

# Modern Critical Thought

*An Anthology of Theorists  
Writing on Theorists*

Edited by Drew Milne



# MODERN CRITICAL THOUGHT



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# Introduction: Criticism and/or Critique

Anyone interested in modern critical thought is faced with the difficulty of knowing how to negotiate its daunting range and complexity. Where to begin? The question could hardly be simpler and yet for any modern thinker the options appear endless and, more worryingly, groundless. Anyone engaged in a specific intellectual activity is likely to feel the force of suspicions that answers to more general questions have been assumed without justification. Reflecting on such assumptions appears to be a self-critical virtue, while scepticism has become an essential dynamic of modern thought. Self-critical reflection also prompts recognition of the historical traditions and contingencies that make up modern thought. Historical continuities undermine the claims of innovation, while contingency masks the blindness of mediation and repetition. To read Judith Butler or Slavoj Žižek it is necessary to have a smattering of Hegel and Lacan, perhaps also of Kant, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, but it is quickly apparent that smatterings are uncritical. This anthology focuses on twentieth-century thinkers who have been influential across a number of disciplines and critical approaches, as well as providing retrospective surveys of key sources in the history of modern thought. Although many of these thinkers have the status of necessary reading, they are difficult to read. Much of modern critical thought is engaged in dialogues with previous thinkers, such as Kant, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud, whose controversial legacies rule out easy consensus. This anthology provides an introduction to the way modern thought develops such dialogues through shared and conflictual conversations.

The dialogues of modern critical thought inevitably involve disagreements and different approaches to critical reading. To read particular thinkers requires some knowledge of the shared conversation of critical ideas. It has nevertheless been common to isolate thinkers from the traditions with which they engage. Isolating names and 'isms' is obviously reductive but surprisingly common. Reductive labels appear to be a necessary simplification in the market of contemporary ideas, but there is more to critical thought than the branding of positions and the commodification of intellectual 'stars'. When the quantity of publication is so great, it becomes necessary to discern quality; and quality does not come neatly packaged but requires comparative criticism.

A focus on one critic or theorist can be a useful starting point, but the critical moment more often takes place between thinkers and across different intellectual paradigms.

A defining feature of intellectual modernity is the recognition that no one philosopher or thinker can master the totality of what is known and thought. Hegel was perhaps the last to try with any success. The extraordinary erudition of subsequent thinkers such as Marx, Max Weber or Walter Benjamin is often won at the cost of encyclopedic oeuvres that remain fascinatingly incomplete. The dangers of selecting one figure as an idol are evident from the forms of dogmatism associated with Marx and Freud, but the dangers of misunderstanding are no less critical when Adorno, Derrida, Butler or Žižek are read in isolation or treated as singular authorities. Their work opens out through readings of others without providing self-contained oeuvres. Rather than being grounded in foundational claims or first principles, critical articulation through earlier traditions is constitutive of modern critique. Another distinctive feature of modern thought is the increased awareness of thinking's dependence on language and writing. Many influential forms of modern thought also offer new ways of developing critique through reading. This helps to explain the importance of critical reading and the way critical thinking rests on the texts it criticizes.

It is, accordingly, important to grasp modern critical thought's processes of exchange, dialogue and conversation. Modern European philosophy – or what is sometimes called 'continental' philosophy<sup>1</sup> – looms large, but modern critical thought also breaks with traditional conceptions of philosophy. What counts as philosophy in one tradition of thought or academic context may be dismissed as non-philosophical or philosophically trivial in another. Defensive denial or negation is constitutive of many border disputes. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, 'True philosophy scoffs at philosophy, since it is aphilosophical.'<sup>2</sup> Many of the most important modern thinkers – Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud and their successors – resist thinking of their work as philosophy, indeed are critical of philosophy and suggest the necessity of crossing philosophy's borders. Habermas is as much a critical social theorist as he is a philosopher. Derrida transgresses differences between philosophical and rhetorical or literary argument. Foucault offers radical new ways of thinking historically. Žižek finds as much intellectual grist and ideological provocation in a Hitchcock movie as in the thought of Hegel or Lacan. Philosophy remains important, reconfigured in dialogue with disciplines and social questions that go beyond the traditional problems of philosophy. It can seem as if modern academic disciplines are nevertheless designed to make it difficult to study key modern thinkers in their own right and in the spirit of their critical projects. An interest in Marxism or psychoanalysis, for example, informs many approaches and disciplines, from economics and business studies to psychology, cultural studies and nursing, but there are not many university departments of Marxism or psychoanalysis. The inter-disciplinary range of modern critical thought prompts reflection on the limits of disciplines and what might come after philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

Recent developments in critical thought dissolve boundaries between philosophy and critical theory, between continental and analytic philosophy, between sociology and cultural studies, and so on. This anthology suggests ways in which influential thinkers prefigure this dissolution by developing a critical awareness of thought's conditions of possibility. Approaches such as Marxism, feminism or psychoanalysis, for example, are informed by critiques of philosophy, but are more concerned to develop new critical

practices. The attempt to combine theory and practice so as to change the world through knowledge is influenced above all by the way Marx politicized differentiations between pure reason and practical reason. The search for critically informed practices is also constitutive of modern critical projects with emancipatory intentions, including psychoanalysis.<sup>4</sup> Sartre's existentialism and Butler's conceptions of gender seek to change the way we think about who we are and imply new ways of living. Similarly, Deleuze and Foucault could be described as philosophers, but their work is as much concerned with changing the way we think about social practices and institutions. The traditions of critical theory which extend from Western Marxism and the Frankfurt School to post-structuralism, postcolonial discourse and queer theory, are engaged in critical dialogues with philosophical traditions, but are concerned with problems distinct from those conventionally associated with philosophy. To the dismay of conceptual purists, recent critical theorists such as Bhabha, Butler and Žižek appropriate and transform the already unstable conceptual vocabularies of Derrida, Foucault and Lacan to generate new spaces of theory.

'Theory' has come to stand as the quickest description of the way argument has been redefined across different intellectual movements and disciplines. Against the fashion to line up the playful postmodern French side of, say, Derrida or Deleuze, against the earnest German modernism of, say, Gadamer or Habermas, the important arguments involve critical translations across linguistic boundaries. Marxism, psychoanalysis, phenomenology and post-structuralism all involve hybrids of German and French thought, and are mediated by their English-language reception. A peculiarity of 'theory' in the English-speaking world is the importance given to French thought, and the neglect of the German sources of such thought. This anthology suggests some of the dialogues between German and French thought, as well as representing work which crosses national and linguistic boundaries in the new hybrid spaces of theory.

Literary 'theory' often adopts a relation to texts which is uncritical in its imaginative use of ideas and thus transgresses the limits of critical self-reflection.<sup>5</sup> The language of 'theory' can make it hard to recognize the traditions of philosophical argument from which terms and concepts are borrowed. The difference between literary theory and critical theory is made all the more ambiguous by the use of 'critical theory' to describe the work of the Frankfurt School associated with Adorno, Benjamin, Marcuse and Habermas. It is not, for example, obvious from the title of *The Handbook of Critical Theory* that what is offered is a handbook to Frankfurt School thought.<sup>6</sup> My own selection of essays surveys Frankfurt School critical theory, phenomenology and post-structuralism, as well as approaches associated with theory in literary and cultural studies. *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, by contrast, focuses on a literary conception of theory, offering an eclectic array of poetics, rhetoric and literary criticism from Plato to the present.<sup>7</sup> Eclecticism makes it hard to see the decisive ways in which theory breaks with earlier traditions of literary criticism and the ways in which modern critical thought breaks down boundaries between the languages of different disciplines.

The resulting difficulties include disagreements not just about what is meant by particular terms, but about the more diffuse process of borrowing across traditions of thought. Ideas from linguistics have influenced anthropology; psychoanalysis has been important for Marxism and for feminism; ways of reading Nietzsche have changed perceptions of power and sexuality, and so on. The impact of structural linguistics on a

range of different fields, from child psychology to semiotics and ideology-critique, was sufficiently diffuse to give rise to the perception of a structuralist moment in intellectual work as a whole. If Saussure and Lévi-Strauss are the presiding influences on structuralism, the range of those associated with structuralism includes Althusser, Lacan, Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva and Deleuze.<sup>8</sup> These thinkers could also be read as critics of structuralist methodology, participating in the dissolution of structuralism which became known as post-structuralism. What such 'moments' reveal is not so much a specific set of shared ideas, but horizons of interpretation which constitute and divide the dialogues of modern thought.<sup>9</sup> Post-structuralism is subject to 'logics of disintegration'<sup>10</sup> in which the critical legitimacy of any stable post-structuralist paradigm is brought into crisis. Work in the wake of post-structuralism, such as Butler's and Bhabha's, is important for gender studies and postcolonial discourse, but the theoretical impetus of their work deconstructs the categories according to which such studies ground themselves. Their work, as with many of those in this anthology, is situated between critical paradigms, questioning the essentialism and uncritically empirical organization of disciplines and practices. More generally, borrowing from one discipline or tradition to illuminate another has become an important way in which new areas of thought are developed, but cross-fertilization creates plenty of room for muddle and confusion.

This anthology, accordingly, develops a different approach to the need for critical introductions. Many of those thinkers most in need of introductory explication are at their most accessible and revealing when introducing the thought of their precursors and rivals. Forced to provide brief introductions to the work of others, many critical thinkers provide succinct accounts of influences on their own work. Rather than providing generalized or unfocused overviews, such introductions reveal priorities and key areas of difference. While such introductions are not impartial, the differences of interpretation involved are themselves critical. Reviews and expositions help to highlight tensions or difficulties in the work of a thinker, while also contextualizing the relation between two thinkers. A reader seeking a quick guide to Nietzsche or Heidegger might stumble unthinkingly through encyclopedia entries or beginner's guides. But a reader analysing Heidegger's introductory lectures on Nietzsche can begin to grasp aspects of Nietzsche's thought and its impact on Heidegger's thought. As well as providing a critical introduction to Nietzsche, Heidegger's Nietzsche also provides one of the most helpful introductions to the thought of Heidegger and a point of comparison for other thinkers informed by Nietzsche, such as Derrida, Foucault and Deleuze. Similarly, a reader relying on one interpretation of Marx or Freud will encounter difficulties, but a reader who can recognize the processes of interpretation, appropriation and critical translation has begun to enter the conversation of modern thought. Given that so much of modern critical thought develops through critical readings, there is enhanced interest in reading through such processes.

Along such lines, this anthology selects essays, lectures, interventions and critical reviews which provide critical introductions to thinkers from Marx to the present. These essays are chosen to introduce key figures in modern thought, but also to serve as introductions to the thinker writing the essay: an essay by Gadamer on Heidegger serves to introduce both Heidegger and Gadamer. Essays on writers appearing earlier in the anthology build into overlapping conversations and arguments. This allows the

anthology to be used for different kinds of reading and teaching, while also providing a representative survey and introduction to modern thought. The organization of the anthology also suggests how critical thinking has developed as a practice of critical reading across the boundaries and labels of more conventional introductory patterns, across differences in French and German thought, or across differences between Marxism and psychoanalysis. Each essay is introduced by some contextualization of the thinkers in dialogue, sketching lines of influence and areas of disagreement, along with suggestions for further reading. For reasons already suggested, these brief introductions need to be read sceptically as guides rather than as critical representations. The rest of this introduction provides orientation for the anthology as a whole, sketching some of the different meanings of critique and outlining some important intellectual sources and problems.

In different forms, critique is the shared core of most current theoretical work, serving as the central way in which theoretical practices are legitimated. There is, however, little agreement as to what is meant by critique or how it might differ from criticism, and one function of critique is to criticize the functions criticism is made to serve.<sup>11</sup> This anthology focuses on twentieth-century thought, but the modern coming together of criticism, critical reading and critique can be traced back to Kant, who made the term ‘critique’ and its practice central to modern thought. In the preface to the *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781), Kant suggests that: ‘Our age is, in especial degree, the age of criticism, and to criticism everything must submit.’<sup>12</sup> The German term for criticism here is *Kritik*, often also translated as ‘critique’. Kant could also be translated as describing his age as the age of critique. The difference between criticism and critique has never become firmly established in English usage, although there is a largely unexamined assumption that criticism is the more modest, nit-picking activity as opposed to the more philosophical pretensions of critique. Indeed, the cluster of associated terms in English usage still owes something to the coming together of English criticism, French *critique* and German *Kritik*, the latter a translation from French to German.<sup>13</sup> A measure of this process of translation is the extent to which it can sound awkward to use ‘critique’ as a verb, as in: *I’ve had enough of being critiqued, stop critiquing me!* To some ears, the verb here should be ‘criticize’, as in: *I’ve had enough of being criticized, stop criticizing me!* This difference between ‘critique’ as a noun and as a verb owes something to French and German resonances of *critique* / *Kritik* overlapping with the verb ‘criticize’, and hints at profound interconnections between English, French and German thought.

Amid European dialogue, the age of critique epitomized by Kant is that of enlightened reason subjecting religion, ethics and aesthetic judgement to rigorous and independent scrutiny. The assertion that everything should submit to critique asserts the autonomous authority of free and public examination in the court of reason. Kant’s critique is not just a critique of the books or systems of reason, but a critique of the faculty of reason itself. The double genitive in the title of the *Critique of Pure Reason* indicates an important ambiguity: reason is both the subject and the object of critique. Kant delimits the epistemological conditions by which the subject of knowledge, the knower, knows the object, or the known. The critique of reason’s conditions of possibility marks out Kant’s conception of critique as a new philosophical reflexivity: the self-critique of enlightenment. Critique develops the practice of criticizing the ideas



and writings of others into self-critical reflection. Although the critique of pure reason dominates the architecture of Kant's thought, his critical philosophy includes critiques of practical reason and aesthetic judgement, differentiating epistemology, ethics and aesthetics. Critique, for Kant, is also a practice of writing and of publicizing his thought through writing. Willi Goetschel argues that, for Kant, critical theory and critical thought imply the necessity of considering the limits of writing, and of turning the written discourse of reason into the medium of critical self-reflection.<sup>14</sup>

The word 'critique' derives from the Greek *krinein*, used with reference to separating, judging and deciding, modes which continue to be active in the work of book reviewers and literary critics. In this sense, 'critique' even now refers to modes of literary criticism, not least those of grammarians and philologists.<sup>15</sup> It would be possible, for example, to understand the American reception of Derridean deconstruction not in terms of philosophical critique, but as the radicalization of literary criticism,<sup>16</sup> a critical turn exemplified by the work of Paul de Man. Such developments in modes of philosophical reading combine different conceptions of criticism and critique. Interpretation and hermeneutics have become important, moreover, not just for textual scholars but for reflections on reading and language central to the work of Heidegger, Gadamer, Levinas, Habermas and Derrida. For such thinkers, and for modern critical thought more generally, understanding through interpretation is not another 'method' of investigation separable from natural or 'hard' sciences, but a necessary dimension of understanding as such.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, from Marx to Žižek, the characteristic presentations of modern critical thought combine philosophical critique with critical 'readings' of the texts of predecessors and contemporaries.

The possibility of combining philosophical critique with literary or textual criticism is already implicit in Kant's age of critique. Within the emergence of modern thought, however, different writing practices associated with the history of literary and textual criticism are subject to new social functions and forms of professionalization and commercialization. Raymond Williams, for example, argues against the social or professional generalization associated with criticism: '**criticism** becomes ideological not only when it assumes the position of the *consumer* but also when it masks this position by a succession of abstractions of its real terms of response (as *judgement, taste, cultivation, discrimination, sensibility; disinterested, qualified, rigorous* and so on).'<sup>18</sup> This list sketches key battlegrounds in the history of literary criticism, with Williams indicating his own preference for a cultural critique of criticism. Critiques of literary scholarship, philology and textual criticism can be traced back through the social distinctions and divisions of labour in eighteenth-century textual criticism. Simon Jarvis, for example, concludes one historical account of such developments by arguing, against the terms suggested by Williams, that 'professionalism in historical scholarship and its concomitant division of intellectual labour is neither a set of mistaken opinions nor a delusory world-view'.<sup>19</sup> The professionalization of textual criticism leaves criticism torn between the commercial market and the demands of professional rationalization associated with academic work in universities. Commodification and professionalization mean that criticism either embraces humanistic amateurism or develops the professional legitimacy of scholarly specialisms and their narrower social relevance.<sup>20</sup> Within the general division of intellectual labour, there is, accordingly, an ongoing struggle for intellectual freedom and for the free exchange and publication of ideas in a republic of letters.

Where modern critical thought has to struggle with the pressures of commercial trivialization and academic institutionalization, much of the energy in eighteenth-century thought was directed against the authorities of church and state, particularly those authorities that restricted freedom of intellectual expression. While the practices of criticism and critique are subject to logics of professional rationalization and modernization specific to individual disciplines, such practices are also associated with public reasoning and the reflexively self-critical work of secular discussion. Religious and political dogmas were particular targets for criticism, even if only implicitly. Comparative studies in the history of religion have the capacity to suggest critiques of Christian faith and generate new kinds of intellectual freedom. Commenting on the impact of J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* (1890–1915), for example, Jane Harrison records how 'A cultured policeman, a member of the Working Men's College, . . . said to me, "I used to believe everything they told me, but, thank God, I read the *Golden Bough*, and I've been a free-thinker ever since".'<sup>21</sup> It is easy to forget that such intellectual freedoms are comparatively recent, especially in states of emergency which call for uncritical solidarity.

The new kinds of public discussion and exchange associated with eighteenth-century criticism and critique ranged from essays on miscellaneous subjects in journals and critical surveys, most notably Diderot's *Encyclopédie* (1751–1772), to the more philosophically systematic writing exemplified by Kant. Kant exemplifies the enlightenment culture of criticism, becoming one of the few philosophers whose work remains influential across analytic and continental philosophy.<sup>22</sup> Kant suggests how enlightenment and critique are linked in the assertion of reason's autonomy and its ability to legislate for itself rather than being beholden to the external authorities of church, party or state. The critical activity of the enlightenment implied a secular republic of letters developed through the publication of debates, a model of intellectual exchange that still informs contemporary thought.<sup>23</sup> Critique, for Kant, negotiates the difference between dogmatism and scepticism, and, as he puts it at the end of the *Critique of Pure Reason*: 'The critical path alone is still open.'<sup>24</sup> This means revealing the conditions that make any knowledge possible and recognizing the limits of reason's powers. In 'An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?' Kant writes that: 'Have courage to make use of your *own* understanding! is thus the motto of enlightenment.'<sup>25</sup> Foucault draws out one of the implications of Kant's text: the moment of enlightenment when humanity reasons without subjecting itself to authority is the moment when critique becomes necessary. If Kantian critique analyses the limits of reason, Foucault suggests a new turn: 'The point, in brief, is to transform the critique conducted in the form of necessary limitation into a practical critique that takes the form of a possible transgression.'<sup>26</sup> A consequence of this shift, for Foucault, is that critique no longer involves the search for formal structures with universal value, but rather develops as a genealogical investigation into the historical conditions of contemporary thought and action. The philosophical attitude associated with enlightenment critique is translated into the labour of diverse inquiries. The move from necessary limitation to possible transgressions informs Foucault's interest in discourses such as madness, medicine and sexuality which unsettle the boundaries of reason.

Almost all subsequent traditions of critical thought involve such reference back to Kantian critique. Kant's account of how our phenomenal experience is structured by intellectual categories which are the conditions of the possibility of this experience

continues to influence traditions of phenomenological inquiry. The work of Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas, for example, can be understood as radical attempts to rethink Kant. The intellectual background for phenomenology was formed by the various schools of neo-Kantianism in the second half of the nineteenth century, which were also a spur for sociology in the work of Durkheim and Weber and for what became Western Marxism.<sup>27</sup> Gillian Rose's critical survey of neo-Kantianism suggests that the attempt to break with neo-Kantianism through Durkheim's meta-critique is shared by Dilthey, Heidegger, Mannheim, Benjamin and Gadamer, and by what she sees as the neo-Kantian Marxism of Lukács and Adorno.<sup>28</sup>

Many thinkers have taken issue with formalist, ahistorical or metaphysical features in Kant's account of the system of concepts which constitute *a priori* knowledge, suggesting that Kant neglects the social, historical and ontological conditions of experience. Rose describes how a modified type of Kantian argument can change the problem of *a priori* knowledge into the problem of the sociological preconditions of experience: 'when it is argued that it is society or culture which confers objective validity on social facts or values, then the argument acquires a metacritical or "quasi-transcendental" structure.'<sup>29</sup> While Kant's 'transcendental' deduction of intuition, space and time as conditions of the possibility of knowledge remains controversial, Kant's thought reverberates beyond conflicting interpretations of his work. As Willi Goetschel puts it: 'Following Kant, every form of critique finds itself always already having to refer back to its ground- and sourcebook, the *Critique of Pure Reason*. A purely conceptual theory is not capable of accounting for an influence of this scope.'<sup>30</sup> Kant's influence can in part be explained by the rhetoric of Kantian critique, despite Kant's notoriously rebarbative prose. A more plausible explanation of Kant's influence lies in the way his critiques suggest the possibility of developing critique beyond epistemology, ethics and aesthetics into the critique of society.

Reference back to Kant and neo-Kantian argument is a continual recourse for more recent thinkers such as Habermas and Derrida, but for very different purposes, in part because Kant remains central to conflicts between sociology and philosophy in modern critical theory. This also reflects the way that Kant's critiques point beyond pure philosophy into practical philosophy, morality and politics. The attempt to find regulative principles with which to guide moral action and aesthetic judgement has become a shared critical orientation in political and social thought. Regulative principles suggest ways of criticizing the irrationality of particular arguments, practices and social arrangements. Critique metamorphoses into a more general quality of argument, mediating criticisms which subject particular claims, practices or institutions to scrutiny, and the more systematic claims of philosophical critique. Echoes of Kant can be heard in titles such as Sartre's *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* or Spivak's *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*.<sup>31</sup> The object criticized can range from bureaucracy and the cult of personality, to postmodern cynicism and child labour in Bangladesh. Such books exemplify the tensions between rationally self-legislating critique and criticisms of particular forms of irrationality and injustice.<sup>32</sup>

The meaning of critique in modern thought is, then, more extended than in Kant's work. Kant's conception of the freedom to make public use of one's reason in all matters nevertheless implies a critique of political restrictions and distortions. The autonomous exercise of practical reason also suggests a new freedom of moral action

with political consequences, suggestions evident in Kant's political writings.<sup>33</sup> After Kant, the politics of critique motivates the emancipatory projects of critical sociology to develop accounts of the social conditions of rationality and ways of making society more rational. Indeed, an important feature of modern critical thought is scepticism towards the forms of scientific reason which do not recognize the limits of their assumed rationality. Industrial technology, for example, may seem eminently rational and efficient, but understood critically it is irrational in its inability to see the environmental and social conditions which make it possible. To recognize that technology's conditions are not autonomous but dependent on natural, historical and social conditions is to develop a critical sociology of reason, or a metacritique of scientific rationality. Sociological critique of Kant informs many of the Marxist thinkers included in this anthology, from Lukács to Žižek, while different critical renegotiations of Kant also inform Nietzsche's thought and the reinterpretations of Nietzsche offered by Heidegger and Deleuze.

The political implications of Kantian critique find their most radical translation in Marx, a translation of critique important even for those who are hostile to Marxism. The word 'critique' figures prominently in the titles of almost all of Marx's major works, from his early critiques of Hegel, through to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1859) and *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy* (1867). Despite the prominence of the word 'critique' in the writings of Marx, it is surprisingly difficult to pin down what Marx means by critique. There is scant evidence that Marx intends a developed analogy with Kant's conception of critique, though there have been attempts to find affinities between Kant and Marx.<sup>34</sup> In *The Holy Family, or Critique of Critical Critique* (1845), Marx and Engels launched a polemical attack on the high-flown intricacy of the dialectics of Critical Criticism, a rebuke which prefigures the abuse of dialectical critique within Marxism itself. *The Holy Family* is eloquently rude about the uncritical qualities of Bruno Bauer and others: 'Critical Criticism makes criticism, as a predicate and activity of man, into a subject apart, criticism which relates itself to itself and is therefore *Critical Criticism*.'<sup>35</sup> The sarcastic and pejorative doubling up in the term 'critical criticism' suggests scepticism about the uses and abuses of critique understood as a self-sufficient methodology. Beyond the critical practice of polemic and a judgemental torrent of disagreements, however, it is hard to see why Marx and Engels continue to use 'critique' to describe their own approach. Marx rejects the conception of critique suggested by critical philosophy, seeking to overcome philosophy through what the theses on Feuerbach call revolutionary practice and practical-critical activity.<sup>36</sup> Put in loosely Kantian terms, Marx's conception of critique seeks to reveal capitalism's conditions of possibility by delimiting the scientific claims of political economy.

The claim that Marx's later work involves an epistemological break with philosophy and the inauguration of a science of critique and scientific criticism is central to Althusserian Marxism. Althusser identifies the development of a new, more scientific method of critical reading in the mature work of Marx.<sup>37</sup> In *Capital*, Marx integrates the recognition of oversights and inconsistencies in political economy through a new conception of the object or terrain of social reality that is the condition of possibility for the discourse of political economy. Marx, accordingly, provides both an immanent critique of political economy and a symptomatic reading which provides a more 'scientific' framing of political economy. This theorization of critical reading informs the Althusserian re-reading of the symptomatic presence and absence of the anthropological,

humanist and Hegelian residues in Marx's later, more scientific work. The extent to which Marx ever made a clean, scientific break is nevertheless murky. There is a continuing sense, especially in Marx's account of the fetishism of the commodity, picked up by Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness*, that the anti-metaphysical scientificity of *Capital* intends a critique of the metaphysical illusions produced by capitalism. Whatever the rhetoric, the possibility of articulating a science of metaphysics allies Marx to the problems of Hegelian philosophy. If Marx claims to overcome metaphysics, to go beyond philosophy, his practice of criticism struggles to legitimate its conception of critique scientifically and as something more than an immanent critique of the discourse of political economy.

The point of critical practice for Marx is to realize the truth of philosophy, abandoning the attempt to stand above the social conflicts which constitute philosophical experience. The young Marx claimed that: 'the critic can take his cue from every existing form of theoretical and practical consciousness and from this ideal and final goal implicit in the *actual* forms of existing reality he can deduce a true reality.'<sup>38</sup> This conception animates Marx's subsequent thought, and is characteristic of many modern forms of critical thought, but leaves open critical thought's scientific objectivity. *Capital* offers a politically motivated critique of the way capitalism conceals its role in structuring human existence, but it remains ambiguous whether Marx understands capitalism as a historically contingent mode of production or as a necessary, even logical condition of the possibility of socialism. Michel Henry suggests that:

from Kant to Marx, the transcendental question shifts; it is no longer an interrogation concerning the essential possibility of science, in this case of political economy, but one that concerns first of all the reality which comes to be the object of this science, the 'economy' now understood in its relation to praxis and to the fundamental modes of its actual realization.<sup>39</sup>

Marx, however, has been more influential as a critic of capitalism who seeks to describe the conditions of the possibility of radical social change. The decisive difference in the Marxist conception of critique is the relative indifference to epistemology and traditional philosophical questions, in favour of a critique of society with practical, indeed revolutionary intentions. The attempt to reconfigure the ends of philosophy in a radical new conception of thought's relation to society also informs the critical relation to Kant in the thought of Hegel and Nietzsche. Insofar as both Hegel and Nietzsche offer a less explicit vocabulary of critique, the prevalence of the term in Marx's work helps to explain the subsequent diffusion of the term beyond the models of Kantian critique. To the extent that Marx's approach to critique is politically motivated, however, it remains difficult to delimit the scientificity of Marxist critique.

Marx refuses to ground his critique transcendently or outside the immanent, historical development of capital, and yet seeks to articulate the possibility of socialism as that which transcends capitalism. The critical task of *Capital* is to demystify the pseudo-scientific 'laws' of political economy. Marx shows that such laws are not natural but historical, providing an account of how capitalism's contradictions condition the possibilities of revolutionary transformation. As Marx concedes, however, the presentation of his dialectical method, which shows the life of economics reflected back in

ideas, 'may appear as if we have before us an *a priori* construction'.<sup>40</sup> He wants to avoid giving the impression that the logic of capital is a logic of ideas, as if the development of capital were the external working out of the idea of capital. The way he presents his scientific research nevertheless risks suggesting that his dialectical method either provides a Kantian account of the *a priori* conditions of capital or is guilty of Hegelian sophistry. Marx famously declared that he had stood Hegel on his head, inverting Hegel 'in order to discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell',<sup>41</sup> but this polemical quip leaves a lot to be explained. What, for example, does Marx mean when he claims that his dialectical method is the 'opposite' of Hegel's?

For Hegel, the process of thinking, which he even transforms into an independent subject, under the name of 'the Idea', is the creator of the real world, and the real world is only the external appearance of the idea. With me the reverse is true: the ideal is nothing but the material world reflected in the mind of man, and translated into forms of thought.<sup>42</sup>

The meaning of critique may have Kantian resonances, but Marx owes a more important intellectual debt to Hegel and to Hegel's critique of Kant. Marx's optimistic claim that demystified dialectical thought is essentially 'critical and revolutionary' prefigures the way Marxist critique oscillates between Kant, Hegel and Marx. The philosophical opportunism of such oscillations has been a key focus for those who continue to wrestle with the possibilities of critical dialectic, while also motivating those who reject dialectics.

More germane than Kant to an understanding of what Marx means by critique is Marx's reception of Hegel and the conception of critique developed by the young Hegelians.<sup>43</sup> The meaning of critique for Hegel, however, is no less difficult to specify, though it is widely recognized that the critique of Kant is central to Hegel's work. Although the young Hegel announced his work in the journal he produced with Schelling as 'critical philosophy',<sup>44</sup> Hegel's mature work does not describe his approach as critique and is markedly reluctant to use the term. In one sense, Hegel's whole work amounts to a critique of Kant, but in another sense he transforms critique into a different kind of thinking.<sup>45</sup> Hegel attacks the Kantian separation of the subject and object of knowledge, and of pure and practical reason. He radicalizes critical inquiry as the immanent critique of the way knowledge develops out of the recognition of its own contradictions. Hegel's phenomenological account of the experience of consciousness is self-critical, harnessing the power of sceptical reflection to recognize and overcome the limits and divisions of subjectivity and objectivity. Hegel thus provides a critique of the epistemological enterprise which dominates modern philosophy from Descartes onwards.

Hegel's importance for modern critical thought, however, lies less in the strictly philosophical dimensions of his thinking, than in the way his critique of philosophy becomes a model for subsequent critiques of religion, law, politics and economics. Hegelian thought displaces epistemology and brings philosophy up against a different set of limits. Garbis Kortian describes the way Hegel seeks to overcome the opposition of the knower and the known as the 'metacritical' dissolution of epistemology.<sup>46</sup> Rather than providing a critique of knowledge claims so as to ground knowledge in a secure foundation by revealing the transcendental conditions of all possible knowledge, Hegel

retraces the experience of thought as a self-critical and sceptical journey which is both historical and logical. Critique in Hegel's thought combines immanent critique with metacritical reflection. This combination is constitutive of dialectics, but it is central to Hegel's thought that dialectics is not a method or some external 'standpoint' or detached perspective. The knower and the known cannot be separated formally.

Marx's critique of Hegel's dialectical 'method' nevertheless accuses Hegel of developing a dialectic of pure thought which idealizes the power of logic and its abstraction from the material conditions of thought. For Marx, thought does not develop immanently out of its contradictions but reflects social antagonisms. In this sense, Marx's dialectical method involves a version of Hegelian metacritique, showing how thought and consciousness cannot legislate for their relation to the historical and material conditions of social being. In effect, Marx and Marxism develop a metacritical conception of the social and political unconscious. Marx's practice as critical reader of the texts of political economy nevertheless puts less emphasis on the metacritique of knowledge, than on the immanent critique of scientific attempts to describe political economy. This practice of immanent critique works less as a critique of fundamental grounds than as a way of testing particular knowledge claims, probing the inconsistencies, contradictions and aporia within both texts and reality. The key difference is in the way Marx's reading seeks to tease out contradictions which are ideological, rooted in the social and political distortions of thought rather than in the pure conditions of thought's abstractions.

The tension between Hegelian metacritique and Marx's immanent critique of political economy is fundamental to the development of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School and the work of Adorno, Marcuse and Habermas.<sup>47</sup> This tension can be seen in Max Horkheimer's essay 'Traditional and Critical Theory', a key essay in the definition of the critical programme of the Frankfurt School. Horkheimer defines critical activity as a 'human activity which has society itself for its object', citing the dialectical critique of political economy as a model.<sup>48</sup> The task is to develop the Marxist model into a theory of society which is critical of dogmatic forms of Marxism, revisiting aspects of philosophy Marx wrongly thought he had transcended, though the exact terms of the implicit critique of Marx remain somewhat obscure. Frankfurt School critical theory seeks to develop the emancipatory dimension of the Marxist project without regressing to dogmatic conceptions of science or retreating into foundational philosophy. As Habermas later puts it: 'Through its reflection on the conditions of its own appearance, critique is to be distinguished both from science and from philosophy. The sciences ignore the constitution of their objects and understand their subject matter in an objectivistic way. Philosophy, conversely, is too ontologically sure of its origin as a first principle.'<sup>49</sup> Critique seeks to transcend modern divisions of thought by developing critical theories of society with practical consequences.

Rather than seeking critical models through which to change society, the modern 'division of labour'<sup>50</sup> requires individual thinkers to work with specific problems and methodologies, recognizing the limitations imposed on any individual thinker and the errors that inevitably follow from impressionistic generalization. Modernity also requires individuals to think critically about the limited assumptions constitutive of a discipline's blinkered specificity. To use an example on which Hegel expends a surprising amount of effort, someone who imagined themselves an expert in the 'science' of phrenology – reading bumps on the skull as signs of psychological character – might fail

to recognize the irrationality of their discipline.<sup>51</sup> Hegel's critique of phrenology provides a model for the critique of ideology in other pseudo-sciences of psychological divination, such as graphology and astrology.<sup>52</sup> The extent to which science can be uncritical and unscientific is also shown by the discourse of madness,<sup>53</sup> and, more recently, by modern theories about the genetic determination of psychology. Ideas about smart genes, gay genes, criminal genes, and so forth, suggest that uncritical confusions of nature and culture are rife in disciplines which claim to be scientific. A critique of gene theory, unlike a critique of phrenology or astrology, requires a more scientific account of the limits of genetic determination. Knowing the limits of such a science also requires a critical understanding of other factors of social and cultural determination that might make someone an intelligent, homosexual criminal. Recognizing critical differences between substantive new knowledge claims and ideological representation crosses boundaries that separate science from society.

It remains debatable whether politicized accounts of psychology such as Marxist and feminist appropriations of psychoanalysis can be both scientific and self-critical.<sup>54</sup> A similar crux emerges in the way Marx develops Feuerbach's critique of religion's inverted and distorted picture of reality into a critique of political economy.<sup>55</sup> The difference between religious ideology and the more general critique of ideology as a representation of conflicts between the means and relations of production has ramifications throughout Marx's work. Critical accounts of psychology, religion, gender and race show that the claims of modern thought to be scientific often depend on the uncritical acceptance and generalization of a particular approach. Social sciences, though usually more aware of the social determination of what is meant by 'science', are no less vulnerable to critiques of their pseudo-objectivity.<sup>56</sup> Such difficulties give rise to reflexively self-critical forms of social science, or critical sociology,<sup>57</sup> as well as radical challenges to sociology's neo-Kantianism.<sup>58</sup> The intellectual division of labour forces critical thought to recognize the necessity of working within received paradigms while reflecting on the limits of such paradigms. Critique seeks, accordingly, to delimit the claims of scientific reason.

In the light of the historical disasters of fascism and Stalinism, Horkheimer and Adorno develop the project of critical theory with a profound scepticism regarding the values of positivism, rationality and science inherited by Western society from the enlightenment. The critique of modernity also runs through the work of Husserl and Heidegger into Foucault, Deleuze and Derrida. Against Marx's enlightenment enthusiasm for the ideas of progress and science, Horkheimer's and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* returns to the philosophical critique of enlightenment broached by Hegel and Nietzsche, reinterpreting enlightenment's self-deluding mythology of reason through Weber, Lukács and Freud. Critical reflection on the extent to which philosophy cannot be transcended as Marx thought, leads to metacritiques of modern philosophy and modern scientific rationality. Adorno, for example, restates the Hegelian metacritique of epistemology in his critique of Husserl and in the development of what Adorno later called 'negative dialectics'.<sup>59</sup> In the preface to *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno states that his thought seeks to free dialectics from affirmative traits, while stringently seeking 'to transcend the official separation of pure philosophy and the substantive or formally scientific realm'.<sup>60</sup> Put differently, Adorno attempts to develop a dialectical critique of the modern divisions of intellectual labour, without attempting to coerce the negativity



of critical reflection into positive results. His investigations into ideological contradictions and philosophical problems are developed immanently without providing a way of grounding critique methodologically. Part of the difficulty, however, is the way Adorno's determination to think against the grain of modern rationality and the modern division of labour risks relying too heavily on playing off one set of metacritical assumptions against another. Critics of Adorno, such as Habermas, have suggested that Adorno's thinking relies on an undifferentiated and reductive conception of modernity, leaving critique in a self-referential mode of performative contradiction which neglects the possibilities of social-scientific theoretical revision.<sup>61</sup> Put differently, attempts to negotiate a space for emancipatory critique between philosophy and science look increasingly utopian within the social scientific understanding of the modern divisions of intellectual labour.

To the traditions of modern critical thought associated with continental philosophy, the challenge of dialectical critique seems no less marginal. Of the thinkers represented in this anthology, Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Levinas are perhaps most closely allied with the traditions of continental philosophy associated with phenomenology and existentialism. In different ways, each of these thinkers engages with questions of experience, language, historicity, interpretation, politics and religion which are not exclusively philosophical. Although Husserl remains a common point of reference, subsequent traditions of phenomenology differentiate themselves in ways that do not allow a meaningful summary of their shared philosophical project.<sup>62</sup> Conceived as a response to the crisis of philosophy, phenomenology is torn between scientific inquiries into the observable phenomena of experience and philosophical reflection on the possibility of such experiences. Husserlian phenomenology describes the objects of experience as they are intended or intuited through systematic investigations into conscious mental processes. Heidegger's thought develops as a critique of Husserl's emphasis on intentional consciousness. After Husserl's death, phenomenology metamorphoses into a range of hybrid inquiries, ranging from Heidegger's fundamental reformulation of philosophy and language, to compounds of existentialism and Marxism.<sup>63</sup> The critique of Husserlian phenomenology is also pivotal in the work of Levinas and Derrida. The traditions of phenomenology are often rather tentative in describing their investigations as critiques, in part because phenomenological investigations are often open-ended and aporetic. Phenomenology nevertheless suggests radical critiques of the way thought's conditions of possibility are occluded or obscured by science, technology and psychology.

Although ignored or dismissed by the analytic traditions that dominate anglo-saxon philosophy departments, phenomenological and existential thinkers have been fundamental for developments in social psychology, poetics, hermeneutics, literary criticism, ethics, religious thought and political theory. One explanation for their influence is less the truth of their claims and propositions than their ability to suggest new problems, new ways of reading and new approaches to experience incompatible with existing paradigms of thought. Philosophy is only one of the contributory sources of modern critical thought, and insofar as philosophy can be embodied in the rhetoric of writing, philosophy shares the conversations of writing with other forms of discourse. Aspects of phenomenological thought and existentialism can be traced back, for example, to the restless authorship of Søren Kierkegaard. The writings of Kierkegaard, like those of

Nietzsche, resist being reduced to a series of philosophical truth claims or arguments, in part because of the way their thinking is stylized as a rhetoric of writing.<sup>64</sup> Kierkegaard poses questions of experience, ethics and religion, rather than providing a stable philosophy, and in ways which have had a dynamic but often obscure influence on intellectual history.<sup>65</sup>

Freud's thought has been more influential, but very few of Freud's most suggestive ideas, including such central hypotheses as the Oedipus complex, the death drive and even the unconscious, are susceptible of scientific proof or propositional defence. Despite the difficulty of providing philosophical or scientific legitimation, Freud has nevertheless informed a range of different practices, including clinical psychoanalysis, as well as changing the way even those who do not believe in his ideas think about human consciousness. A metacritical conception of knowledge is implicit in Freud's approach to the interpretation of the unconscious. Attempts to combine Marx's sociological metacritique with Freud's metacritique of the individual inform the thought of Adorno, Marcuse and Habermas, while psychoanalytic models of interpretation have also influenced Althusser, Lacan, Derrida and Žižek.<sup>66</sup> Freud might not be thought of as a philosopher or critic, but his work has nevertheless transformed the critical understanding of thought, self-reflection and the ideology of subjectivity.<sup>67</sup> As Connerton puts it, 'Without explicitly invoking the idea of a critique, Freud proposed what was in effect a new procedure of critical reflection.'<sup>68</sup>

Freud's work also plays an important role in the breaks with phenomenology associated with structuralism and post-structuralism, often in surprising ways. Jacqueline Rose provides one of the most incisive, feminist accounts of Lacan's re-reading of Freud in the light of structuralism. The dialogue between psychoanalysis and post-structuralism continues to inform the work of recent critical theorists such as Bhabha, Butler and Žižek, but Lacan's influence is also an acknowledged influence on Althusser's re-reading of Marx.<sup>69</sup> Beyond Marx, such processes of symptomatic reading have informed critical theory more generally, becoming a fundamental method in cultural and literary studies. In a characteristically awkward process of critical reading, Lacan's reading of Freud draws on structuralist linguistics and structural anthropology, to suggest new modes of critical reading. These new modes also involve the reinterpretation of Freudian interpretation. The resulting models of critical reading are then read back into Marx, and from Marx back into the critique of contemporary ideology. A measure of the difficulty arising from such borrowings is the way in which Žižek's post-Marxist critique of ideology weaves between Lacanian and Althusserian models of interpretation, using a re-reading of Hegel which goes against the grain of Althusser's resistance to Hegelian Marxism.

The chain of influence connecting Freud, Saussure, Althusser, Marx, Lacan, Hegel and Žižek is only one instance of ways in which models of critical reading can be translated. Such chains appear inconsistent if too much pressure is put on methodology rather than on the processes of intellectual dissemination developed through critical reading. Lucien Goldmann suggests, for example, that there are important affinities between Lukács and Heidegger, despite what seem to be profound incompatibilities. He finds references to reification in Heidegger's *Being and Time* which he reads as allusions to Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness*.<sup>70</sup> Heidegger in turn was an important teacher and influence on thinkers such as Herbert Marcuse and Jürgen Habermas

and in ways that cross the apparent dividing lines between Heidegger and Western Marxism.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, it seems likely that polemical exaggerations of differences disguise the way important problems are shared.

What emerges from the difficulties imposed by chains of influence is the importance of recognizing that there is more to critical reading than sustained scepticism or careful philological reconstruction of such chains. Just as importantly, critical reading needs to identify shared problems animating otherwise very different conceptual terms and apparently divergent intellectual traditions. At the more local level, exposition often moves between the voice of the text being read and the voice of the writer producing the reading through modes of ventriloquism which break down the difference between the subjects and objects of critique. The effects generated range from implicit allusions to a more general use of free indirect style. Alain Badiou illustrates the problem in his critical reading of Deleuze by asking: 'If I read, for example: "force among forces, man does not fold the forces that compose him without the outside folding itself, and creating a Self within man" (*Foucault*, p. 114), is this really a statement of Foucault's? Or is it already an interpretation? Or is it quite simply a thesis of Deleuze's, for we recognize in these lines his reading of Nietzsche . . .'<sup>72</sup> The difficulty is compounded by the diminished echoes of translation across German, French and English, but the critical task for Badiou's reader is to focus the relative importance of parts of the Deleuze-Foucault-Nietzsche composite in question.

Nietzsche often figures in such unstable composite theoretical constellations. It is possible to trace a German reception of Nietzsche through Heidegger and Karl Jaspers which has in turn influenced French Nietzscheanism from Deleuze to Derrida.<sup>73</sup> Such chains of influence are better understood as rhetorics of critique dramatizing differences and similarities by suggesting family trees or genealogies of argument. Jürgen Habermas, for example, is critical of Nietzsche's influence, which he identifies with the neo-conservative trends of postmodernism. He sketches Nietzsche's critique of modernity as an influence on Foucault's dissolution of singular historical metanarratives into a plurality of discontinuous islands of discourse, offering what Habermas calls 'the outline of a *transcendental historicism* at once inherited and going beyond Nietzsche's critique of historicism'.<sup>74</sup> Whereas Heidegger and Derrida develop Nietzsche's critique of reason through the destruction or deconstruction of metaphysics, Foucault's critique of reason does so through the destruction of historicism and historiography and through a radicalized conception of 'power'. Habermas's critical characterization of Foucault has generated a debate which reveals productive differences.<sup>75</sup> Habermas's critique of Foucault is developed, however, not so much as an immanent critique as a synoptic critical overview, providing a critical translation of underlying assumptions in Foucault's work into Habermas's own terms. This manoeuvre is comparable with the way Habermas positions his work at some distance from earlier Frankfurt School theorists. Such positioning, like Habermas's reconstruction of Walter Benjamin included in this anthology, exemplifies the critical strategy of second-generation Frankfurt School theorists.

Foucault's own description of his approach to Nietzsche suggests greater affinities between Foucault and earlier Frankfurt School critical theorists such as Adorno. For Foucault, Nietzsche suggests a genealogical approach which resists the linear narrative of 'history' and rejects the use of metahistorical ideals as tools of analysis. The model for

genealogical critique is provided by Nietzsche's *Genealogy of Morals*, which re-evaluates historical ideas of progress and emancipation, suggesting a critical relation to enlightenment values.<sup>76</sup> Knowledge, according to this Nietzschean model of genealogical critique, is revealed not as a narrative of progressive freedom but as enslavement to the instinctive violence of the will to knowledge. Foucault suggests the need for critical reflection on the way intellectual history reveals practices and discourses of power rather than the grand narratives proudly abstracted from history by science and philosophy. The critique of grand historical narratives finds its most influential representation in Lyotard's account of postmodernism.<sup>77</sup> Despite Foucault's critique of historicism, Foucault's work has been influential on the resulting emphasis on the study of discrete constellations of discourse and power in what has become known as 'new historicism'.<sup>78</sup> Foucault's account of sexuality's genealogical conditions of possibility has also informed theories of sexual dissidence and 'queer theory'.<sup>79</sup> Foucault's own work, however, negotiates differences between philosophy, science and history, a negotiation which offers a new conception of critique as genealogical reflection with practical and ethical consequences. Foucault's response to Derrida's critique of Foucault's *Madness and Civilization* exemplifies problems in the metaphysical and metacritical assumptions at work in their differences. The more symptomatic difficulty revealed by Foucault's influence, which informs the work of Bhabha and Butler, is the tension between the philosophical dimensions of critique and the looser sense of critique as a political-critical practice.

Derrida's work puts more emphasis on the philosophical difficulties of reflexive thought and the philosophical entailments of writing practices. He has often distanced 'deconstruction' from 'critique', suggesting that deconstruction owes more to the genealogical approach suggested by Nietzsche and Heidegger than to Kantian or Marxist critique. Despite such disclaimers, deconstruction suggests critiques of the metaphysical assumptions in philosophical and non-philosophical writings. As with Hegel, Marx and Nietzsche, the impulse to define the word 'critique' is foreign to the way such words are developed within Derrida's work. Questioned about the relation between deconstruction and critique, Derrida suggests that:

The *critical* idea, which I believe must never be renounced, has a history and presuppositions whose deconstructive analysis is also necessary. In the style of the Enlightenment, of Kant, or of Marx, but also in the sense of evaluation (esthetic or literary), *critique* supposes judgement, voluntary judgement between two terms; it attaches to the idea of *krinein* or of *krisis* a certain negativity. To say that all this is deconstructible does not amount to disqualifying, negating, disavowing, or surpassing it, of doing the *critique of critique* (the way people wrote critiques of the Kantian critique as soon as it appeared), but of thinking its possibility from another border, from the genealogy of judgement, will, consciousness or activity, the binary structure, and so forth.<sup>80</sup>

Characteristically, this passage suggests a practice which claims not to be critical or metacritical but which seeks to affirm a genealogy which honours and deconstructs Kantian and Marxian critique. Insofar as Derrida develops a different mode of critical practice, his approach emphasizes the conceptual, metaphysical or ontological presuppositions at work in different discourses. Derrida's way of questioning the grounds of texts without seeking new critical foundations exemplifies the scepticism of modern

thought and its oscillation between quasi-transcendental claims and historical concretization. Much of the uncritical energy of modern thought reduces critique to the relativism of sceptical historicization. More conceptually sophisticated traditions of thought are more critical of historical thought's conditions of possibility. The more difficult task is to develop the critique of reason both historically and conceptually.

Such difficulties emerge in *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality*. Judith Butler questions the Kantian oppositions between quasi-transcendental claims and historical examples in Žižek's appropriation of Hegel.<sup>81</sup> Ernesto Laclau, similarly, points to 'the widespread feeling that neither a radical historicism nor a fully fledged transcendentalism' is viable to explain the way 'quasi-transcendentalism' has been postulated.<sup>82</sup> What emerges, however, is the need for a historical or genealogical account of the emergence of 'quasi-transcendental' arguments in contemporary theory, and for critical reflection on the way such arguments are deployed. The term 'quasi-transcendental' appears earlier in Adorno's account of the way Walter Benjamin thinks through tradition.<sup>83</sup> Geoff Bennington puts the complication of the empirical and the transcendental marked by the prefix 'quasi-' at the heart of Derridean deconstruction, and the current fashion for the term probably reflects the currency of the term in Derrida's work.<sup>84</sup> Just as 'post' seems to function in a number of contemporary compounds – post-structuralism, post-modernism, post-colonialism, post-Marxism, post-theory – without clarifying the shifts involved, so 'quasi' seems to evade critical definition. Thus Butler observes of quasi-transcendental formulations of sexual difference that: 'The "quasi"-that precedes the transcendental is meant to ameliorate the harshness of this effect, but it also sidesteps the question: what sense of transcendental is in use here?'<sup>85</sup> If sexual difference is determined by 'quasi-transcendental' conditions of possibility which cannot be changed historically, then such a theory of sexual difference effectively prescribes the limits of possible sexual arrangements. Žižek's attempt to answer such questions concludes the selection of essays in this anthology, but it is clear that the complexity of the conceptual vocabularies involved exemplifies the ongoing attempt to develop critical separations between pure and practical reason. In different ways, the quasi-transcendental is a symptom of the difficulty of breaking with the traditions of critique generated by Kant and Marx. To be post-critical is to be uncritical: the critical path alone remains open.

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# 1

## Lukács on Marx

Georg Lukács (1885–1971) is the most important figure in twentieth-century Marxist critical theory. A friend of Georg Simmel, Max Weber and Ernst Bloch, his thought emerged out of the neo-Kantian schools of German thought and an early interest in Søren Kierkegaard and Nietzsche. His pre-Marxist literary essays, notably *Soul and Form* (1910) and *The Theory of the Novel* (1916), along with his later essays on literary realism, influenced literary critics such as Walter Benjamin, Lucien Goldmann, Raymond Williams and Frederic Jameson. His central contribution to Marxist thought is the collection of essays known as *History and Class Consciousness* (1923). These studies in Marxist dialectics renew the Marxist dialogue with Hegel and offer a new philosophical understanding of key concepts such as commodity fetishism, alienation and reification.

'The Phenomenon of Reification' is from the central essay 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat'. Lukács combines his exposition of Marx with Max Weber's conceptions of rationalization and bureaucracy, reconstruing the kernel of Marx's conception of the commodity structure of modern capitalism. Having set out the phenomenon of reification, Lukács goes on to argue that modern, 'bourgeois' critical philosophy is rooted in this phenomenon rather than critical of it. *History and Class Consciousness* develops such claims as a critique of Kant. According to Lukács, the formalism of Kantian critique can be overcome only through the transformation of philosophy into revolutionary praxis.

*History and Class Consciousness* seeks a revolutionary strategy to overcome reification through proletarian class consciousness. This positions Lukács within the dynamic response to the Russian revolution and at the centre of debates about the revolutionary tradition within what is sometimes called 'classical' Marxism. Although his book *Lenin* (1924) argues for the importance of Lenin, placing Lukács within Marxist-Leninism, *History and Class Consciousness* was attacked by the Stalinist forces of Leninist orthodoxy. *History and Class Consciousness* prefigures the discovery and publication of Marx's 1844 *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, which reveal a more Hegelian dimension to the work

of the young Marx. This discovery helped to make *History and Class Consciousness*, along with the work of Karl Korsch, an important influence on currents of Hegelian Marxism developed against the grain of Stalinist orthodoxy. Working within severe constraints, Lukács diverted his theoretical energies into socialist literary criticism, although *The Young Hegel* (1948) is of considerable interest in relation to *History and Class Consciousness*, not least in the way Lukács works out the philosophical history of 'alienation'. Lukács' later works nevertheless lack the critical originality of *History and Class Consciousness*. Indeed, Adorno quipped that *The Destruction of Reason* (1962) manifested the destruction of Lukács' own reason. Lukács, in turn, was self-critical of his earlier work, describing how coming to read Marx's early manuscripts shattered the theoretical foundations of *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács also criticized the residues of Hegelian idealism and subject-object dialectics in his own work. He argued that in *History and Class Consciousness* he had over-extended the concept of political praxis; underestimated the importance of labour; and wrongly equated alienation with objectification. Lukács' early exposition of Marx nevertheless provides one of the most acute introductions to Marx's thought.

Despite being rejected by its author and suppressed by supposedly orthodox Marxists, *History and Class Consciousness* became a seminal text. In *Lukács and Heidegger* (1973), Lucien Goldmann observed that references to the 'reification of consciousness' in *Being and Time* (1927) suggest that Heidegger's thought was in dialogue with Lukács. *History and Class Consciousness* was a more direct influence on Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse and what became known as Frankfurt School critical theory. More generally, although Lukács himself sided with Eastern European Marxism, *History and Class Consciousness* is the seminal text within Western Marxism, and an important influence on the dialogue between existentialism and Marxism. Merleau-Ponty's critique of Lukács appears later in this anthology; resistance to Lukács' conception of dialectic and socialist humanism also motivates the anti-Hegelianism of Louis Althusser and Gilles Deleuze. In the mid-1920s Lukács wrote a fascinating document which has only recently been unearthed in Moscow archives and published in translation as *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic* (2000).

#### FURTHER READING

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**Georg Lukács, 'The Phenomenon of Reification' (1922), from 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1971), pp. 83–110.**

*To be radical is to go to the root of the matter. For man, however, the root is man himself.*  
*Marx: Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*

It is no accident that Marx should have begun with an analysis of commodities when, in the two great works of his mature period, he set out to portray capitalist society in its

totality and to lay bare its fundamental nature. For at this stage in the history of mankind there is no problem that does not ultimately lead back to that question and there is no solution that could not be found in the solution to the riddle of commodity-*structure*. Of course the problem can only be discussed with this degree of generality if it achieves the depth and breadth to be found in Marx's own analyses. That is to say, the problem of commodities must not be considered in isolation or even regarded as the central problem in economics, but as the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects. Only in this case can the structure of commodity-relations be made to yield a model of all the objective forms of bourgeois society together with all the subjective forms corresponding to them.

## The Phenomenon of Reification

### 1

The essence of commodity-structure has often been pointed out. Its basis is that a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity', an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and all-embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people. It is beyond the scope of this essay to discuss the central importance of this problem for economics itself. Nor shall we consider its implications for the economic doctrines of the vulgar Marxists which follow from their abandonment of this starting-point.

Our intention here is to *base* ourselves on Marx's economic analyses and to proceed from there to a discussion of the problems growing out of the fetish character of commodities, both as an objective form and also as a subjective stance corresponding to it. Only by understanding this can we obtain a clear insight into the ideological problems of capitalism and its downfall.

Before tackling the problem itself we must be quite clear in our minds that commodity fetishism is a *specific* problem of our age, the age of modern capitalism. Commodity exchange and the corresponding subjective and objective commodity relations existed, as we know, when society was still very primitive. What is at issue *here*, however, is the question: how far is commodity exchange together with its structural consequences able to influence the *total* outer and inner life of society? Thus the extent to which such exchange is the dominant form of metabolic change in a society cannot simply be treated in quantitative terms – as would harmonise with the modern modes of thought already eroded by the reifying effects of the dominant commodity form. The distinction between a society where this form is dominant, permeating every expression of life, and a society where it only makes an episodic appearance is essentially one of quality. For depending on which is the case, all the subjective and objective phenomena in the societies concerned are objectified in qualitatively different ways.

Marx lays great stress on the essentially episodic appearance of the commodity form in primitive societies: "Direct barter, the original natural form of exchange, represents rather the beginning of the transformation of use-values into commodities, than that of commodities into money. Exchange value has as yet no form of its own, but is still directly bound up with use-value. This is manifested in two ways. Production, in its

entire organisation, aims at the creation of use-values and not of exchange values, and it is only when their supply exceeds the measure of consumption that use-values cease to be use-values, and become means of exchange, i.e. commodities. At the same time, they become commodities only within the limits of being direct use-values distributed at opposite poles, so that the commodities to be exchanged by their possessors must be use-values to both – each commodity to its non-possessor. As a matter of fact, the exchange of commodities originates not within the primitive communities, but where they end, on their borders at the few points where they come in contact with other communities. That is where barter begins, and from here it strikes back into the interior of the community, decomposing it.”<sup>1</sup> We note that the observation about the disintegrating effect of a commodity exchange directed in upon itself clearly shows the qualitative change engendered by the dominance of commodities.

However, even when commodities have this impact on the internal structure of a society, this does not suffice to make them constitutive of that society. To achieve that it would be necessary – as we emphasized above – for the commodity structure to penetrate society in all its aspects and to remould it in its own image. It is not enough merely to establish an external link with independent processes concerned with the production of exchange values. The qualitative difference between the commodity as one form among many regulating the metabolism of human society and the commodity as the universal structuring principle has effects over and above the fact that the commodity relation as an isolated phenomenon exerts a negative influence at best on the structure and organisation of society. The distinction also has repercussions upon the nature and validity of the category itself. Where the commodity is universal it manifests itself differently from the commodity as a particular, isolated, non-dominant phenomenon.

The fact that the boundaries lack sharp definition must not be allowed to blur the qualitative nature of the decisive distinction. The situation where commodity exchange is not dominant has been defined by Marx as follows: “The quantitative ratio in which products are exchanged is at first quite arbitrary. They assume the form of commodities inasmuch as they are exchangeables, i.e. expressions of one and the same third. Continued exchange and more regular reproduction for exchange reduces this arbitrariness more and more. But at first not for the producer and consumer, but for their go-between, the merchant, who compares money-prices and pockets the difference. It is through his own movements that he establishes equivalence. Merchant’s capital is originally merely the intervening movement between extremes which it does not control and between premises which it does not create.”<sup>2</sup>

And *this* development of the commodity to the point where it becomes the dominant form in society did not take place until the advent of modern capitalism. Hence it is not to be wondered at that the personal nature of economic relations was still understood clearly on occasion at the start of capitalist development, but that as the process advanced and forms became more complex and less direct, it became increasingly difficult and rare to find anyone penetrating the veil of reification. Marx sees the matter in this way: “In preceding forms of society this economic mystification arose principally with respect to money and interest-bearing capital. In the nature of things it is excluded, in the first place, where production for the use-value, for immediate personal requirements, predominates; and secondly, where slavery or serfdom form the broad foundation of social production, as in antiquity and during the Middle Ages. Here, the