Introduction:
The Topography of Western Marxism

There are no easy ways to map the rugged and shifting terrain of the intellectual territory known as Western Marxism. Indeed, its very boundaries and most prominent features have themselves been the source of heated dispute.¹ Most commentators have followed the lead of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who in his 1955 study Adventures of the Dialectic popularized the term to designate the body of thought generated thirty-two years earlier by Georg Lukács’ heterodox masterpiece, History and Class Consciousness.² For Merleau-Ponty and those who adopted his usage, Western

1. Much of the controversy was sparked by Perry Anderson’s Considerations on Western Marxism (London, 1976). See, for example, the critical reviews by Jeffrey Herf in Socialist Revolution 7:5 (September–October 1977); Richard D. Wolff in Monthly Review 30:4 (September 1978); and Paul Piccone in Telos 30 (Winter 1976–77). See also my response to Piccone in Telos 32 (Summer 1977) and the rebuttal by Piccone and Andrew Arato in the same issue. With all of the confusion over its meaning, it is not surprising to find Stanley Aronowitz conclude in his recent book, The Crisis in Historical Materialism: Class, Politics and Culture in Marxist Theory (New York, 1981):

The term “Western” Marxism is a signifier that connotes no particular body of doctrine. Its historical function has been linked to the anti-Leninist movements of this century both as the object of accusation and, less often, a self-description of a melange of dissenters. Its theoretical status is not only ambiguous, it is problematic. (p. xiii)

An even clearer expression of uncertainty over the term’s meaning appears in an article by Toni Long, “Marx and Western Marxism in the 1970s,” Berkeley Journal of Sociology 24 (1980), where the author uses “Western Marxism” to include figures like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida with the explanation:

I shall use “Western Marxism” to refer to certain self-proclaimed Marxists as well as certain self-proclaimed non-Marxists since Lukács who have in some important way taken up the challenge of Marx by probing the strengths and weaknesses of his theory from the perspective of the possibility of human emancipation. (p. 57)

Marxism was thus identified solely with a subterranean tradition of humanist, subjectivist and undogmatic Marxism that was the negation of its official Soviet (or Eastern) counterpart. The latter had been turned into a doctrinaire ideology of legitimation by a tyrannical regime, whereas Western Marxism, nowhere in power, had retained the libertarian, emancipatory hopes of the socialist tradition.

In its Merleau-Pontyan version, the reason Western Marxism had preserved those hopes lay in its challenge to the scientific self-understanding of its orthodox rivals. Rather than trying to ape the methods of bourgeois science, Western Marxism recognized its true origins in the tradition of philosophical critique that began with Kant and German Idealism. In the vivid language of one of its most celebrated founders, Antonio Gramsci, Western Marxism demanded a revolution “against Capital,” that is, against the false belief that objective economic laws would automatically bring about the collapse of capitalism and the victory of the proletariat. Philosophical critique showed instead that radical change could come only when human action overthrew the man-made structures oppressing mankind.

Western Marxism, in this reading, was therefore opposed not only to the fatalistic economism of the Second International, but also to the voluntarist vanguardism of the Third. In contrast to both, it insisted that true praxis was a collective expression of self-emancipation involving all of mankind. The reawakening of the potential for such a collective subject was thus a central preoccupation of the Western Marxists who represented what another early exponent, Ernst Bloch, liked to call the “warm” rather than “cold” current of socialism.

Because Lukács, Gramsci, Bloch and others in the Western Marxist camp insisted on the importance of Marx’s debt to Hegel, Western Marx-

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with intro. Fred Halliday (New York and London, 1970), pp. 119–20. But it was not until Merleau-Ponty’s work that the term became widely used. Here, too, there was some controversy over its meaning. See, for example, Raymond Aron, Marxism and the Existentialists, trans. Helen Weaver et al. (New York, 1969), p. 64, where it is claimed that “Western Marxism was in fact the Marxism of the Second International.”

3. For an identification of Western Marxism exclusively with Critical rather than Scientific Marxism, see Alvin W. Gouldner, The Two Marxisms: Contradictions and Anomalies in the Development of Theory (New York, 1980); for a critique of some of the problems with this identification, see Martin Jay, “For Gouldner: Reflections on an Outlaw Marxist,” Theory and Society 11:6 (November 1982).

4. Antonio Gramsci, “The Revolution Against Capital” in History, Philosophy and Culture in the Young Gramsci, eds. Pedro Cavalcanti and Paul Picone (St. Louis, 1975). Gramsci, it should be noted, was not contrasting “Western” and “Eastern” Marxism in this essay, which in fact is about the Bolshevik Revolution. His real target was the political quietism of the Second International.
ism in this view has often been equated with Hegelian Marxism. The recovery of Marx's early writings in the late 1920s and the subsequent publication of the *Grundrisse* a generation later helped strengthen this equation, as they demonstrated for many that Marx had indeed been what Lukács and the others had said he was: a radical Hegelian. Accordingly, such terms as alienation, mediation, objectification, and reification were understood to have a special place in the lexicon of Western Marxism. Culture, defined both widely as the realm of everyday life and narrowly as man's most noble artistic and intellectual achievements, was also a central concern of the tradition, which tended as a result to neglect the economy and, at times, politics. Western Marxism, therefore, meant a Marxism that was far more dialectical than materialist, at least as those terms were traditionally understood.

Defined in this way, Western Marxism was created by a loose circle of theorists who took their cue from Lukács and the other founding fathers of the immediate post–World War I era, Antonio Gramsci, Karl Korsch and Ernst Bloch. Included in their number were the members of the Frankfurt School, notably Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Leo Lowenthal and Walter Benjamin; the French Hegelian Marxists Henri Lefebvre and Lucien Goldmann; and the existentialist Marxists, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Certain other figures were frequently admitted to their ranks, in particular Bertolt Brecht, Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm, the Council Communists in Holland, the *Arguments* group in France, and second-generation Frankfurt School members like Jürgen Habermas and Alfred Schmidt. And still others like Alfred Sohn-Rethel, Leo Kofler, Franz Jakubowsky, Claude Lefort and Cornelius Castoriadis were sometimes candidates for inclusion.

This traditional conception of Western Marxism has generally been held by both its friends and enemies.\(^5\) Or at least it was until the publication of Perry Anderson's *Considerations on Western Marxism* in 1976.\(^6\) For Anderson, who writes from an Anglo-Trotskyist perspective outside the tradition, Western Marxism should also include the anti-Hegelian critics of Marxist Humanism who came to prominence in Italy and France after World War II, the schools of Galvano Della Volpe and Louis Althusser. Rather than contending that critical and scientific Marxists are two sep-

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rate breeds, one calling for a revolution against *Capital* and the other defending its continued relevance, Anderson argues that certain shared characteristics allow them to be placed roughly in a common camp.

Although one might justifiably question Anderson's choice of precisely who belongs to this enlarged camp—he ignores, for example, Bloch, Reich and Habermas, as well as all English Marxists—his general point does seem to be well taken. Far too much has occurred both in theory and in practice since 1955 to permit us to remain content with Merleau-Ponty's initial definition. To help us decide who should be included under the rubric now, Wittgenstein's notion of "family resemblances" tells us that no perfectly uniform set of characteristics need be found to identify members of a collective entity. Insofar as both neo-Hegelians and anti-Hegelians share certain other traits that cut across their antagonism over Marx's debt to German Idealism, they can be understood as cousins, if not brothers, in an extended family. When compared with other Marxist traditions, such as Social Democracy, Austro-Marxism, Stalinism, Trotskyism or Maoism, these commonalities become more obvious. In acknowledging them, we can discern certain unexpected alliances that cut across the boundary determined solely by their attitudes toward Hegel or humanism. We will also avoid the petty sectarianism of those who jealously guard the purity of their version of the tradition against all the rest.

The most obvious common denominator among Western Marxists is that all were born or came of intellectual age in continental Western Europe. This sets them apart from the generation of Marxist intellectuals maturing directly before World War I, typified by Lenin, Luxemburg, Hilferding, Bukharin, Trotsky, and Bauer, who had less direct contact with Western European intellectual traditions. Apparent exceptions, such as Lukács, born in Hungary, and Goldmann, originally from Rumania,

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7. The exclusion of English Marxists like Maurice Dobb, Christopher Caudwell, Maurice Cornforth, Eric Hobsbawm, Christopher Hill and Raymond Williams is a source of particular chagrin to Richard Wolff in his review of Anderson in *Monthly Review* 30:4 (p. 56). Insofar as the introduction of continental thought to England by Anderson and his *New Left Review* colleagues was intended as, and understood by its targets to be, a corrective to the insularity of British Marxism, it is appropriate to distinguish Western from Anglo-Marxism, at least until the 1970s. The ongoing polemic between Anderson and E. P. Thompson demonstrates many of the tensions between the two traditions. See E. P. Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays* (New York, 1978) and Perry Anderson, *Arguments Within English Marxism* (London, 1980).

One very important distinction between continental and English Marxism was, in fact, the far greater importance accorded by the former to the concept of totality. Aside from several suggestive references to culture as a "whole way of life" in the early work of Williams, totality did not really enter the English debate until the Althusserian wave of the 1970s. Many English Marxists were historians with that discipline's characteristic distaste for generalizing concepts.
can be included by virtue of the German and French contexts in which they matured intellectually. Although the influence of Hungarian intellectuals, such as the poet Endre Ady and the syndicalist Ervin Szabó, can be detected on the early Lukács, his most formative philosophical experiences occurred in Heidelberg in the 1910s. And even though he spent most of his later life in Budapest and Moscow, the impact of his work was felt far more keenly in Western than in Eastern Europe. As for Goldmann, his most significant intellectual training took place in Paris and Geneva, not the Bucharest which he left when he was only twenty. A third possible exception to the rule, Louis Althusser, was born in Algeria, but he was schooled in Marseilles and Paris. The other major Western Marxists, both Hegelian and anti-Hegelian, were born and intellectually nurtured in France, Italy, and Germany, although a number came to spend several years in American exile during the fascist era. (Significantly, of those forced to emigrate only Lukács went eastward.)

The impact of that period combined with subsequent translations of major works meant that American outposts of Western Marxism had developed by the 1960s. But on the whole, their occupants merely absorbed and adapted ideas that had been developed in Europe over the previous half century. A similar situation prevailed in England, where the New Left Review was the major conduit of continental ideas. The same derivative status may be accorded the reception of Western Marxist ideas in the countries under Soviet control after the Second World War. Although such thinkers as the Polish philosopher Leszek Kolakowski (during his Marxist Humanist phase) and the Czech philosopher Karel Kosík were certainly important in their own right, their work was nonetheless built upon the earlier thought of Western Marxists, as was that of the Yugoslav theoreticians published in the journal Praxis.8

Western Marxism also earned its name through the doggedly consistent Eurocentrism of most of its adherents, both Hegelian and anti-Hegelian. Walter Benjamin's suicide on the brink of his departure from Europe for America in 1940 may be seen as an idiosyncratically extreme expression of that inclination. But many of those who did emigrate

8. The concept of totality was particularly important in the work of Kosík. See especially Karel Kosík, Dialectics of the Concrete: A Study on Problems of Man and World, trans. Karel Kovanda with James Schmidt (Dordrecht, 1976). It was also frequently used by contributors to Praxis. See the discussion in Gerson S. Sher, Praxis: Marxist Criticism and Dissent in Socialist Yugoslavia (London, 1977), p. 84f. One should also mention the so-called Budapest School that developed around Lukács in his later years, the members of which, in most cases, were forced into exile after his death. Its most notable figures are Ágnes Heller, Ferenc Fehér, György Márkus, Maria Márikus, Mihály Vajda and András Hegedűs. As would be expected, the concept of totality often played a key role in their work.
to America—Horkheimer, Adorno, Bloch, Brecht—returned home at the first opportunity.

Although impressed and troubled by the example of the Russian Revolution, whose implications they heatedly debated for decades, the Western Marxists remained true to Marx’s expectation that a genuine socialist revolution could succeed only in the most advanced capitalist societies. If occasionally finding something to praise in the Chinese Revolution, they rarely derived anything of real theoretical substance from the thoughts of its revered leader. And even though they staunchly supported the process of decolonization, few believed global revolution could be led by the emerging Third World.

Geographically, then, Western Marxism can be located in continental Western Europe, even though certain of its members spent considerable amounts of time elsewhere. Temporally, the pattern is somewhat more complicated. Anderson suggests that it may be divided into two or possibly three generations: those born in the fifteen years before the turn of the century, who were radicalized by the First World War and its aftermath—Lukács (b. 1885), Bloch (b. 1885), Korsch (b. 1886), Gramsci (b. 1891), Benjamin (b. 1892), Horkheimer (b. 1895), Reich (b. 1897), Brecht (b. 1898) and Marcuse (b. 1898); those born after 1900 and radicalized in the interwar period or during the Second World War—Lowenthal (b. 1900), Lefebvre (b. 1901), Adorno (b. 1903), Sartre (b. 1905), Merleau-Ponty (b. 1908), Goldmann (b. 1913), and Althusser (b. 1918); and those born after the First World War and whose political education came after the Second—Colletti (b. 1924) and Habermas (b. 1929). The only major exception to this pattern is Della Volpe, who was born in 1897 but became a Marxist only near the end of World War II. As might be expected, each generation tended to concentrate on the different issues central to their life histories, such as the Bolshevik Revolution, the rise of Fascism, or the political significance of the Resistance. Similarly, each was open to influences from non-Marxist schools of thought such as psychoanalysis, existentialism, and structuralism, according to the coincidence of those competing systems with their own intellectual development.

One of the generalizations Anderson attempts to make about generational uniformity is that the earliest group tended to find a closer link between its theory and political practice than the later ones. From the eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach onwards Marxism has, of course, been preoccupied with the necessity of forging that link. During the era of the Second Interna-

9. The only exception to this generalization was Althusser. See For Marx, trans. Ben Brewster (New York, 1970).
tional, many Marxists thought they had discovered the means to do so, although of course there were serious clashes over the organizational and tactical form which theoretically directed practice was to take. Western Marxism, like Leninism, grew out of a disillusionment with the results of the Second International’s theory-practice nexus. But whereas Leninism tended to change its practice without seriously questioning the theory it had inherited, Western Marxism understood the need to revise both. For while recognizing that there had indeed been a connection between theory and practice before 1914, the Western Marxists argued that it was a most unfortunate one. The scientific, determinist economic theory of Engels, Kautsky, Plekhanov et al. had contributed to the bureaucratic, non-revolutionary, and ultimately impotent politics of the Second International’s mass parties, most notably the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD). In fact, if there is anything on which Western Marxists, neo-Hegelian and anti-Hegelian alike, completely agreed, it is the utter repudiation of the legacy of the Second International. Only towards the work of Rosa Luxemburg, whose political radicalism seemed more attractive than her theoretical orthodoxy, did they make an exception.

Less uniform was their response to the new attempts to unify theory and practice after World War I, when the bureaucratic model of the Second International was discredited. Schematically put, these attempts were reducible to the Bolshevist model of small, disciplined vanguard parties and the alternative, more “leftist” council-communist model of soviets or Räte. Initially, it seemed to some in the first generation that there was no real contradiction between the two, but ultimately a choice had to be made. A few like Lukács and, somewhat less decisively, Gramsci chose the party; others like Korsch opted for the councils, even though they realized the impracticality of their choice in the short run. In the subsequent generations, fewer were drawn to the Leninist alternative, although at times Althusser, Della Volpe, Lefebvre and Colletti found it enticing. The majority were attracted to more libertarian modes of political activism like the councils out of a sober realization that the Soviet Union’s sorry history had compromised Leninism irreparably. In some cases, this insistence on a Marxism that would not surrender its theoretical purity and

10. For a discussion of the importance of the councils in the origins of Western Marxism, see Russell Jacoby, *Dialectic of Defeat: Contours of Western Marxism* (Cambridge, 1981). Although the main theoretician of Council Communism, Anton Pannekoek, seems to have derived much of his inspiration from the vulgar Marxist philosophy of Joseph Dietzgen, he was nonetheless hostile to crude materialism in ways that have earned him a tentative comparison with the early Western Marxists. See the discussions in Serge Bricianer, *Pannekoek and the Workers’ Councils*, intro. John Gerber, trans. Malachy Carroll (St. Louis, 1978); and D.A. Smart, ed., *Pannekoek and Gorter’s Marxism* (London, 1978).
high aspirations meant a tenacious, even desperate search for historical “subjects” who would regain the momentum lost when the councils were defeated after the First World War. The so-called “existentialist Marxists” in France and Marcuse in America thought they found a possible surrogate in the counter-cultural student movement of the late 1960s, but they came to recognize the prematurity of their optimism. Others such as Goldmann sought an alternative in the “new working class” of technicians and white collar workers defined by Serge Mallet and André Gorz in France and Victor Foa and Bruno Trentin in Italy. Still others, primarily Adorno and Horkheimer, retreated from the hope that such a subject could be discovered in the near future and fell back on a nuanced defense of theory as itself a form of non-resigned practice.

However they may have “resolved” their dilemma, Western Marxists rarely, if ever, deluded themselves into believing that theirs was a time in which the unity of theory and practice was easily achieved. In fact, after the early 1920s Western Marxism was marked by a growing pessimism. Although moments of renewed hope appeared during the Resistance era and in the late 1960s, by and large Western Marxism never regained the confidence characteristic of its most utopian period, after the end of World War I. It experienced instead what one recent commentator has called a “dialectic of defeat.”

None of its major figures, however, underwent the kind of extreme “God that failed” disillusionment so frequent among more orthodox Communist defectors. Except for the former Althusserians who became leaders of the “New Philosophy” in France after 1975, and perhaps the later Horkheimer, Western Marxists did not move radically to the right. Instead, they directed a great deal of their intellectual energy towards investigating the means by which advanced capitalism prevented the unity of theory and practice from being achieved. The critical role of culture in this process was affirmed as it could not have been during the era of the Second International, when the primacy of the economy was an unchallenged article of faith. Having originally come to Marxism in the hope that it would address the crisis in bourgeois culture, many Western Marxists continued to be preoccupied with cultural questions.

Marxist aesthetics, in fact, came of age during the Western Marxist era in the writings of Lukács, Brecht, Bloch, the Frankfurt School, Benjamin, Sartre, Goldmann, Della Volpe, and Althusser. Their work went well be-

11. Jacoby, Dialectic of Defeat, which sets out to challenge “the ethos of success that has drained off the critical impulse of Marxism” and to “salvage a Western Marxism that rarely knew victory” (p. 4).
yond the scattered observations of Marx and Engels\textsuperscript{12} on cultural questions, and was a major advance over the reductionist theories of Plekhanov, Mehring and others in the Second International. If one adds the name of Raymond Williams,\textsuperscript{13} perhaps the only English Marxist able to hold his own with his continental peers, it can be plausibly argued that Western Marxism has enriched cultural theory more than economic or political theory. Hegelian and non-Hegelian Marxists alike have recognized that the problem of "cultural hegemony," as Gramsci called it, was key to understanding the staying power of capitalism. Furthermore, many understood that a purely "scientific" theory gives little indication of the potential advantages of socialism beyond the abolition of economic exploitation.

In its efforts to understand the resilience of capitalism, Western Marxism was also generally open to psychological explanations of the unexpected turns taken by advanced capitalist society, in particular the advent of Fascism in the interwar period. Although a few of the older generation, most notably Lukács and Korsch, remained absolutely anti-psychological, Western Marxists tended to take the challenge of Freud and his successors very seriously. Some added forms of psychological estrangement to the other expressions of alienation in the experience of everyday life. Others argued that emancipatory praxis had to include a form of collective, and perhaps even individual, radical therapy. Still others, who were less impressed by the direct therapeutic benefits of psychology, claimed that psychoanalysis could be used on a purely theoretical level to enrich Marxism's sensitivity to the subtle nature of human needs and gratification. Yet another group teased out the linguistic implications of Freudian theory to bring to life an entire dimension of Marxian hitherto underdeveloped; even anti-subjectivist theorists such as Althusser were able to find in Freud an inspiration for their work. Those who felt Freud was insufficient in certain ways found Gestalt psychology or Piaget's genetic structuralism useful instead.

Western Marxism's openness to psychology in general and psychoanalysis in particular was, in fact, only one manifestation of its essential readiness to draw on non-Marxist intellectual currents to make up de-

\textsuperscript{12} For a selection of their thoughts on aesthetics, see Marx and Engels on Literature and Art, ed. Lee Baxandall and Stefan Morawski, intro. Lee Baxandall (St. Louis, 1973).

\textsuperscript{13} For a recent retrospective analysis of Williams' remarkable career, see the interviews he gave the New Left Review in Politics and Letters (London, 1979). One of his former students and a frequent critic, Terry Eagleton, might also be included in the list of major Western Marxist aestheticians. Or at least so Eagleton confidently tells us. See his Walter Benjamin: Or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism (London, 1981), p. 96. For an analysis of some of the problems in both Williams and Eagleton, see Catherine Gallagher, "The New Materialism in Marxist Aesthetics," Theory and Society 9:4 (July 1980).
ficiencies (or develop incipient leads) in the inheritance from the nineteenth century. This process, to be sure, had already begun during the Second International with the Revisionists' attempt to link Marx and Kant, and with Plekhanov's interest in Spinoza and Kautsky's in Darwin, but only after 1918 did the practice become widespread. The result was a series of adjectival Marxisms—existentialist, phenomenological, structuralist, Hegelian, even Schopenhauerian—which paralleled on a theoretical level the proliferation of parties and sects on a practical one. Those engaged in one or another of these cross-fertilizations defended their position as a synthetic enrichment which helped Marxism to adjust to the changed circumstances of the modern world. To their opponents, however, the results were a feeble eclecticism that defiled the essential validity of Marx's teaching.\(^{14}\) As early as Lukács' reproach to Bloch in *History and Class Consciousness*, that Marxism did not need the supplement of religious utopianism,\(^ {15}\) some Western Marxists looked askance at the synthesizing efforts of their peers. Indeed, in general Western Marxists have been uncharitable towards their fellows, if they deigned to notice them at all. Displaying in classic form what Freud once called the narcissism of small differences, Western Marxists frequently maligned and deprecated each other, often after misrepresenting the positions they attacked.\(^{16}\) Potential allies were thus lost in the eagerness for theoretical correctness, a failing that is still manifest in the assertion of absolute opposition between Critical and Scientific Marxism.

The reverse side of this internecine quarreling has been the enormous creative fecundity of the tradition, which sharply sets it apart from its orthodox Marxist or Marxist–Leninist opponents. Western Marxism has been open and experimental in a way that is not comparable with anything in this century except perhaps aesthetic modernism, which also exploded in a whirl of movements and counter-movements. Lacking the means to impose intellectual conformity, the various subcurrents of Western Marxism have had to coexist uneasily and engage, if often indirectly, in a critical dialogue that has been sadly absent in the institutionalized socialist world.

To compare Western Marxism with aesthetic modernism is to draw attention to yet another characteristic of its adherents. All were members

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14. This charge was hurled, for example, by the Althusserian Göran Therborn against Habermas. See his "Jürgen Habermas: A New Eclecticism" in *New Left Review* 67 (May–June 1971).


16. A prime example of this tendency can be found in Colletti's diatribes against the Frankfurt School, which will be discussed in Chapter 14.
of an intellectual avant-garde with highly ambivalent relations to the majority of their fellow men, for whom they nonetheless often claimed to speak. Marcuse’s description of Goldmann could easily be extended to others in the tradition: “a radical intellectual who was proud to be an intellectual—without the slightest inferiority complex, so widespread among the New Left, of being a revolutionary and not being a worker. To him, intellect was by its nature revolutionary.” Here they were set apart not only from the more anti-intellectual elements in the New Left, but also from the organized socialist parties whose characteristic attitude towards intellectuals was one of suspicion and mistrust. Whatever their political position, Western Marxists were united in their distaste for “vulgar Marxism,” the crude ideology of uneducated spokesmen for the oppressed. Here Lenin’s assessment of the trade-union, or “economistic,” consciousness of the majority of the working class was tacitly accepted, although his solution of bringing revolutionary class consciousness from without, which had been foreshadowed by Kautsky, often was not. Indeed, one might say that the example of a tightly disciplined vanguard party, in which intellectuals were compelled to curb their independence, haunted Western Marxists to the extent that many came to equate any party allegiance with the sacrifice of critical power.

And yet, the elitist character of the Leninist party was unwittingly duplicated in the often elitist nature of their work. Rather than attempt to present their theories in a manner easily accessible to uneducated minds, they almost invariably wrote in a style whose complexity defied popular comprehension. There could be no easy “ABC of Marxism” for the Western Marxists, as there had been for Soviet ideologues like Bukharin, because popularization risked the dilution, if not perversion, of meaning.


18. The tension between workers and intellectuals in the socialist movement can be seen as early as the 1840s and Marx’s battles with the tailor, Wilhelm Weitling. Marx’s frustrations at his anti-intellectual opponents led him to exclaim impatiently: “Ignorance never yet helped anybody!” For a description of the clash, see David McLellan, Karl Marx: His Life and Thought (London, 1973), p. 155, where Paul Annenkov’s reminiscences are quoted at length. The tension between intellectuals and workers in the socialist movement has been thematically developed in the work of Alvin Gouldner, most notably in The Two Marxisms where he argues that behind “the unity of theory and practice” lies the putative alliance of theorists and the masses.

19. Perhaps the only major Western Marxist to attempt a popular introduction to Marxism was Karl Korsch, whose Karl Marx, 2nd ed. (New York, 1963) was designed to spell out the tenets of Marxism in a reasonably accessible form. Ironically, at the same time as the book first appeared in 1938, Korsch was voicing reservations about the validity of many of the same principles he presented without qualification for his popular audience. See the discussion in Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory, ed. with intro. by Douglas Kellner (Austin, 1977), p. 169.
as well as the danger of premature co-optation. In general they spoke to a relatively circumscribed audience of intellectuals, or to a mass public yet to be created. Theirs was a democracy of the future, not the present. As a result, they were often pilloried for their elitism, an accusation leveled as early as the Comintern's denunciation of the "professorial" Marxism of Lukács and Korsch in 1924. On occasion this reproach led to bouts of self-criticism, such as Lukács' condemnation of his *History and Class Consciousness* and Althusser's repudiation of his early "theoreticist deviation," or somewhat less frequently to attempts at direct communication with the masses, most notably in Brecht's *Lehrstücke* (didactic plays) and Reich's Sex-Pol clinics. But by and large, Western Marxists were content to point out that defiance of the status quo could be expressed only in terms not easily absorbed and neutralized by current popular discourse.

Although Gramsci had called for a class of "organic intellectuals" growing out of the working class, the Western Marxists, with the sole exception of Gramsci himself, came from educated, relatively comfortable middle-class families. Despite Benjamin's insight into the economic proletarianization of the writer under capitalism, they never truly merged into the class for whom they spoke. Although they scorned such concepts as Karl Mannheim's "free-floating intelligentsia," they often came to resemble the model despite themselves. For all their efforts to find the proper role for the radical intellectual—party militant, fellow-traveler, critical outsider, etc.—the results were often deeply unsatisfactory. Indeed, if one had to select one major characteristic that set Western Marxists apart from their rivals, it would have to be their increasing isolation from mass politics.

Their "inorganic" relation to those for whom they spoke was reflected not only in the hermeticism of the way in which they spoke, but also and perhaps more fundamentally in one of the major terms of their discourse. That term, "totality," had a special place in the lexicon of all Western Marxists. In privileging it as they did, they betrayed their unmistakable status as intellectuals: throughout modern history, only "men of ideas" have combined the time (and economic support) to reflect on matters beyond their immediate material concerns with the hubris to believe they might know the whole of reality. Often only marginally related to their

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class of social origin, frequently tending to be cosmopolitan rather than provincial in their loyalties, intellectuals have rarely been reluctant to impute to themselves a universal function in society. Along with this self-image has gone a willingness to assume a totalistic perspective and speak for all members of the relevant whole, whether it be local, national, or global. In fact, as Alvin Gouldner has remarked,

It is not only that intellectuals can take the standpoint of the social “whole,” by reason of their structural position or special culture; intellectuals often occupy social roles and have had educations that induce them to define themselves as “representatives” of the larger society or nation, or of the historical or native tradition of the group. Teachers and clerks are often educated to define themselves as having a responsibility to their group as a whole. However “false” such a consciousness may be, it is often real in its consequences, inducing some intellectuals to accept responsibility for and obligation to cultural symbols and social structures that unite the group as a whole.  

From the seventeenth-century “Revolution of the Saints” in England through the eighteenth-century Jacobins to the modern intellectual elites who led the Russian Revolution and subsequent upheavals in the Third World, revolutionary intellectuals in particular have been motivated by a totalistic imagination normally absent among more self-interested and short-sighted men. In Nietzsche’s pungent phrase, they have been the “knights of totality,” arrogating to themselves a teleological mission to speak for the whole. Even Marx and Engels justified themselves in these terms when they wrote in The Communist Manifesto that “a portion of the bourgeoisie goes over to the proletariat; and in particular a portion of the bourgeois ideologists, who have raised themselves to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole.”

A totalistic stance has not, of course, had only revolutionary political implications. Before modern times, religious elites were spokesmen for a holism that had profoundly conservative implications. More recently, there have been mandarinate whose claim to speak for their society also affirmed its present status, a salient example being the bureaucratically entrenched Bildungsbürgertum (cultural bourgeoisie) in Germany whose

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23. Quoted in Konrád and Szélényi without a specific citation, p. 134.

fortunes have been traced by Fritz Ringer.\textsuperscript{25} In our century, holistic perspectives of a non-radical kind have been developed by a wide range of thinkers including Karl Mannheim, Othmar Spann, Talcott Parsons, and the adherents of such movements as structuralism, Gestalt psychology, and systems theory. The celebrated claim made by Lukács in \textit{History and Class Consciousness},\textsuperscript{26} that Marxism is differentiated from bourgeois thought by its adoption of the point of view of totality, is thus on the face of it untrue.

But by and large it is correct to say that the issue of totality has been at the center of the Marxist, or at least Western Marxist, debate as it has not been with bourgeois thought, especially in its positivist, neo-Kantian or existentialist guises. Possibly because of their marginal relation both to the class of their origin and the class to which they gravitated, the intellectuals in the Western Marxist tradition were particularly prone to think holistically. But if collectively drawn to the concept of totality, they were by no means unified in their understanding of its meaning or in their evaluation of its merits. Indeed, it might be said that the major subterranean quarrel of this subterranean tradition has been waged over this concept's implications. By forcing that quarrel to surface, through examining representative figures in the tradition, we can discern certain patterns that would otherwise be obscured if, for example, we remained tied to obvious dichotomies such as those between Hegelian and anti-Hegelian or Scientific and Critical Western Marxisms. Indeed, we might argue that by spelling out the various meanings of totality and investigating their implications for other aspects of Marxist theory, we can fruitfully make sense of the tradition in new and revealing ways. Or, to put it in the terms of our initial metaphor, it is to the concept of totality that we can look for a compass to help us traverse the vast and uncharted intellectual territory that is Western Marxism.

It is, to be sure, not the only compass that we might use, for although totality has been of enormous importance for Western Marxists, the totality of their work cannot be reduced to it alone. Other key concepts such as praxis, subjectivity, or dialectics might also be explored profitably by historians of the tradition. But again, each of these taken in isolation would not be sufficient to give us a complete view of its topography. And even if we could somehow work our way through complicated analyses of how all of these key terms were used by the major Western Marxists, it is by no means certain that they would then come together in a grand, coherent synthesis.


\textsuperscript{26} Lukács, \textit{History and Class Consciousness}, p. 27.
Moreover, we are still too close to the tradition, which is by no means at its end, to attempt such a conclusive totalization. As will become evident later in the text, one of the most frequent points of contention among holistic thinkers is whether or not epistemological totalization can occur solely in retrospect. For those who so argue, the dusk of Western Marxism has by no means yet fallen, and thus Minerva's omniscient owl must remain in its nest. Pace Perry Anderson, it is too early to offer a "historical balance sheet" of the movement as a whole. In Imre Lakatos' terms, Western Marxism is still a progressive rather than degenerating research program.

Consequently, it would be inappropriate for the structure of this study to assume a totalistic form of the kind, say, employed by M. H. Abrams in his *Natural Supernaturalism*, a history of an earlier period in which totality was a central issue. Abrams' narrative ends where it begins, and thus mimics the unity—disunity—unity pattern whose development in the Romantic era he traces. Besides prematurely terminating the still open-ended history of Western Marxism, employing such an approach here would also mean subtly accepting one of the major holistic schemes of the Western Marxists, but by no means the only one.

Inevitably, any work of scholarship begins somewhere and ends somewhere and thus presents a sense of closure and completion. But as we have recently come to appreciate, no text is isolated from its intertextual context, a context which differs for the writer and each of his readers, however much overlapping may occur. If this is true for works of art, to which the quality of totality has been often ascribed, it is even more so for works of scholarship, especially those that enter into an ongoing theoretical dialogue. Although written by a historian, this study does not aspire to the status of a "definitive" work on a past phenomenon, foreclosing all further discussion of the issues it treats; it is aimed instead at making a contribution to the still-lively debate on those issues.

Although that debate is taking place primarily among Marxists, the contributions of non-Marxist thinkers to our understanding of holism cannot be dismissed. As has been argued, Western Marxism derived much of its strength from its non-doctrinaire openness to stimuli from without. Accordingly, this study will not presume that Marxism is itself