational relationality and interdependence of bodies in the street.

As we saw above, Butler defends a view in which the vulnerability and agency of the group are intertwined and related to the body as a site of politics. Building on this relationship, she advocates for political action that mobilizes this vulnerability. We must be careful, however, about the way in which this mobilization occurs, and who is doing the mobilizing, and how. Butler acknowledges the history of the concept of vulnerability to the project of feminist politics. She identifies a particular worry or risk involved in the term, particularly with respect to vulnerable populations. The phrase ‘vulnerable populations’ is often used as a way of managing populations and establishes a particular binary logic.⁵⁶ Labeling a population as vulnerable can be used to help or hurt those populations – however either way it targets that population in a way that remains within a particular binary. “The notion of vulnerability works in two ways, to target

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 88-89.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 144: “This has produced a paradox within neoliberalism and its notion of ‘responsibilization’ that designates such population as accountable for their own precarious position, or their accelerated experience of precaritization.”

a population or protect it, which means that the term has been used to establish a restrictive political logic according to which being targeted and being protected are the only two alternatives.”⁵⁷ Within this binary, vulnerable populations are seen as either hyper-responsible for their own precarious positions, or as passive, suffering, and in need of care. Following Butler’s logic, neither position within the binary sees the vulnerable as active or capable of changing their situation.

Butler proposes an account of vulnerability that goes beyond this binary. In order to do that, she argues that vulnerability is not a contingent or fleeting situation, but rather at the heart of the human experience. On her view, while different people will be differently vulnerable and different times, in an underlying sense, we are always already vulnerable. “And though we may legitimately feel that we are vulnerable in some instances and not in others, the condition of our vulnerability is itself not changeable... To say that any of us are vulnerable beings is to mark our radical dependency not only on others, but on a sustaining and sustainable world.”⁵⁸

Vulnerability as an underlying condition of our existence goes beyond the binary logic above. If we are all, to a certain extent, vulnerable because we are dependent on others and the world around us,⁵⁹ then our political response to conditions of vulnerability among our population is not restricted to the target-protect binary. Rather, vulnerability, as a condition for political action, opens onto new ways of understanding the possibility of coalitional politics.

⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 144.

⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 150.

⁵⁹ While Butler does not state it explicitly, this is clearly a Heideggerian formulation (perhaps of care *Sorge*). *Being and Time* clearly defends the equiprimordiality of Being-in-the-world and Being-with-others. Exploring this connection, especially in light of Adorno’s own critique of Heidegger in *Negative Dialectics*, while interesting, unfortunately falls outside the scope of the present chapter.

This account of vulnerability as condition for political action sheds light onto the kinds of capacity an assembly has, and what it can do. For Butler, strength and vulnerability are not opposing forces, but rather mutually co-implicating. “Strength is not quite the opposite of vulnerability, and this becomes clear, I would suggest, when vulnerability is itself mobilized as an individual strategy, but in concert.”⁶⁰ Collective mobilization of vulnerability, particularly outside of or beyond the target-protect binary, offers new possibilities of understanding how a group can act. That a population is vulnerable or in precarious situations does not entail that it is thus immobilized. Rather, the very conditions of vulnerability and precarity are able to be mobilized in order to struggle against the conditions themselves. Butler acknowledges that such mobilization risks falling back into the political logic of the target-protect binary; however, this risk in itself is not enough to recoil from such political analysis.

Conditions of Precarity

Indeed, Butler acknowledges one other risk, which I argue requires a bit more attention than she gives to it. She argues that while precarity is differently distributed across society, the shared sense of precarity can condition the organization of political alliance and coalition. While on the whole I agree with this position, I argue that it requires at the very least a much more precise language⁶¹ in order to describe and differentiate precarity. I worry that by relying on a shared sense of precarity, we risk covering over the differences between different precarious situations, which can create disunity and destroy solidarity. Certainly, a shared sense of precarity can unite

⁶⁰ Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 150.

⁶¹ One strategy we might use in order to address this issue is we-narratives, as I describe in Chapter 3.

us, as long as we do not assume that different members of the collation are precarious in the same way.

For Butler, the concepts of vulnerability and precarity are similar, and certainly overlap in many areas. Precarity, more so than vulnerability, is the explicitly politically engaged concept. “The opposite of precarity is not security but, rather, the struggle for an egalitarian social and political order in which a livable interdependency becomes possible – it would be at once the condition of our self-governing as a democracy, and its sustained form would be one of the obligatory aims of that very governance.”⁶² Here precarity is a condition of a particular political, social, or economic order. The conditions under which one lives are more or less precarious – it seems that on Butler’s view, precarity is not something that can be avoided, but rather minimized. Security is not the opposite of precarity since it is possible to live in a condition of (relative) security (or at least in a condition in which one’s security is constantly threatened or under attack) and still recognize one’s own precarious situation. The opposite of precarity is rather an active struggle for a better world (Butler uses the phrase “egalitarian social and political order, whereas Dean often uses the phrase “communist or egalitarian horizon” but they seem to play a similar function in their thought). It involves the collective giving obligations to itself via democratic self-legislation or governance. Precarity, then, is not simply inaction, but rather the conditions that foreclose the possibility of the self-governance. Conditions of precarity disallow collective participation in the political decision-making process.

Butler highlights the collective aspect of precarity, arguing that we are not only precarious individually, but fundamentally as a group. Conditions of precarity implicate the

⁶² Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, p. 69.

hegemonic social, political, and economic order, calling into question their very legitimacy. “This means that in some of our most vulnerable experiences of social and economic deprivation, what is revealed is not only our precariousness as individual persons – though that may well be revealed – but also the failures and inequalities of socioeconomic and political institutions.”⁶³ The reason for these institutions to exist is to alleviate the precarity in vulnerable populations. That conditions of precarity persist despite, or all too often because of, these existing institutions, is itself reason enough to be critical. That institutions fail particular individuals is often not enough evidence to prove their underlying, systematic problems. Such failures can, and often are, attributed to errors or accidents – bugs rather than features of the system. These vulnerable experiences take on a different dimension when understood collectively, since their failure cannot be explained away by accident or error. The task at hand, on Butler’s view, is not to stop at acknowledging the precariousness of individuals persons, but to show how the failures of these social, political, and economic institutions present the possibility of acting together.

On Butler’s view, a shared sense of precarity can go a long way in conditioning the possibility of political alliance or coalition building. Butler is clear this shared sense of precarity does not entail that precarity is evenly distributed across society, or that one person’s precarity is equal to, or equivalent with another person’s precarity.⁶⁴ Butler is wary of building political alliances around a shared vulnerability, since it lends itself to the binary logic we saw above.

⁶³ Ibid., p. 21.

⁶⁴ Ibid., p. 17: “Of course we are right to distinguish among kind of protest, differentiating antimilitarization movements from precarity movements, Black Lives Matter from demands for public education. At the same time, precarity seems to run through a variety of such movements, whether it is the precarity of those killed in war, those who lack basic infrastructure, those who are exposed to disproportionate violence on the street, or those who seek to gain an education at the cost of unpayable debt.”

Nonetheless, she defends a position in which a shared condition of precarity can, at the very least, inform the way in which we form political alliances or build coalitions. “Perhaps we could say that the body is always exposed to people and impressions it does not have a say about, does not get to predict or fully control, and that these conditions of social embodiment are those we have not fully brokered. I want to suggest that solidarity emerges from this rather than from deliberate agreements we enter knowingly.”⁶⁵ Here solidarity is not something that can be determined in advance of the mobilization of conditions of vulnerability or precarity. Solidarity is something that comes out of these political movements. It is something that is established by these political movements. Conditions of precarity – as that which brings people out and into the street – are thus at least partially responsible for the gathering itself. These conditions of precarity can constitute the reason we are all in the street, and thus constitute the reason for which an alliance is formed, or a coalition is built.

While Butler does not develop her own position in this direction, I argue that her implicit position with respect to the capacity of the group to act is itself based in this shared condition of precarity. She does argue that in her view, “...a shared condition of precarity situates our political lives, even as precarity is differentially distributed.”⁶⁶ It is important to note here that she is not explicitly stating that a shared condition of precarity conditions the possibility of (collective, political) action. However, taking this position does not seem to require much explication. Insofar as our ‘political lives’ are situated by this shared condition of precarity, and that political action is always conditioned by our mutual interdependence (on one another, as well as the world in which we find ourselves), I argue that on her view, this shared condition of

⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 152.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 96.

precarity can constitute, at least in part, the collective agency of the group comprised of bodies in the street.

Butler certainly notes that precarity situates our lives despite the fact that it is distributed unevenly across society. This is just to say that different individuals and groups within society are not all precarious in the same way, or to the same degree. Following this logic, any alliance or coalition must take this differential distribution into account; otherwise we risk equivocating peoples experience of precarity. It seems safe to assume here that this is not Butler's position – clearly her position on an account of the capacity for political action of a group should not be predicated on covering over the differences between conditions of precarity. Rather, the possibility of solidarity between people whose conditions of precarity differ may lie precisely in the fact that despite these differences, they have more in common than they might otherwise believe. Further, that conditions of extended precarity persist in our society grounds a shared experience that while experienced differently, can be related to across those differences.

This position comes into better relief in comparison to Dean's account of the egalitarian discharge of the crowd above. Whereas Dean advocates for fidelity to the crowd event, Butler more suspicious. She is

...quite suspicious of those political views that hold, for instance, that democracy has to be understood as the event of the surging multitude. I don't think so. It seems to me that we have to ask what it is that hold such a group together, what demand is being shared, or what felt sense of injustice and unlivability, what intimation of the possibility of change heightens the collective sense of things.⁶⁷

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 134-135.

Butler is most likely referencing Hardt and Negri's account in *Multitude*, although it could also be taken as an implicit critique of Dean's position of having fidelity to the crowd event.

While Dean distances her own account from positions like this,⁶⁸ it still risks falling back into the problem Butler recognizes. It is not just that the crowd or assembly in the street constitute a political event – we must interrogate what, if any, collective sense of injustice is at play. Following Butler, we must ask what holds the group together. The reason for the crowd gathering in the street is crucial to understanding what that group can do. It is not enough to merely have fidelity to the egalitarian discharge of the crowd. Rather, we need a politics that takes into account the conditions of why people are in the street in the first place, why and how people understand their own conditions of precarity, *before* proclaiming fidelity to the psychodynamics of the crowd event. Perhaps 'conditions of precarity' is still too broad or vague and requires a more precise explanation in order to fully understand the capacity of the bodies assembled in the street, but I argue that it is the right place to start such an analysis.

Conclusion

In this section, we saw how Butler's account of embodiment, and the subsequent interdependency and precarity conditions political action in ways that cannot be isolated completely from the action itself. On her view, bodies do not appear in public spaces fully formed; rather, their mutual interdependence establishes a site of political struggle. For Butler, the space between bodies becomes just as important as the bodies themselves. Her account of

⁶⁸ For example, see Dean, *Crowds and Party*, p. 63: "Hardt and Negri are right to point to the changes in the settings that produced the bourgeois individual. Yet they underplay the emergent ferocity of commanded individuality. Their fluid, hybrid, and mobile subjectivities appear as loci of freedom, as if their singularity were a natural property rather than itself enjoined, inscribed, and technologically generated in the service of capitalism. As the decline of discipline weakened individuating structures, new technologically mediated techniques of individuation took their place."

vulnerability, as the capacity to be affected, not only outlines the reason one assembles in the street in the first places, but also points toward the way in which a successful political action is carried out. The precarity of our collective lives indicates that exclusive focus on individual action misses the capacities of the group to act. As we saw above with Dean’s account, perhaps this kind of political action does not involve ‘agency’ narrowly defined. However, I argue that we risk missing the whole picture if we do not make our account of agency wider.

Summary of Chapter 4

In this chapter, I outline an account of the capacity of a group that is not reducible to the capacities of its individual members. Both Dean and Butler provide accounts of group agency that does not rely on the atomistic account of the individual members who comprise it. From Dean, we saw that the individual was only understood as separated from the collective. From Butler, we saw that the plurality of the group was again foundational to her understanding of precarity. Consider, for example, the following account of alliance from Butler “What I am calling alliance is not only a future social form; sometimes it is latent, or sometimes it actually is the structure of our own subject-formation...”⁶⁹

For Butler, an alliance is not just a group of individual human beings who come together to form a group. On her view, a single individual can be an alliance. Butler continues, “the ‘I’ in question refuses to background one minority status or lived site of precarity in favor of any other; it is a way of saying, ‘I am the complexity that I am, and this means that I am related to others in

⁶⁹ Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* p. 68.

ways that are essential to any invocation of this ‘I.’”⁷⁰ Even in the form of the first person singular, the ‘I’ is not completely self-determining or self-sufficient. What it means for an I to be an I, is in part to be in relation with other Is, to be always already part of a group. For Butler, this essential inter-relatedness and interdependence, “challenges us to grasp the insufficiency of identitarian ontologies for thinking about the problem of alliance. For the point is not that I am a collection of identities, but that I am already an assembly, even a general assembly, or an assemblage”⁷¹ This language of ‘identitarian ontologies’ echoes Adorno’s critique of Hegelian dialectics that we saw in chapter 2. This critique of identitarian ontologies constitutes a critique not only of certain strains of identity politics, but also the atomistic, individualized account of group formation in the social ontology literature.

Both Dean and Butler are theorists from the continental tradition who reject methodological individualism. For them, understanding the group means looking at the collective political subject as a whole. The nature of its agency is not reducible to its individual members and is different even than Gilbert’s account of plural subjects. What is important for the present discussion is that the agency (or capacity to effect change) of a group is not solely determined by its constituent members. Following Dean and Butler, the collective subjectivity of the group also plays a role. Putting the insights of this chapter together with those of chapter 3, I have hopefully provided an argument that defends an account of group agency that takes both the movement from individual to group and group to individual into account. This dialectical account of group agency focuses ultimately on the primacy of the mediation rather than one side (individual) or the other (group). It is this kind of agency, I argue that is at play in the concept of

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid.

class consciousness; therefore, in order to understand what class consciousness is and how it works, we must first understand this dialectical account of group agency.

CONCLUSION

This dissertation offers a sustained account of the political agency at work in the concept of class consciousness. Chapter 1 traces the development of the relationship between class consciousness and political agency in key early Marxist theorists. Chapter 2 outlines a critical intervention from Theodor Adorno on the relationship between social conditions and political agency. From building on the insights of these two chapters, I argue that the political agency involved in social transformation must be dialectical: it must incorporate both individualist and holist methodologies in order to avoid a one-sided analysis. Chapter 3 develops accounts of key groups in society – the vanguard, the party, and the proletariat – by showing how contemporary analytic accounts of group agency deepen our understanding of how this political agency works. Chapter 4 outlines how to widen our account of agency to include the collective capacities of groups that might not be considered as ‘agency’ narrowly defined. Taken as a whole, these two chapters offer an argument defending an approach to understand group agency as generated by thinking about how individuals come together to form a group, as well as how groups are divided up into individuals. While I have not offered an exhaustive account of these capacities, I hope to have provided the conceptual framework necessary to think more broadly and deeply about the kind of political agency at the heart of class consciousness.

In Chapter 1, I traced the development of the relationship between consciousness and agency from the early works of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, through the activist work of Rosa Luxemburg and V.I. Lenin, culminating in Georg Lukács’ account of class consciousness. In the section on Marx and Engels, I show how the capacity of the worker to act under capitalism is limited by alienation. Despite these limitations, the proletariat, as a class, is capable of coming together to fight for its own interest. I argue, through an analysis of Marx’s account of the class

struggle in France, he already has an account of group agency that goes beyond an individual, atomized understanding of human action. In the section on Rosa Luxemburg and V.I. Lenin, I show how this relationship between consciousness and agency is deepened by these two political activists. Lenin emphasizes the need for conscious intervention and organization, showing that embryonic, trade-unionist consciousness has not yet reached a political understanding of the task of revolutionary action. Luxemburg emphasizes attention to social conditions, warning that strong organizational structure risks reproducing existing relations between leaders and the masses. In the section on Lukács, I show how he takes the insights from both Luxemburg and Lenin in order to develop his own position on the standpoint of the proletariat and class consciousness. I defend the position that already in Lukács, class consciousness is not merely awareness of one's own class position, but entails the political agency needed for social transformation.

In Chapter 2, I considered Adorno's critique of Lukács' account of class consciousness and reification not as rejection, but as a widening and deepening of a materialist account of social conditions and the possibility of transformative social action. I show that Adorno, far from giving up on the possibility of social transformation, maintains that society could be otherwise. On his view, the absence of the party is a barrier to changing society, but that a new Leninist Manifesto is needed. The 'spell' of ideology can indeed break; however total disaster as well as liberation is possible. Following Adorno, I argue that the political agency at work in class consciousness must be dialectical, and emphasize the negative, nonidentical, and unreconciled elements of society.

In Chapter 3, I turned to the contemporary analytic tradition in order to better understand the aspect of group agency understood as a combination of individuals. I look at the vanguard as

an example of a plural subject. The vanguard comes together voluntarily, with a shared goal and the capacity to act jointly. The party structure gives it group agency. Through its organizational structure and joint action, it should be thought of as a group agent. The proletariat, while not having group agency in a narrow sense, is still an important group in society, and can have a common class interest. I argue that with the use of we-narratives, one could develop a greater sense of togetherness and help organize social change.

In Chapter 4, I explore accounts in the contemporary continental tradition in order to better understand the aspect of group agency understood as political collectivity. I look at how accounts of the crowd resist a strict, individualist reduction, and how in fact the process of individualization arises from singling people out from the crowd. I show how the nonidentical nature of political groups open up gaps and splits within themselves, and how these gaps widen our understanding of the capacity of the group for transformative political action. While the crowd might not always act justly, it opens new possibilities that cannot be understood through reduction of the group to its component parts. I also show how embodiment and precarity are crucial elements in an account of group agency. The space between bodies, just as much as the bodies themselves, condition possibilities of political action. Interdependence and vulnerability are not only reasons why one engages in political struggle, but also important capacities to engage in strategic political action. Together with Chapter 4, I have hoped to develop a dialectical understanding of group agency. Rather than emphasizing either the individual or the group, the part or the whole, I argue that the emphasis should rather be placed on the relation between the two, on the mediating force of their relation.

Future Projects

The present work is far from an exhaustive study on class consciousness and political agency and offers many opportunities for future research. The present work has focused primarily on developing an account of political agency required for reconstructing a concept of class consciousness. As the discussion above has hopefully shown, agency is not the only aspect of class consciousness – a reworked concept of class consciousness would also need a developed account of social possibility, as well as an analysis of motivation for action. Chapter 2 discusses possibility, and touches on Adorno’s account of real possibility and Lukács’ account of objective possibility. The present work was unable to provide an in-depth look at these accounts of social possibility since such an investigation would go beyond the present scope. In order to understand how the political agency of class consciousness could in fact play out, an analysis of present social conditions, as well as the possibilities those conditions afford constitute another necessary dimension to the concept of class consciousness that I was unable to provide.

In addition, a concept of class consciousness would also require an understanding of why individuals and groups act. Broadly speaking, I maintain that far too much emphasis is placed on rational motivations for action. Individuals, just as much as groups, are often motivated by nonrational forces, emotion and affect being among the most common. One dimension I have neglected in the present work is the possibility of group emotion, and the role it might play in understanding how the concept of class consciousness might be a useful political tool. These two aspects – social possibility and motivation – constitute two other interconnected dimensions that, along with the present look into political agency, would go far in providing a more complete account of class consciousness.

One aspect of group agency that I was unable to address adequately in the present work was the way in which new and emerging technological developments condition the possibility of group agency, as well as the possibility for class consciousness. Marx himself was attentive to the technological developments of his own time. Embedded in his account of alienation is a critique of modern forms of technology and argues not only that the mechanization of the factory is reproduced as the mechanization of the worker, but that new technologies such as the steam engine completely revolutionized socially possible forms of life. While Marx was critical of new forms of technology, he was not against the development of technology as such. Automation could also usher in a new age where human beings could be freed from the limiting constraints of work. In the spirit of this critique, I would argue that technological development today, especially developments in communication technologies such as the internet and cell phones, offer radically new ways of understanding what a group is and what it can do politically. I would argue that the present work sets up the conceptual tools necessary to engage thinkers interested in these emerging technologies in order to better understand the social possibilities for group political action.

In order to develop research in these directions, there are many contemporary and historical figures who offer opportunities to expand the argument of the present work. In addition to Adorno, other figures from the Frankfurt School offer interesting possibilities for further research. Specifically, the work of Ernst Bloch or Herbert Marcuse speak to similar issues raised by Adorno. Engaging with these thinkers would offer new opportunities to continue to develop the arguments presented here, as well as offer different approaches to similar questions. Later thinkers from the Frankfurt School, including Jürgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, and Rachel Jaeggi. From the tradition of Italian Marxism, Antonio Gramsci's work on hegemony also offers

interesting possibilities for developing a deeper account of political agency. Sartre's later work on groups would also be an interesting comparison. There is also a tradition of Analytic Marxism, as well as thinkers today working in Critical Social Ontology, all of whom could offer insight to the current project.

In addition, there are interesting conversations to be had with thinkers who focus on other dimensions of oppression in contemporary society. It is my aim in the present work to give an account of class consciousness that is neither nor reductive nor deflationary with respect to class, or any other systemic account of human suffering. In the future I hope to develop a more nuanced account of political agency that takes engages advances in disability studies, critical feminisms, critical race studies, as well as others. Specifically, I am interested in looking at the intersection between Marxist thought and identity politics. The term identity politics covers a wide range of thought, but I worry that some contemporary work over emphasizes the concept of identity in the political sphere. Rather, the focus should be on the conditions of alliance and coalition building. In this political project, I argue that class often drops out of the analysis, even for those theorists who nominally agree that class is an important aspect of their political thought. It is my hope to develop a class forward, but not reductionist account that appeals not only to those in the Marxist tradition strictly speaking, but also to those working in other aspects of social domination.

Finally, I hope that the insights of the present work reach beyond the limits of academic thought narrowly construed. Returning the Marx's eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, conceptual theorizing about the social, political, and economic problems, while I argue a necessary tool or component in the political struggle, does not by itself properly address these issues. Concrete political action is needed today, and this account of political agency and class consciousness

aims to provide the conceptual tools necessary to engage in effective political struggle. Today, now more than ever, I argue that an understanding of the political capacity of groups can help to bring about a better tomorrow.

A Note on Social Conditions Today

Since starting this project, our own social conditions have transformed radically due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite difficult economic conditions for many working-class Americans for almost a decade after the 2009 recession and housing crash, we might not call social conditions during the last decade revolutionary. There have been mass populist movements across the political spectrum: from Occupy Wall Street on the left to the Unite the Right rally on the right. While these movements have certainly shifted the political landscape in the US considerably, none of them has been capable of generating the kind of revolutionary social transformation of the early 20th century. Certainly, established American political institutions have been forced to address these movements; however, they have at best precipitated political reform rather than social transformation. These are important, and often powerful movements, but they have not (yet) generated the political agency required to completely upend our way of life.

Over the past few months, we have seen social, political, and economic change on a historically unprecedented scale. We have witnessed extreme swings in the stock market, millions filling for unemployment, shelter in place orders requiring those who can work from home to do so. In short, we have seen the entirety of the capitalist economic system come to a grinding halt. Neoliberal capitalist institutions are not equipped to handle a global pandemic on

this scale. In a time of crisis such as the one we are currently in, the real motivations of the ruling elite become painstakingly clear: capitalism, as a system designed to generate surplus value cares more about profit than it does about people. I would argue that this has been true since Marx's time; however, the system has devised more and more complex ideological systems to explain why suffering persists given the preponderance of technological advances. When the institutions begin to break down, and the system no longer functions as it once did, the values inherent in the exchange economy reveal themselves. The ruling class is scrambling to get things 'back to normal' and are clearly willing to sacrifice the lives of the elderly and immunocompromised in order to make this happen.

While it is too soon to understand completely how the coronavirus pandemic will affect the future of our society, it appears that a return to normal is, even given perfect conditions, nowhere in sight. We may never return to the way things had been. This crisis, however, also offers new possibilities concerning social organization. In a period of crisis, the 'natural' and 'immutable' laws of capitalist economics no longer seem as unshakable as they do during periods of relative calm. Perhaps this 'spell' of capitalist ideology is in the process of breaking. Following Adorno, we should keep in mind that social transformation does not guarantee liberation or revolution, and always risks total disaster. No Marxist theory, no matter how complete, can determine or even predict where society is going. We can, however, learn from the periods of crisis in the past in order to better prepare for what is to come.

Given these unprecedented social changes, I argue that the concept of class consciousness, as well as a well-developed account of political agency is important now more than ever. As the working class comes to realize that the ruling class is willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of profit, they will also recognize their power to change their own social

conditions. A reconstruction of the concept of class consciousness could be a helpful conceptual tool for political organizing. This concept must be able to account not only for awareness and agency aimed at a progressive, leftist politics, but also the mass movements of the right and alt-right. That is to say, we must also be able to give an account of why the working class does not, or has not, come together as a class for the sake of overthrowing global capital. Such an account requires an account of political agency and action complex and nuanced enough to attend to the differences within the working class. It is my hope that the present work constitutes at least step in that direction.

We should not wait for social conditions to become revolutionary before we act. It is possible to begin and continue the work of establishing political organizations that maintain and develop progressive political energy and begin building alternative institutional structures that can outlast not only the present crisis, but also the global system of capitalism. While the future is always to some extent uncertain, today it is unclear if, or when, a return to normal will happen. Perhaps a return to normal is not what is needed. Perhaps we can imagine a different future – a future beyond the current system of exploitation and alienation. Conscious intervention, however, is a crucial factor in determining how the present crisis unfolds. While no single individual or group can guarantee what will happen, an understanding of the complex interrelated web of political agency is a crucial step towards whatever the future holds in store. The concept of class consciousness, reconstructed through the lens of political agency, offers conceptual resources to address the problems of today, for the sake of a better tomorrow.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Adorno, Theodor (2005). *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*. London: Verso.

Adorno, Theodor (2007). *Negative Dialectics*. New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group.

Adorno, Theodor (2000). *Introduction to Sociology*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Adorno, Theodor and Herbert Marcuse (1999). "Correspondence on the German Student Movement." *New Left Review*. 1/233, p. 123-136.

Allen, Amy (2016). *The End of Progress: Decolonizing the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Andrew, Edward (1983). "Class in Itself and Class against Capital: Karl Marx and his Classifiers." *Canadian Journal of Political Science*. Vol.16, No. 3, p. 577-584.

Arendt, Hannah (1958). *The Human Condition*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.

Butler, Judith (2015). *Notes Toward a Performative of Assembly*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Canetti, Elias (1973). *Crowds and Power*. New York: Victor Gollancz Ltd.

Dean, Jodi (2018). *Crowds and Party*. London: Verso.

Dean, Jodi (2019). *Comrades: An Essay on Political Belonging*. London: Verso.

Derrida, Jacques (2010). *The Beast and the Sovereign, Volume 2*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

- Feenberg, Andrew (2014). *The Philosophy of Praxis: Marx, Lukács and the Frankfurt School*. London, UK: Verso.
- Feenberg, Andrew (2017). “Why Students of the Frankfurt School Will Have to Read Lukács.” *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Theory*. Ed Michael J. Thompson. Palgrave MacMillan.
- French, Peter A (1995). *Corporate Ethics*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace & Company.
- Gallagher, Shaun and Deborah Perron Tollefsen (2017). “We-Narratives and the Stability and Depth of Shared Agency” *Philosophy of the Social Sciences*. Vol 47(2).
- Gilbert, Margaret (2008). *A Theory of Political Obligation: Membership, Commitment, and the Bonds of Society*. Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press.
- Hegel, G.W.F. (1991). *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Hegel, G.W.F. (1952). *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Hegel, G.W.F. (1997). *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*. New Jersey: Prentice-Hall.
- Honneth, Axel (2008). *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Horkheimer, Max and Theodor Adorno (2002). *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Stanford University Press.
- Horkheimer, Max and Theodor Adorno (2019). *Towards a New Manifesto*. London: Verso.
- Jaeggi, Rachel (2016). *Alienation*. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Jameson, F. (1988). "History and Class Consciousness as an 'Unfinished Project'." *Rethinking Marxism*, 1(1).
- Jay, Martin (1984). *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukacs to Habermas*. California: University of California Press.
- Lasch, Christopher (1979). *The Culture of Narcissism*. New York: Norton.
- Lavin, Chad (2005). "Postliberal Agency in Marx's Brumaire." *Rethinking Marxism*. Vol 17, no. 3. July.
- Le Bon, Gustave (2018). *The Crowd: Study of the Popular Mind*.
- Lenin, V.I. (1915). "The Collapse of the Second International." Section 2.
<<https://www.marxists.org/archive/lenin/works/1915/csi/ii.htm#v21pp74h-212>>
- Lenin, V.I. (1975). *What is to Be Done? Burning Questions of Our Movement*. Peking: Foreign Languages Press.
- Lenin, V.I. (1993). *State and Revolution*. New York: Penguin Classics.
- List, Christian and Philip Pettit. *Group Agency: The Possibility, Design, and Status of Corporate Agents*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
- Lukács, Georg (1967). *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of his Thought*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Lukács, Georg (2000). *A Defense of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic*. London: Verso.

- Lukács, Georg (2010). *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Wales: The Merlin Press.
- Luxemburg, Rosa (1971). “Organizational Questions of Russian Social Democracy.” *Selected Political Writings of Rosa Luxemburg*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Luxemburg, Rosa (1971). “Reform or Revolution.” *Selected Political Writings of Rosa Luxemburg*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Luxemburg, Rosa (1971). “What does the Spartacus league want?” *Selected Political Writings of Rosa Luxemburg*. New York: Monthly Review Press.
- Macdonald, Iain (2019). *What Would Be Different: Figures of Possibility in Adorno*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Marx, Karl (1956). *The Holy Family or Critique of Critical Critique*. Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House.
- Marx, Karl (1975). “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right. *Marx Engels Collected Works*. Vol 3. London, UK: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Marx, Karl (1976). *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Vol 1*. London, UK: Penguin Books.
- Marx, Karl (1988). *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. New York: Prometheus Books.
- Marx, Karl (1998). *The German Ideology*. New York: Prometheus Books.
- Marx, Karl (2014). *The Poverty of Philosophy*. Mansfield Centre: Martino Publishing.

Marx, Karl (2017). *The 18th Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*. New York: International Publishers.

Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels (1978). *The Marx-Engels Reader*. New York: Norton & Company.

Nelson, R. and S. Winter (1982). *An Evolutionary Theory of Economic Change*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Nietzsche, Friedrich (1989). *On the Genealogy of Morals*. New York: Random House.

Tollefsen, Deborah Perron (2015). *Groups as Agents*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.

Tollefsen, Deborah Perron (2018). "Collective Intentionality and Methodology in the Social Sciences." *The Routledge Handbook of Collective Intentionality*. Routledge, New York: Routledge.

Wood, Allen (2004). *Karl Marx*. 2nd Edition. New York: Routledge.

Wright, Erik Olin (1985). *Classes*. London: Verso.