

## BOURGEOIS MARXISM

*Ben Agger*

I found Andrew Wernick's response to my articles in the *CJPST* interesting because it leaves so much about his own position and proclivities unsaid. I will investigate these here, in defense of my non-Leninist approach to issues of radical change. I find many of his comments on my work tinged with the corruption of intellectual elitism and what I call philosophical Leninism. As a result, I can not pretend patience with a position which I find all too reminiscent of much of bourgeois academia, with its aversion to the unity of theory and praxis and its enthronement of "scholarship" as a way of avoiding the recognition of its own corruption by power. If much of what follows seems intemperate, it is because I believe that Leninism, whether in philosophical or political form, should be seen for what it is, the will to power cloaked in a perverted reading of Marxian objectivism. Let me address Wernick section-by-section, for the sake of clarity.

### The Frankfurt Question

"Goes quite overboard." A prototypical bourgeois Marxist response to an alarming truth. On reflection, I did not go far enough in sublating/negating the Frankfurt theorists (including most of Marcuse, although I still read *An Essay on Liberation* as the most important work of Marxism since Lukács). Adorno's and Horkheimer's only "practical" significance has been to fuel the alienated intellectual labour of later generations of academic Marxists, like Wernick. Adorno failed not because he was pessimistic but because he pretended to serve the cause of emancipation by writing books like *Negative Dialectics*. I was also trapped before by the hermeneutics of critical theory, but today it strikes me as needlessly reactionary to retreat to the Frankfurt theory except as an exercise in intellectual history. This intellectual history does not preserve the ideal of liberation via the cultivation of some obscure theoretical lexicon but merely amuses those disenchanted young leftists who have not yet joined the Red Brigades. Both traditions are authoritarian because they pretend

**Editor's Note:** For the above articles by Prof. Agger see the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 3-34 and Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 47-57. For Prof. Wernick's response see the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, Vol. 3, No. 1, pp. 107-117.

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to know the unspeakable, which can only be communicated through the private language of critical theory or with machine-guns and grenades.

Curiously, Wernick wants to defend Adorno and Horkheimer against my interpretive mistreatment. This might seem hard to square with his thinly veiled Leninism, but it is not difficult to explain. Both Adorno and Lenin felt that they had grasped objective truth, which was somehow the preserve of a small coterie of thinkers/theorists. Adorno is a philosophical Leninist. Wernick favours Adorno because he steps back from the fray; he favors Lenin because he stands above the proletariat, knowing what must be done. The essence of bourgeois Marxism is this anti-socialist elitism, dressed up, in the case of Adorno, as philosophical profundity necessary to keep an ineffable truth alive; in the case of Lenin, as strategic profundity required to lead an atheoretical proletariat.

Wernick suggests that "it is a crude misconception to suppose that the Frankfurt School intended its critique of ideology to stir people into action, let alone *en masse*." Though I'm undoubtedly going overboard again, let me simply say that this is *precisely* why the Frankfurt people were bourgeois Marxists, they did *not* try to stir people into action, nor did they revise the theory of class struggle to fit new historical realities. Instead, they enshrined the so-called autonomy of theory as an ingenuous way of justifying their own disengaged philosophizing.

As for Wernick's apparently serious claim that critical theory has "been remarkably successful in the practical goal it ... set itself," namely to survive fascism and to keep alive the dream of freedom, I would guess, at the risk of overstating it, that critical theory has served to influence perhaps 5000 academic leftists. Critical theory is virtually dead in Europe, but in North America it is just beginning to arrive as a normal slot in the academic social science curriculum. To think that a single soul was rescued from the aura of the death camps by reading Adorno shows pitiable naivete.

Finally, Wernick says that I ignore Adorno's and Horkheimer's interests in psychology. My position is merely that they read Freud as the prescient prophet of a totally administered, de-erotized society, in which repression has become overbearingly heavy, while Marcuse reads Freud as pointing to a libidinal core of revolt. The difference between Adorno and Marcuse is that Marcuse believes that surplus repression can be lessened.

### Descent into Pragmatism

I do not reject "the possibility of objective knowledge." I say, following Lukács, Korsch, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty, *et al.*, that there is a subject-object dialectic; objective knowledge is always partly self-knowledge. Wernick inclines to a Leninist reflection-theory, as later remarks will indicate.

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Wernick basically ignores my argument that critical theory failed because it endorsed the thesis of declining subjectivity. My two articles attempt to revive a concept of radical subjectivity which can be the starting point for democratic class struggle. Wernick ignores the problem of subjectivity (and he ignores Marcuse's work in the 1960's) because the introduction of a radical subjectivity would derail Wernick's patent Leninism and it would ground what he terms my "epistemological democracy" and thus undercut vanguardism both on the level of epistemology and politics. I find it very curious that Wernick does not take seriously my analysis of the split between Adorno/Horkheimer and Marcuse over the issue of subjectivity. Wernick smirks that I am "remarkably silent about the extent to which Marcuse ... himself shared Horkheimer's and Adorno's pessimism about the capacity of contemporary individuals to withstand corporatist and consumerist integration." I do, however, note that Marcuse, before *An Essay on Liberation*, and especially in *One-Dimensional Man*, endorsed the declining subjectivity-thesis; my point is that there are two Marcuses, the Frankfurt Marcuse and the Freudian Marcuse who developed the concept of the "new sensibility" on which I build. I take it that Wernick ignored all of this in my article because he had access only to the censored version.

I do *not* say that there is an "objective truth to human nature"; I say that there *is* a human nature, a human essence, humanness. The epistemological question of how best to know human nature does not directly concern me here.

I also do not eschew "theory" if that means, with Wernick, reading society towards the end of deciding how to change it. However my point in the first article was that Marx did not rationalistically "think up" the working class but rather discovered it before his eyes. His dialectical methodology moved between the objective pre-existence of class struggle and the necessity of subjective class consciousness.

### The Fate of Intellectual Culture

This is where Wernick really lives, in "intellectual culture." Only a bourgeois Marxist would accuse my position of being "over-politicized."

Yes, I am a "populist," willing to risk (if not succumb to) "anti-intellectualism" in the interests of destroying the division of labour and its attendant ideology of professionalism. Wernick is obviously pro-intellectual in the same sense Lenin was. He knows objective reality, he engages in "cold, detached" "rational calculation" to manipulate the proletariat. I am more worried about "dictatorship *over* the proletariat" than about slipping too far into North American populism with its non-authoritarian resonances. A bourgeois Marxist believes in:

- (a) objectivism

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- (b) cool, detached rational calculation designed to transmit a "correct" reading of objective reality to a pliant, theoretically backward proletariat
- (c) the autonomy of theory and of "specialized intellectual culture"
- (d) the division of labor, both in the revolutionary movement and in society before *and* after the revolution.

Wernick raises the question (in defense of Adorno and Horkheimer): is intellectual conservatism such a bad thing? For a "Marxist" in a bourgeois society, no, indeed, intellectual conservatism, couched in serious "Marxist scholarship," is a viable *raison d'être*. Wernick is really no Marxist at all but a bourgeois intellectual who sees the world in terms of facts and values, truth and ideology, knowing and doing. He does not know the fire of the dialectic nor the human meaning of socialism; his Marxism is a set of cold, calculating formulae for conquering state power and then for legislating an objective truth. Short of being a modern Bolshevik, Wernick remains ensconced within the academic role — a world in which rational calculation results not in the Siberian camps but in the authoritarianism of left-wing "scholarship."

This kind of scholarship — and this is the main point of my second article on the dialectical sensibility — pretends to be radical when in fact it is deeply conservative (and not in the redeeming sense of offering a creative re-appropriation and transformation of the past but in elevating death over life, the past over the present). It seems to me that this sort of Marxian scholarship violates one of Marx's most interesting and oft-neglected canons of socialist freedom, that the past would no longer dominate the present. Marxian scholarship of the kind Wernick advocates treats the words of the past as inviolable guide-posts on the route towards future truths. I believe that this is deeply un-Marxist, un-socialist, inhuman. A Marxist must himself contribute to loosening the bonds of the past by joining theory and praxis in the context of his own life; Wernick utterly skirts the issue of the socialist transformation of lived experience because, for him, the issue of socialist transformation involves purely structuralist considerations.

Lenin erred because he did not think about how he could relate socialist theory and liberatory praxis in his own life; all of his political sins can be traced to his elitism. Marxian scholarship is the philosophical sublimation of Leninism, as I noted above with respect to Adorno. Marxian scholars like Wernick believe that they can arrive at important truths by reading society objectivistically, failing to see that Marxian truth is not epistemological but practical — that the truth of Marxism is socialism. Socialism is not purely a reality "out there," it is also an interior reality, captured in the way we treat our loved ones, our children, our friends, our work, our play. I said above that I believe that Marcuse's *An Essay on Liberation* is the most important statement

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since Lukács. This is because Marcuse is one of the only Marxists (along with Sartre and Merleau-Ponty) to seriously write about the relationship between the individual and class struggle, while in the process sketching what I call a socialist general will which is the zero-point of non-dominating authority and a non-alienating division of labour. In the *Essay on Liberation* Marcuse argues that the struggling individual is the foundation of all class struggle. He does not reduce socialist transformation to “mere thought” but argues that the only way to achieve a humane socialism is to build upon the infrastructure of the new sensibility.

My articles were initial attempts to sketch possible mediations between this kind of personal sensibility and new forms of class radicalism. Wernick completely misses this point because he does not know what it means to achieve liberation simultaneously on the levels of the sensibility and the collective. Wernick thinks about strategy only in terms of the mechanics of class struggle and not *also* in terms of the necessary emancipatory individuation of this class struggle on the level of lived experience — necessary if the class struggle is to avoid a Leninist resolution. His bourgeois Marxism is precisely what I was attacking in “Dialectical Sensibility II,” where my *bête noir* was the kind of Marxist who engages in the affirmative culture of the surrounding society all the while parading his sober commitment to socialist objectivity.

Unfortunately, that kind of Marxism will never create the broad socialist-populist ideology required to motivate the North American working class. The only hope is to show factory and office workers that their incipient populist critique of centralist bigness and of the authoritarian co-ordination of labour is the foundation of a full-fledged non-authoritarian socialism. I talk about expert/non-expert dualisms because I believe that the average American worker can understand non-authoritarian socialism not in terms of the abstractions of *Capital* (at least not initially) but in terms of struggles for control of the workplace and in terms of a deep-seated resentment of the rigid division of labour. My so-called epistemological democracy is not an end point but a starting point, a way of thinking through mediations between the non-authoritarian North American experience (articulated as populism) and full-blown non-authoritarian socialism.

Coming from the tradition of Lukács’ Hegelian Marxism, I contend that Marxists should be devising new forms of ideological mobilization and not trying, scientistically, to describe the precise contours of objective capitalist reality. My hope is that dialectical sensibility, rooted in epistemological democracy, can be the starting point for a North American Marxism which builds upon the cultural and ideological formation of radical populism. Marxism is the practice of theory, not simply a theory which recommends a practice which stands apart from the theory, as bourgeois Marxists falsely believe. I differ from Wernick precisely where he divests what he calls “ob-

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jective knowledge" of its constitutive linkages with a dynamic subjectivity. Wernick's objectivism is a convenient excuse for continuing to sanction, albeit from within Marxism itself, the domination of the past over the present, and as a consequence, specialist intellectuals over the masses.

Wernick is especially pernicious when he says that dialectical sensibility will lead to Maoist barbarism (if that is what it is). He seems convinced that the proletariat needs socialist philosophers and intellectuals to preserve a rarified "truth"; that, on their own, workers would refuse the rationalism which Wernick so naively ascribes to European bourgeois culture. My position, however, tending towards a Gramsci-like populism here, is that workers possess a kind of lived rationality which will allow them to engage in precisely that multi-dimensional role-playing and merging of mental and manual labor that Marx urged (and not only in his "early" works, as Wernick, in his Althusserian fashion, avers).

Wernick says that I "situate [myself] within the utopian project so dear to the early Marx." What am I utopian about? Amazingly, Wernick finds "utopian" and "irresponsible" my "position that the intelligentsia ultimately has no right to exist as a separate social stratum," either now or in the future. He is correct in his reading of my position. The intelligentsia in the bourgeois sense has no right to exist as a class apart. (Wernick here borrows from Mannheim and Habermas in positing some kind of rationalistic intelligentsia as an agency of vanguardist social reform.) Socialist intellectuality will surely be of the kind that Marx indicated in his metaphor of the free-wheeling fisherman-hunter-critic, able to move among roles without gaining the life long imprint of any one role. Wernick says that this is "early Marx." It is all of Marx and it is Western Marxism, too, in the styles of Lukács, Sartre, Gramsci and Marcuse.

Does he deny the vision of non-alienated work, of self-creative praxis, rooted both in mind and body projects? When I say intellectuality in the second article, I mean any praxis which involves thought (are there any which do not?). A philosophical Leninist would conveniently say that the workers need "truth from without" — the basic axiomatic difference between Marx (early and late) and Lenin.

Wernick is a bourgeois Marxist because he believes in a "specialized intellectual culture" — a thoroughly revealing term — which is merely philosophical vanguardism justified on the grounds of revolutionary and cultural necessity. Yes, the mental-manual division of labour is "necessarily oppressive and hierarchical." I am a Marxist and I believe that unless we get rid of specialized intellectual culture today (along with the host of other alienated narrow roles we inhabit) the socialist future will be as fully authoritarian as the present. If Wernick does not believe this, he utterly misses the dialectic between the transformation of sensibility and the transformation of class structure, the most crucial aspect of Lukács' Hegelian Marxism and Marcuse's

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Freudian Marxism. Again, what Wernick wants is to chase down socialist "truth," being a specialized "intellectual," while others do the dirty work. He is fundamentally afraid that socialism would liberate him, too.

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