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Marxism of, by, and for the People: Karl Korsch and the Problem of Worker Education

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*This article argues for the importance of worker education for understanding the intellectual history of Marxism. It examines the work of the early Western Marxist Karl Korsch, who was deeply engaged in that project, showing that his most famous text, 1923's *Marxism and Philosophy*, can be read as a reflection on its problems and goals, especially the demand that the theory taught to the workers should “express” their life experience and struggle. The article ends with a discussion of the way in which the project of worker education can help us think through the geographical specificities of Marxism. In adjusting the pedagogical project to “express” new populations, especially in countries without a large industrial working class, intellectuals and party leaders entertained broad revisions to Marxist theory.*

The *Quintessenz des Marxismus* (Quintessence of Marxism) is a small, twenty-four-page pamphlet, printed on cheap paper that today crumbles at the touch. It appeared in early 1922 under the imprint of the German Communist Party, Viva, and was priced to win a broad readership; a copy cost four marks, or around a dollar in today's prices.¹ Intended as an introductory guide to Marxism, the pamphlet was recommended for small reading groups, as well as for individual workers seeking to teach themselves. It is organized into thirty-seven questions and short answers, which, the preface recommended, could be discussed over six meetings of two hours.

Having presented the political goals of Marxism, the pamphlet poses the sixth question: “According to the materialist conception of society, how do the various components of human society fit together?” As an answer, it offers the chart in [Figure 1](#). The figure illustrates the argument that the “base” (*Unterbau*) or economic order is the ultimate “foundation” (*Grundlage*) of the various forms of the “superstructure” (*Überbau*), from institutions like the family and state, through educational organizations like church, schools, and voluntary groups, which affect law, customs, and habits. At the pinnacle of this order, though not in terms of importance and influence, are the “ideas in human heads.”

¹See the advertisement on the back cover of *Die Internationale* 4/21 (1922). “The price has been set as low as possible and therefore the widest distribution of this text is possible.”

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Graphische Darstellung der menschlichen Gesellschaft.

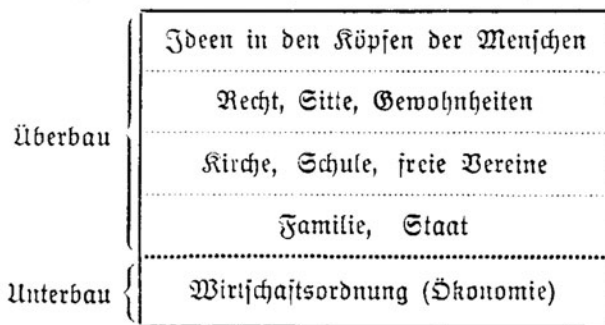


Figure 1. Karl Korsch, *Quintessenz des Marxismus: Eine gemeinverständliche Darlegung* (Berlin, 1922), 6.

The figure, the only one in the pamphlet, occupies a significant place in its argumentative structure. It opens an extended section, which explains why the political goals the pamphlet laid out at the beginning could not be dismissed as utopian dreaming; they were grounded in the objective development of society. In dividing base from superstructure, the figure justified the decision to focus on the former to make this case. The economic order could explain the exploitation central to capitalist society (questions 8–23), and it was the source of the contradictions (questions 24–30) that would lead to that society’s “necessary” collapse (questions 31–7). The elements of the “superstructure” never made it back into the argument.²

In privileging the determining power of the economy and neglecting “superstructural” elements, the *Quintessenz* might call to mind what Western Marxists like Georg Lukács, Karl Korsch, and Antonio Gramsci derided as “vulgar Marxism.” In fact, in its details the figure recalls Korsch’s most pointed criticism of this type of thinking in his almost contemporaneous book *Marxism and Philosophy* (1923). With “only a slight caricature,” Korsch asserted, we can say that “for vulgar Marxism there are *three degrees of reality*: (1) the economy, which in the last instance is the only objective and totally nonideological reality; (2) Law and the State which are already somewhat less real because clad in ideology, and (3) pure ideology which is objectless and totally unreal (‘pure rubbish’).”³ Our confidence in these judgments, however, should be shaken, if we take a moment to peruse the prefatory material. For there we would see that the *Quintessenz* had been written not by an anonymous party hack, but by Korsch himself.

Intellectual historians do not normally pay much attention to pamphlets like the *Quintessenz*.⁴ We prefer texts written by intellectuals for other intellectuals, not

²There is, however, a brief discussion about how “king, priest, professor, whore, and soldier” lived off surplus value, even though they weren’t directly involved in production, because their work was “also necessary or useful for the maintenance and further development of human society.” Karl Korsch, *Quintessenz des Marxismus* (Berlin, 1922), 15–16.

³Karl Korsch, “Marxism and Philosophy,” in Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, trans. Fred. Halliday (New York, 1971), 29–97, at 82.

⁴For instance, the classic texts by Leszek Kolakowski, Perry Anderson, and Martin Jay don’t mention Korsch’s *Quintessenz*, nor does it feature in the recent dissertation on Korsch and his interlocutors by

those aimed at students with a pedagogical intent. After all, we expect from the latter a reiteration of established ideas in accessible form, rather than the articulation of new arguments. They seem, quite simply, less interesting. This neglect is, however, a mistake. First, teaching was an important preoccupation for most of the figures whom intellectual historians study. But it had a particular centrality for radical thinkers, above all Marxists. For the majority of Marxists in the early twentieth century, the royal road to revolution led through the enlightenment of the working class. That is why Marxist parties tended to invest heavily in the project of worker education. In the interwar period thousands of intellectual workers were employed in that project and it could draw on overlapping networks of publishing houses, educational establishments, and local reading groups, amongst others, that stretched across Europe. In terms of scale and resources, it dwarfs most of the enterprises towards which intellectual historians have turned their attention.

Take the *Quintessenz*. At the time, the pamphlet was Korsch's most widely read work. Sales figures are hard to track down, but, given its publisher and price, it is likely that the *Quintessenz* was read by tens of thousands of people, an order of magnitude more than his more canonical work, such as *Marxism and Philosophy*, which first appeared in Carl Grünberg's specialist journal *Archiv für Geschichte des Sozialismus und der Arbeiterbewegung*. Beyond its use within working-class communities in Germany, the *Quintessenz* was rapidly translated: into Russian in December 1922 and again in 1923, into Greek in 1924, into English by an Australian press in 1924, and into Norwegian also in 1924.⁵ In that year Gramsci even proposed translating it into Italian.⁶ To my knowledge, this is the only time Gramsci mentioned a text by Korsch. *Marxism and Philosophy*, in contrast, wasn't widely translated until the 1960s.⁷

Second, despite the apparent gulf that separates pedagogical works from the canon of Marxist theory, the two were intimately related. The project of worker education generated some of the most pressing questions and problems addressed by Marxist intellectuals: what did the working class think and believe? What did they need to know to become class-conscious? How did that knowledge relate to their experience and conditions of life, and who was best placed to develop it? What were the most effective means of cultivating that knowledge in them? Debates between Marxist intellectuals were often informed and shaped by the practical and theoretical exigencies of worker education.

In this article, I will show how a consideration of worker education can shift our understanding of Marxist theory by focusing on Korsch. First, I will detail how Korsch came to be involved in the project of worker education, and present his various contributions to that project, not least writing the *Quintessenz*. I will then show how the demands of this project shaped the arguments of *Marxism and Philosophy*,

Devlin. Nicholas Devlin, "Dialectic of Disillusionment: The Political Thought of Ex-communists, c.1929–c.1939" (unpublished PhD thesis, University of Cambridge, 2021). It does receive a short discussion in more specialist works.

⁵See Buckmiller's annotations in Karl Korsch, *Gesamtausgabe*, 9 vols. (Frankfurt am Main, 1980–2001), 2: 444. Buckmiller's introductions to the *Gesamtausgabe* still count as the most extensive and reliable scholarly treatment of Korsch.

⁶See Antonio Gramsci, *Lettere 1908–1926* (Turin, 1992), 189.

⁷French translation (1964), Italian (1966), English (1970), Spanish (1971).

and thus lay out its role within Korsch's broader theoretical and practical work. Though scholars have tended to read that book as an attempt to restore philosophical sophistication to Marxist theory, focused on the highly educated intellectuals who were involved in party debates, I argue that it was motivated first and foremost by Korsch's concern for the intellectual lives of workers.⁸ Finally, I follow Korsch's development in the late 1920s and the 1930s, explaining how his approach to worker education informed his changing political position, ultimately leading him to break with Soviet Communism. Korsch was not an intellectual who happened to be involved in worker education. He was a teacher who used his theoretical writings to grapple with the problem of imparting Marxism to the working masses.

Democracy, socialism, and revolution

Korsch was born in 1886 to a middle-class family in Germany, and though it was clear early on in his education that he sympathized with social reform, he was by no means a Marxist or indeed a revolutionary. When he studied at Jena, he was a leading figure in the Free Student Movement, and his efforts were directed towards mitigating the harms of capitalism by promoting redistributive policies.⁹ In the lead-up to the First World War, Korsch spent two and a half years in England, where he was won over to the ideas of the Fabians, eventually becoming a member of the society.¹⁰ Korsch celebrated above all the Fabians' "democratic-socialist" program. This expressed itself in their support of democratic forms of government and the socialization of land and industry. But it was also the driving force behind their educational project. The Fabians refused to function as a political party, which would require them to appeal to only a subset of society. Rather they sought to win over the whole country to socialism. Through cheaply priced pamphlets, public lectures, and a network of summer schools, the Fabians had created an "intellectual center for social culture" promoting collectivism as the "ultimate ideal of human cultural will."¹¹

Germany's defeat in 1918 offered Korsch an opportunity to put these ideas into action. After all, the SPD had gained power in the "November Revolution," and though it had been slow to implement reforms, change was in the air. In 1919 Korsch declared joyfully that "the hour of socialism has arrived."¹² At that time, he served as an assistant to the socialist-leaning professor Robert Wilbrandt, in a commission on "socialization" in industry, an initiative of the new SPD regime. In a March 1919 pamphlet, Korsch

⁸See, for instance, Max Pensky, "Western Marxism," in P. E. Gordon and W. Breckman, eds., *Cambridge History of Modern European Thought*, vol. 2 (Cambridge, 2019), 259–88, at 270–71. Devlin makes a similar point when he argues against "culturalist" understandings of Western Marxism. Nicholas Devlin, "Karl Korsch and Marxism's Interwar Moment, 1917–1933," *History of European Ideas* 48/5 (2022), 574–93.

⁹See Patrick Goode, *Karl Korsch: A Study in Western Marxism* (London, 1979), 6–9. However, in this period Korsch also organized talks by figures like Eduard Bernstein and Karl Liebknecht. See Michael Buckmiller, "Einleitung des Herausgebers," in Korsch, *Gesamtausgabe*, 1: 11–75, at 24.

¹⁰For this period of his life see Paul Breines, "Korsch's 'Road to Marx,'" *Telos* 26 (1975), 42–56; and Buckmiller, "Einleitung des Herausgebers," in Korsch, *Gesamtausgabe*, 1: 48–72.

¹¹Karl Korsch, "Die Fabian Society" (1912), in Korsch, *Gesamtausgabe*, 1: 308–11.

¹²Karl Korsch, "Die Sozialisierungsfrage vor und nach der Revolution," in Korsch, *Gesamtausgabe*, 2: 161–6, at 162. See also Korsch, "Über die Möglichkeiten einer sozialistischen Aufklärungsarbeit," *Die Tat*, 1919, 67. Also printed in Korsch, *Gesamtausgabe*, 2: 143–6. And Korsch "Die Politik im neuen Deutschland" (1919), in Korsch, *Gesamtausgabe*, 2: 81–9, at 81.

laid out his position, proposing a set of nesting and semi-independent organizations, moving from factory councils up to the state, which he thought would allow “industrial autonomy” and grant real power to workers and consumers alike.¹³

Such reforms, however, would only provide a first and incomplete form of socialism. Constructed out of human material corrupted by capitalism, a socialized society would at first have to be governed by the principle of “equal pay for equal performance,” where workers maintained ownership of their own labor, and earned different wages.¹⁴ So too, Korsch thought, “intellectual workers” would have to be flattered and paid higher salaries to keep them on side.¹⁵ Only once the class struggle had been won and socialized labor had become a reality would the conditions emerge for the cultivation of a “communal sense” (*Gemeinsinn*), or a true “comradely spirit.” And only when those had fully flourished would it be possible to construct a fully socialist society on the principle “from each according to their abilities, to each according to their needs.”¹⁶

That is why, in addition to institutional and economic change, Korsch continued to prioritize “cultural–political measures.”¹⁷ It is telling that the final section of his socialization pamphlet had the title “What Should We Do Now?—Education [*Erziehung*] for Socialism.” The path forward lay through “tireless educational work on the rising generation.” Any impatient revolutionary who despaired at the slow rate of change, Korsch declared, should commit themselves to instilling a socialist spirit in the masses.¹⁸ In an article written the following month, Korsch laid out what this might entail:

- 1 Talks, discussions, courses for the treatment of socialist problems, organized by a “working association” and its subgroups founded for this purpose.
- 2 The creation of an appropriate educational literature.
- 3 Consistent mutual support of association members for the complete grasping and working through of socialist doctrine. In particular, collaborative independent research work undertaken by the subgroups ...
- 4 Active participation of association members in all public actions by authorities, organizations and parties that relate to the problem of socialism and socialization.¹⁹

For the second, Korsch was clear, the pamphlets should be no longer than forty pages, printed on “good paper,” and sold at cost. They might be difficult to read

¹³Korsch, “Was ist Sozialisierung?,” in Korsch, *Gesamtausgabe*, 2: 97–134, at 118–21.

¹⁴*Ibid.*, 122–3.

¹⁵Karl Korsch, “Die Arbeitsteilung zwischen körperlicher und geistiger Arbeit und der Sozialismus,” in Korsch, *Gesamtausgabe*, 2: 167–75.

¹⁶Korsch, “Was ist Sozialisierung?” 124.

¹⁷*Ibid.*, 124. In “Die Politik im neuen Deutschland,” 82, Korsch argued that the socialization of industry and the *Ausbildung* were necessarily intertwined, and neither could claim priority. He gives a fuller account of what a socialized education would look like at 86–7. For Korsch’s educational proposals, including an *Einheitsschule* for children of all classes, see Michael Buckmiller, “Einleitung des Herausgebers,” in Korsch, *Gesamtausgabe*, 2: 13–72, at 26–9.

¹⁸Korsch, “Was ist Sozialisierung?” 126.

¹⁹Korsch, “Über die Möglichkeiten einer sozialistischen Aufklärungsarbeit,” 67.

in part (that was the nature of the ideas), but they should be accessible, and so should not rely on specialist terminology. Korsch also argued that the literature should be “non-partisan” (*unparteiisch*) in the sense that it should be free from the “strictly defined dogmas of the party programs,” and thus be open both to those who were and those “who still might become” socialist.²⁰ He held up the Fabians as a model, and appended his private address to the article so that anyone interested in the project could contact him.²¹ In 1919, then, Korsch thought he could build a socialist society out of the human material denatured by capitalism through a socialization of the means of production and the promotion of a socialist sensibility through education.

Korsch’s hopes for top-down change were quickly dispelled.²² As he later remarked, the signs of a missed opportunity were becoming too ubiquitous to ignore: the establishment of economic freedom in the new Weimar constitution of 11 August 1919; the SPD’s shift away from revolutionary action, especially in the 1921 Görlitz program; and with the stuttering end of the socialization commission.²³ The leaders of the SPD, he noted bitterly, had come to the conclusion that it was necessary first to rebuild capitalism and reform it before socialism would become possible.²⁴ But Korsch was enormously skeptical that socialism could emerge from internal reform. In January 1920, Korsch declared that there was a stark choice between socialism and capitalism, with no third way. The socialists had thus chosen poorly.²⁵ Frustrated, Korsch drifted to the left, joining first the USPD and then in 1920 the Communist Party (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands—KPD).²⁶

Korsch’s disappointment with the socialization process and the SPD-led government is not just important for understanding his turn to the KPD and consequently deeper engagement with Marxist theory. It also helps explain the focus and problems of his later writings. Because the socialization process had failed, Korsch no longer thought that social change would arise through the mutually reinforcing combination of institutional reform and education. This meant, first, that education had to be the party’s highest priority. The forging of socialist consciousness was the essential precondition of revolution. But second, the party could not rely on the socialization process to provide the economic conditions Korsch had considered necessary for promoting that consciousness. Korsch had to explain how it could arise in a capitalist society. In response to this problem, Korsch began to insist that socialism was not an

²⁰Ibid., 68.

²¹Ibid., 69.

²²See his criticism of certain Social Democrats and their declining faith in socialization, in Karl Korsch, “Realpolitiker des Sozialismus (April 1919),” in Korsch, *Gesamtausgabe*, 2: 139–42.

²³See Karl Korsch, “Grundsätzliches über Sozialisierung” (1920), in Korsch, *Gesamtausgabe*, 2: 213–226, at 219. On his understanding of the history of the SPD and the way the Erfurt program set the path to Görlitz see Karl Korsch, “Zur Geschichte der sozialistischen Partei-programme (1921),” in Korsch, *Gesamtausgabe*, 2: 259–63. And Korsch, “Der 18. Brumaire des Hugo Stinnes (1922),” in Korsch, *Gesamtausgabe*, 2: 265–8.

²⁴Karl Korsch, “Sozialismus und soziale Reform,” in Korsch, *Gesamtausgabe*, 2: 201–8, at 203.

²⁵Ibid., 207.

²⁶On this political shifting see Buckmiller, “Einleitung des Herausgebers,” in Korsch, *Gesamtausgabe*, 2: 37–51.

objective theory, an ahistorical ideal, to which the workers needed to ascend. Rather, it was an expression of their experience and aspirations as a class.

This is the context in which Korsch wrote the textbook I discussed in the introduction. Based on courses Korsch was teaching at the time it was designed to show the workers that their interests implied revolutionary struggle.²⁷ The *Quintessenz* was only one part of Korsch's broader project of worker education. After 1920 he regularly lectured in unions and *Volkshochschulen* (akin to community colleges in the US), giving a Marxist reading of labor law. The lectures were then published as a book: *Arbeitsrecht für Betriebsräte* (Labor Law for Work Councils) (1922). He also wrote a range of other short pamphlets, including a cheap edition of Marx's *Critique of the Gotha Program*, which came out the same year.²⁸ In his introduction, Korsch argued that the very reasons Marx had criticized the Gotha program of the German Socialists in 1864 would have led him to criticize the SPD's Görlitz program from 1921. The Gotha program endorsed a Lassallean position, and mobilized bourgeois ideas of ethics, rights, and the state. According to Marx, it lacked an adequately materialist understanding of history, which would have showed how those ideas were produced by and inextricably linked to capitalism. By yoking it to the superstructures of capitalism, Lassalle had rendered socialism a utopian dream. So too the Social Democrats of his present, Korsch declared, had given up the revolutionary force of Marxism, in their adherence to an "ethical demand" for change.²⁹ Korsch ended with the injunction that "every worker must in the end become a *materialist*," that is, that they should understand communist theory as emergent from their own conditions of life and struggle.³⁰ In practical terms, they needed to abandon the SPD and join the KPD.

Expressing the revolutionary movement

While in his educational work Korsch was committed to showing the workers how Marxist theory responded to their most fundamental interests, and including them as active participants in a revolutionary movement, this was not the task of his more academic writing. The two were nonetheless intimately related, and to understand how we need to place Korsch's work within a broader tradition of Marxist pedagogics. Despite Korsch's vehement rejection of Second International theory, and especially the work of Karl Kautsky, his work closely followed the plan laid out in the older man's *Das Erfurter Programm* (The Erfurt Program) (1892). There Kautsky provided a schema for understanding the emergence of "class consciousness." In their everyday life, Kautsky thought, workers were made aware of their conflict with the employers, and their solidarity with those employed in other factories and industries. But this "class instinct" (*Klasseninstinkt*) was not sufficient for revolution. Most often, it would lead workers to come together to demand better conditions and higher wages, or it might make them succumb to the illusions of anarchism.³¹

²⁷See the advertisements on the back of *Die Internationale* 4 (1922)

²⁸Buckmiller understands this emphasis on education in the context of the "united front": Korsch was reaching out to the workers in order to win them over to the Communists. Buckmiller, "Einleitung des Herausgebers," in Korsch, *Gesamtausgabe*, 2: 58.

²⁹Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 152–7, 161, 169–70.

³⁰*Ibid.*, 170, original emphasis.

³¹Karl Kautsky, *Das Erfurter Programm* (Stuttgart, 1892), 192, 235.

That is why, Kautsky asserted, social democracy needed the input of intellectuals, most importantly Marx himself, who were able to use scientific tools to point out to the workers that their interests required not just reforms, but wholesale economic change, i.e. that the “final goal” (*Endziel*) of the workers’ movement was socialism. And he had shown them that economic forces were driving society to that final goal according to a “natural necessity” (*Naturnotwendigkeit*).³² When the party brought these conclusions to the workers in its propaganda and agitation, it was able to transmute their “class instinct” into revolutionary “class consciousness.”³³ This is what Korsch had been doing in the *Quintessenz*. He was pointing out to the workers the ultimate “goals” of the movement, and the economic forces that made those goals possible.

This account of propaganda and political education—bringing scientific socialism to the workers’ movement—was only one part of Kautsky’s argument. He also provided an analysis of how scientific socialism had emerged. For Kautsky, Marx had not developed his theses through disinterested academic study. He had been deeply involved in the workers’ movement and was attentive to its needs and praxis. As we have seen, Kautsky thought that the experience of capitalist exploitation produced “class instinct” amongst the workers. Marx started from this basis and used the tools of modern science, especially political economy, to clarify it. Marx’s scientifically informed socialism drew out from the workers’ “class instinct” truths that were latent in it.³⁴ Later Kautsky would extend the argument to other intellectuals: social democracy needed “thinkers, armed with all the tools of bourgeois science, to bring themselves to the proletarian standpoint and develop out of it a new proletarian conception of society.”³⁵

Given inequalities in access to education, Kautsky thought that most of the intellectuals who could fulfill this function would come from the bourgeoisie. But he was not arguing that this was necessary. Rather he was concerned with a particular intellectual operation that could in principle be undertaken by anyone. Moreover, though they often lacked the necessary training, workers had an advantage because they were not limited, Kautsky thought, by the bourgeois worldview. Since that intellectual operation was applied to the workers’ life and experience, its product would not be alien to them. At the very least, it meant that the workers would quickly come to understand and embrace Marx’s theory.³⁶

Korsch’s more academic writings follow this part of Kautsky’s argument: they explain how party intellectuals, both from the working class and from the bourgeoisie, should develop the theory whose conclusions they would then impart to the workers more broadly. Take his 1923 essay on the “Marxsche Dialektik” (Marxian Dialectic), which opens with the following lines:

The tremendous significance of Karl Marx’s theoretical achievement for the praxis of the proletarian class struggle consists in the fact that for the first

³²Ibid., 239.

³³Ibid., 240.

³⁴Ibid., 235–40.

³⁵Karl Kautsky, “Akademiker und Prolaterier,” *Die Neue Zeit* 19/2 (1900–1), 89–91, at 90.

³⁶Kautsky, *Erfurter Programm*, 231–2.

time he brought together formally into a solid unity, into the living totality of a scientific system, the whole content of those new perspectives [*Anschauungen*] that transcend the bourgeois horizon, and that spring necessarily [*mit Notwendigkeit*] from the social situation of the proletarian class into the consciousness of this class.

Korsch elaborated: Marx had taken the “‘natural’ class perspectives of the proletariat,” which comprised “disparate and formless feelings”; he had then organized them into “theoretical concepts and propositions.” Taken as a systematic whole, these formed “scientific socialism” (*wissenschaftlichen Sozialismus*). Marx did not create the proletarian movement, or indeed proletarian consciousness. Rather he had raised the latter to a higher level. For Korsch, Marx showed how one could construct a theory responding directly to the workers’ interests and conditions of life. In other words, he showed how one could give the workers’ movement its “fitting, theoretically scientific expression” (*angemessenen, theoretisch wissenschaftlichen Ausdruck*).³⁷

The concept of the “expression” is the cornerstone of Korsch’s thinking in this period. It permeates his more academic writings and is crucial for understanding their connection to his educational work, for it articulates what he considered to be the necessary relationship between the working class and the theory that the party needed to transmit to them in its pamphlets, lectures, and reading groups. But it has long been misunderstood. Louis Althusser is in part responsible. In his argument against Hegelian readings of Marx in the 1960s, which he worried reduced the complexity of history to the unfolding of a supposedly essential “core,” he read Korsch’s “expression” to mean that theory was a “direct” outgrowth of the working class: “the proletariat was thus *philosophy in deed* and its political practice philosophy itself. Marx’s role was then reduced to having conferred on this philosophy, which was acted and lived in its birth-place, the mere form of *self-consciousness*.” The operative word here is “mere.” According to this expressive model, Althusser argued, Marx’s contribution was inconsequential, and thus ultimately the proletariat was the “sole historical author” of theory.³⁸ In *Marxism and Totality*, Martin Jay follows Althusser’s example. In Jay’s reading of the “Marxsche Dialektik” article, Korsch was asserting that “Marxist theory arose out of the praxis of the working class ‘by necessity’,” which leads to the conclusion that the practice of the revolutionary proletariat was the “sole source for radical theory.”³⁹

The misreading is perhaps understandable. After all, the central and longest section of *Marxism and Philosophy* is a parallel history of socialist theory and the “revolutionary movement of the proletariat”—its “other side,” as Korsch rather unhelpfully put it.⁴⁰ During the revolutionary 1840s, Marx’s work had assumed a

³⁷Karl Korsch, “Marxsche Dialektik,” in Korsch, *Gesamtausgabe*, 3: 283–8, at 283.

³⁸See Louis Althusser, *Reading Capital*, trans. Ben Brewster (London, 1977), 140–41, original emphasis. Althusser explicitly opposes this to Lenin and Kautsky’s claim that theory comes to the workers from the “outside.”

³⁹Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality* (Berkeley, 1984), 136, 143. See also Devlin, “Karl Korsch and Marxism’s Interwar Moment,” who assumes a more or less automatic relationship between movement and theory (at 10), which makes it hard to understand both the possibility and role of “anachronism” in Korsch’s account.

⁴⁰Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 45.

revolutionary form, best represented, according to Korsch, by the *Communist Manifesto* (1848).⁴¹ The lull in revolutionary activity after 1848 changed things. In the absence of the possibility of wholesale change, the workers' movement, in the shape of trade unions and political parties, came to push for small-scale reforms.⁴² In the closing years of the nineteenth century the theorists of the Second International, including Rudolf Hilferding and Karl Kautsky, presented Marxism as a "set of purely scientific observations, without any *immediate* connection to the political or other practices of class struggle."⁴³ Korsch's point was that, at a moment when real change was not on the cards, a revolutionary theory could only exist if it were severed from social conditions. That is why, whatever its rhetoric, in practice the SPD came to support only small-scale change. Bernstein's revisionism, which emphasized reform over revolution, was the flip side of this orthodox Marxism, one whose slogans aligned with the workers' movement they both expressed.⁴⁴ In the period after 1900 a new revolutionary moment arose, with its expression in the work of Rosa Luxemburg and Vladimir Lenin. On this point it is telling that Korsch was at pains to deny Lenin's self-presentation as simply restoring the "true Marx." Because a scientific socialism was the expression of the experience of the worker's movement, Lenin had updated Marx to speak to the concerns to a newly revolutionary moment.⁴⁵

Though Korsch seems here to be presenting scientific socialism as an inevitable and immediate outgrowth of the proletarian movement, a closer look shows that this was not the case. Take Korsch's "Marxsche Dialektik" article, which I quoted earlier. *Pace* Jay, it wasn't "Marxist theory" that emerged necessarily out of the social conditions of the working class, but rather *unscientific* proletarian *perspectives* (*Anschauungen*). Following Kautsky, Korsch argued that intellectuals were required to work on this unordered material to produce scientific socialism. He explicitly denied that one could understand this "reshaping" (*Umformung*) as a "simply passive 'reflex.'"⁴⁶ "Expression" wasn't for Korsch a simple and direct operation; it was transformative.

Here and elsewhere in his writing at the time, Korsch described the construction of Marxist theory using the language of "form" (*Form*) and "content" (*Inhalt*).⁴⁷ It emerged when Marx provided a form that systematized the content of the "'independent drives' of the proletarian class" and thus allowed the proletariat to "recognize its historical calling."⁴⁸ This form, Korsch was clear, came from the traditions of bourgeois thought. Scientific socialism, then, had not a sole but a dual source: the practice of the proletariat and a philosophy inherited from the

⁴¹Ibid., 57.

⁴²Ibid., 65.

⁴³Ibid., 60, original emphasis.

⁴⁴Ibid., 65.

⁴⁵Ibid., 55. See also 67–8.

⁴⁶Korsch, "Marxsche Dialektik," 283.

⁴⁷See, for instance, Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 47.

⁴⁸Karl Korsch, "Fünfzehn Thesen über wissenschaftlichen Sozialismus," in Korsch, *Gesamtausgabe*, 3: 278–9.

bourgeoisie.⁴⁹ This dual source explains why education was needed. If scientific socialism emerged directly from the revolutionary practice of the workers, the party would not have to impart that theory to them. Worker education was necessary and difficult, because scientific socialism, though deeply rooted in their lives and experience, differed in crucial ways from what the workers thought and believed on their own.

Science and philosophy

Korsch's argument that scientific socialism did not emerge inevitably from the practice of the workers' movement, but rather required intellectuals to clarify and systematize it, followed closely on Kautsky's. The two differed, however, on one crucial point. While Kautsky thought that intellectuals, whether drawn from the bourgeoisie or from the proletariat, should clarify class instinct using the tools of bourgeois science, Korsch thought that they required the inheritance of bourgeois philosophy.⁵⁰ Philosophy might seem an odd choice. Korsch recognized that Marx and Engels understood their work as a "supersession" not only of bourgeois philosophy, but of "all philosophy *as such*," and this was only further cemented as their attention had shifted to political economy over the course of the 1850s.⁵¹ That is why Kautsky and others came to think that socialist theory required an appeal to science (*Wissenschaft*) more generally. But Korsch wanted to argue that Marx's turn to political economy was a result of his philosophical questioning. That is, he was intent on showing that Marx's "abolition of philosophy" should be understood as a subjective as well as an objective genitive: it was a *philosophical* abolition, one that emerged out of and was strongly rooted in philosophical questions. Consequently, philosophy was not entirely absent from Marx's political economy.⁵² Only bourgeois prejudice, Korsch thought, led thinkers to see philosophy only "in philosophies" and not "equally well in positive sciences and social practices."⁵³

The appeal to philosophy was valuable for Korsch for three reasons. First and foremost, philosophy allowed Korsch to articulate more clearly a central presupposition of the Kautsky model that he thought the older man had left underdeveloped. Kautsky had argued that the economy developed according to a "natural necessity," even as he dedicated himself to the task of developing and promoting class consciousness, a project that implied the importance of ideological work amongst the workers, and perhaps even a form of voluntarism. For Korsch, philosophy provided an account of how and why ideological forces were important.

⁴⁹We might even relate the *Anschauungen*, transformative labor of the intellectuals, and class consciousness, to what Althusser described as generalities I, II, and III. See Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, trans. Ben Brewster (London: Verso, 1996). Kolakowski also ignores the work required to systematize and unify proletarian *Anschauungen* into a "science," which would complicate his criticism of Korsch's relativism and its incompatibility with empirical verification. See Leszek Kolakowski, *Main Currents of Marxism* (New York, 2005), 1045.

⁵⁰As I will show later, this explains why, despite the absence of any discussion of the party in Korsch's book, it was implicit in the argument. See Goode, *Karl Korsch*, 93.

⁵¹Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 49, 77, original emphasis.

⁵²See *ibid.*, 47–50.

⁵³*Ibid.*, 39. Compare the two quotes at the top and bottom thirds of the page.

This reasoning motivates what might otherwise be a confusing wavering in the book. Korsch asserted, both in the book and in writings afterwards, that he was concerned predominantly with a rather narrow question: “how is *philosophy* related to the social revolution of the proletariat and how is the social revolution of the proletariat related to philosophy?”⁵⁴ Yet, over the course of the book, it becomes clear that this was important in large part because it drew attention to the significance of ideology more broadly, and especially the ideology of the working class. Korsch argued that “we must solve in a dialectically materialist fashion not only ‘the question of the relationship of the State to social revolution and of social revolution to the State’ (Lenin), but also the ‘question of the relationship of ideology to social revolution and of social revolution to ideology.’”⁵⁵

Philosophy was able to draw attention to broader ideological concerns because it was the source of dialectical thinking, a way of thinking which denied that consciousness and reality were separated according to a “dualistic metaphysical conception.”⁵⁶ Part of a totality, both were essential elements of the revolutionary struggle. In particular, Korsch emphasized the centrality of the forms of social consciousness linked to capitalism that help maintain it: in addition to political economy, he mentioned aesthetic and religious conceptions.⁵⁷ The relations of production under capitalism depend upon and cannot subsist without “pre-scientific and bourgeois-scientific consciousness.”⁵⁸ In short, Korsch stressed that the problem of philosophy had “led Marx and Engels to the question of ideology.”⁵⁹

The claim had implications for the present. An engagement with philosophy would show theorists that they had to grasp “ideological systems in theory as realities, and to treat them in practice as such.”⁶⁰ This was not simply an injunction for intellectuals to participate in technical academic debates. When Korsch argued that a focus on ideological struggle was as essential to the success of the revolution as politics and economics, he made sure to say that, in addition to “revolutionary scientific criticism,” which could be related to the concerns of intellectuals, it involved “agitational work” before the seizure of state power, which could not.⁶¹ A philosophically informed Marxism, Korsch thought, would make intellectuals attend to the ideological commitments of the broader population. They needed to be involved in the project of worker education.

Second, philosophy helped explain why such educational work might lead to revolution. In this it responded to the problem that had vexed Korsch since the war, a problem that had only been sharpened once Korsch came to believe that Marxism was an expression of the life and experience of the revolutionary working class: how could a working class corrupted by capitalism engineer a transition to socialism? As before, Korsch articulated this problem in terms of working-class consciousness. In the “Marxsche Dialektik” essay, he complained that the “complex

⁵⁴Ibid., 71, also 101.

⁵⁵Ibid., 70–71.

⁵⁶Ibid., 88, also 92.

⁵⁷Ibid., 82, 85–9.

⁵⁸Ibid., 89.

⁵⁹Ibid., 71.

⁶⁰Ibid., 72, also 77.

⁶¹Ibid., 97.

of proletarian class perspectives” was distorted by “bourgeois perspectives, with which it was connected, originally inseparable by virtue of its formation.” “Science” wasn’t any help, because it was beholden to the bourgeois illusion of “disinterested” study. Philosophy might seem just as bad, given its roots in bourgeois traditions. But Korsch thought that it was able to “cleanse” (*reinigen*) proletarian perspectives of their bourgeois contamination. The implication here is that if one brought a philosophical understanding to bear on proletarian class instinct, it would produce a theory that could see beyond the limits of capitalism, and thus, when transmitted to the workers, guide them towards a socialist society.⁶²

Throughout his writings in this period, Korsch insisted that philosophy was less closely tied to its social and economic base than other forms of thinking. While some forms of thought were immediately related to material production, others were related immediately only to the relations of production. Philosophy along with the humanities (*Geisteswissenschaften*) was one step further removed, being only immediately related to “intellectual production.”⁶³ That is why, in *Marxism and Philosophy*, Korsch could declare that the relationship between philosophers and the class they represented is a complex one, and that philosophy was “particularly remote from its ‘material and economic foundation.’”⁶⁴

In fact, in idealist philosophy and especially in Hegel, the logic of their thinking was pushing towards revolution and it was only the “bourgeois class standpoint” of the philosophers in the mid-nineteenth century that blinded them to this. When Korsch argued that “the bourgeois standpoint has to stop in theory where it has to stop in social practice—as long as it does not want to cease being a ‘bourgeois’ standpoint altogether,” we should note not only his claim about the limits of the bourgeois standpoint, but also the way in which philosophy threatened to break through them. The “revolutionary movement in the realm of ideas” could make the “transition” from being the expression of the revolutionary bourgeoisie to being the expression of the “revolutionary movement of the proletariat.”⁶⁵ Philosophy offered Communists a means to transcend the ideological limits of capitalism, and thus chart a path to socialism.

The first two advantages of philosophy spoke to the conditions of possibility of revolutionary education. The third, in contrast, offered guidelines as to its content. According to Korsch, philosophy demonstrated the necessity of adapting Marxism to the historical moment. Historical formations, the experience of the workers’ movement and its practice changed over time. As their expression, Marxism had to change too. In *Marxism and Philosophy*, we saw, Korsch did not simply describe the emergence of Marxism out of the experience of the working class; he also gave it a history. And yet, the close expressive connection between theory

⁶²Korsch, “Marxsche Dialektik,” 284. For this reason, we should be wary of the argument that Korsch idealized the working class. See Jay, *Marxism and Totality*, 147.

⁶³Korsch, “Fünfzehn Thesen über wissenschaftlichen Sozialismus,” 280–81.

⁶⁴Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 36.

⁶⁵*Ibid.*, 39–47. This is not to suggest that the driving force of this development lay in the realm of ideas. Rather, because Hegelian philosophy recognized the relationship between ideas and reality, and in particular intellectual and revolutionary movements, on the emergence of an autonomous revolutionary movement of the proletariat, philosophy could point in the direction of a proletarian dialectic. See also Karl Korsch, “Über Materialistische Dialektik,” *Die Internationale* 6 (1924), 376–9, at 378.

and movement could not be relied upon. When he talked about the “necessary” relationship between movement and its expression, this was a normative rather than a descriptive relation, one that should be but was not actually always maintained.⁶⁶ That is why it was misleading for Korsch to present theory as the “other side” of the revolutionary movement; at certain moments the two “sides” came apart. In fact, Korsch argued, this is what had happened in the first decade of the twentieth century.

At the dawn of a new revolutionary age around 1900, a gulf opened up between theory and the workers’ movement. In consequence, the theory of the Second International, both the defanged orthodoxy and its flip side, revisionism, became outmoded “traditions.” Channeling Marx’s *18th Brumaire*, Korsch denounced the ghosts of a previous era that “weighed ‘like a nightmare’ on the brains of the working masses whose objectively revolutionary socio-economic position no longer corresponded to these evolutionary doctrines.”⁶⁷ Korsch’s point was that orthodox Marxism was the relic of an earlier time and had therefore sundered its expressive connection to the workers’ movement. Conversely, Korsch praised Lenin in *State and Revolution* (1917) when he “consciously re-established” the internal connection of theory and practice.⁶⁸

For Korsch, the norm controlling this expressive relationship derived not from science but from philosophy. He was clear that Marx’s understanding of totality, and thus of the “expression,” however appropriate to the revolutionary drive of the proletariat, was at least in part a philosophical inheritance. It was Hegel, most famously in his understanding of philosophy as “its age grasped in thought,” who had recognized that ideas were not autonomous and free-floating, but rooted in their historical moment. Hegel’s dialectic was “idealist” in the sense that he understood history ultimately as the unfolding of the “idea.” That is why Marx had to recast the dialectic in materialist terms, by emphasizing economic change. But the broader argument remained intact. Korsch argued that Marx’s line from the *Communist Manifesto*—“the theoretical propositions of the communists ... are only the general expressions [*Ausdrücke*] of actual relations of an existing class struggle”—should be understood as the demystifying materialist translation of Hegel’s owl of Minerva.⁶⁹ For Korsch the dialectical approach afforded by philosophy made socialist theorists attentive to, and thus could help them keep alive, the contingent and fragile link between theory and movement. It showed them that scientific socialism emerged in the first instance from the proletarian masses, and thus that intellectuals had to pay close attention to their perspectives and interests.

We can see now why Kautsky’s sidelining of philosophy should have had such dire consequences. When Kautsky had initially separated theory and practice, allowing the “living principles of dialectical materialism” to decay, he had done

⁶⁶Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 65. This reading is clearer in the original German. See Karl Korsch, “Marxismus und Philosophie,” in Korsch, *Gesamtausgabe*, 3: 299–367, at 335.

⁶⁷Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 67. Of course, Kautsky’s theory had previously expressed the workers’ movement only because it had been neutered, detached from the movement’s political practice. Korsch’s point is that, as neutered, this theory no longer expressed the workers’ movement after 1900.

⁶⁸*Ibid.*, 68.

⁶⁹*Ibid.*, 74, 69.

so as the “general expression” of a non-revolutionary moment.⁷⁰ He was articulating the contemporaneous conditions and perspectives of the workers’ movement. And yet, because this had led him to give up on philosophy, he had renounced the tools needed to maintain that expressive relationship in the long run.⁷¹ For Korsch, the Social Democrats’ “betrayal” in 1914 and 1917 over the war and the Russian Revolution was the consequence of their earlier lack of attentiveness to philosophical questions, a failure to recognize that Marxism had to be constantly renewed in order to stay relevant to the workers’ movement.⁷² The problem, then, was not Kautsky’s pseudo-revolutionary theory as he had developed it in the 1890s. The problem was that Kautsky had stuck to that theory after 1900. Put concretely, Korsch was arguing that party intellectuals could not continually reissue old textbooks or rely on the same yellowing lecture notes year after year. They had to rewrite their educational material to suit the changing times.

Popular and vulgar Marxisms

An upshot of Korsch’s argument is that, no matter how tightly bound, there was a clear distinction between the Marxism of the working masses and that of the intellectuals. Or to be more precise, there were three levels. As we have seen, the party’s intellectuals addressed in *Marxism and Philosophy* needed to use philosophy and dialectical reasoning to break the bonds of bourgeois thought. They would thereby recognize the importance of ideological struggle, especially amongst the workers, and dedicate themselves to adapting Marxist ideas to express most effectively the ever-changing worker’s movement. In the terms of Kautsky’s model, the intellectuals were being charged primarily with constructing scientific socialism, not with bringing it to the working masses and raising them to consciousness.

That latter task was reserved for a second level comprising theoretically minded workers, those perhaps who might lead Marxist study groups, but who would not write the study material. For these Korsch wrote another short book that was also published by the Communist Party Press: the 1922 *Kernpunkte der Materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung* (Key Points of the Materialistic Conception of History). The book gave its readers significant autonomy in their reading of Marx. After a dense introduction, Korsch provided more than twenty pages of short passages, taken from a range of mostly socialist authors, and he encouraged the readers to test his interpretation in the five appendices over a further ten pages containing more extensive excerpts.⁷³

Though the book did discuss philosophy as part of the history of Marxist thought, because these teachers would be passing on theories developed elsewhere, the injunction to use it to update Marxism was absent, as was any extended

⁷⁰Ibid., 68.

⁷¹As Korsch remarked in his “Marxsche Dialektik” article, the problem was that these Marxist thinkers had separated Marx’s results (which were the expression of the workers’ movement) from the way of thinking (*Denkweise*) that had produced them and aligned them with the workers’ movement. Korsch, “Marxsche Dialektik,” 284–5.

⁷²Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 66.

⁷³Karl Korsch, “Kernpunkte der Materialistische Geschichtsauffassung,” in Korsch, *Gesamtausgabe*, 3: 159–236, at 162.

discussion of the “dialectic.” Nonetheless, the book foregrounded ideological struggle. After all, this intermediary group was stationed on the front lines of that fight. Korsch presented his thesis that Marxism was not a presuppositionless and disinterested “science” in the bourgeois sense of the term, even though this identification “for decades had done indescribable good to the honest philistine souls [*Spießerseele*] of countless German Social Democrats.”⁷⁴ Instead Marx’s thought was a “critique” of bourgeois ideology, especially bourgeois political economy, from the standpoint of the working class. Demonstrating how bourgeois ideas, despite their universalistic pretensions, were rooted in and in turn secured the economic position of the bourgeoisie, Marx showed that challenging them was an essential part of the revolutionary struggle.⁷⁵ The book thus discussed the “superstructure” at length, stressing the importance of overcoming religious belief. Korsch urged his readers to an “active atheism,” and to encourage such atheism amongst the wider proletariat, criticizing the Social Democrats who considered religion to be a “private matter.”⁷⁶

Korsch was explicit that this understanding of ideology and Marxist theory would go over the heads of most other workers. Only after the revolution would the masses be able to achieve a “fully immanent consciousness of the world.” Before then and during the struggle against capitalism, a popular Marxism would be strongly marked by the society it was trying to overcome. In particular, Korsch thought that most workers wouldn’t be able to move beyond a bourgeois and detached (*anschauenden*) naturalism to recognize the intimate connection of communist theory and praxis. They would continue to believe in the “unearthly validity of certain theoretical or practical ‘ideas,’” and see Marxist theory as timeless and objective, rather proletarian, truth. In this way, communism would remain for the masses a type of “religion,” albeit a “religion of immanence” (*Religion des Diesseits*).⁷⁷ In the *Kernpunkte* Korsch offered his readers theoretical insights that would be inaccessible to the majority of their students.⁷⁸

Korsch pitched the *Quintessenz*, by contrast, to the broader masses directly, seeking to produce the third and most basic level of class consciousness. In the terms of the *Kernpunkte*, it offered the catechism of a Marxist religion. As in the *Kernpunkte*, the need to update Marxism is absent in the *Quintessenz*. But here, as we have seen, Korsch also passed over discussions of the superstructure, choosing rather to present Marx’s economic theory as an objective truth.⁷⁹ And yet, if dialectical thinking implies a recognition of the importance of ideological struggle and a responsiveness to the contemporaneous needs of the workers’ moment, it is not entirely missing from the book.

In the *Kernpunkte* Korsch argued that Marx’s *Capital* wore its philosophical learning lightly. In that work, Marx did not give a “theoretical” account of his conception of history and society. Instead, it was “presented live” (*lebendig vorgeführt*),

⁷⁴Ibid., 163.

⁷⁵Ibid., 164–6.

⁷⁶Ibid., 186–7.

⁷⁷Ibid., 187–8.

⁷⁸See *ibid.*, 188–9.

⁷⁹Karl Korsch, “Vorwort,” in *Quintessenz*, 3. Here he referred to the *Kernpunkte* for those who wanted a fuller account.

practiced rather than preached.⁸⁰ We can read the *Quintessenz* in the same way. First, for all his appeal to economic processes and “necessity” in the pamphlet, Korsch made sure not to contradict his arguments in the other works about the importance of conscious proletarian action. When he asserted that Marxism proved a certain “necessity” in answering the first question, for instance, he was referring not to historical processes, but to the goals and means (*Ziele und Mittel*) of communism, and he immediately added that it also involved “action according to this doctrine (praxis).”⁸¹ Alluding to the contemporaneous split on the left, he noted that a recognition of this necessity distinguished the Communists from other Marxist parties.⁸² That is, Korsch’s necessity was one that workers had to follow, *if* they sought revolution. It did not describe an inevitability. So too when he later discussed the “necessity” that capitalism would collapse, he was concerned first and foremost not with economic forces, but with the “conviction” (*Überzeugung*) of Communists that the capitalist system was doomed. He gave as evidence not the inevitable unfolding of inner contradictions, but rather “historical facts” and developments over the previous hundred years, which could reassure revolutionaries that economic forces were on their side.⁸³ Korsch’s primary goal, then, was not to give an objective account of economic reality; it was to shape the way in which the workers understood that reality.⁸⁴

Second, at the end of the essay, Korsch aligned the *Quintessenz* with the new communist theory he would present a year later in *Marxism and Philosophy* as the expression of the current revolutionary moment, in both cases citing Lenin and Luxemburg.⁸⁵ He claimed that at the time economic forces did not point the way forward. In the long term, Korsch assured his readers, economic contradictions would bring about the collapse of capitalist society. But given that capitalism had not yet realized itself fully around the world, that moment lay in the distant future.⁸⁶ The current economic conditions may not have made a socialist revolution inevitable in the short term; they did, however, make it *possible*. To realize this possibility, “all that is missing ... is the full implementation of the organization of the proletariat into a class capable of political and social action,” which would demonstrate that it was ready for revolution in and through the revolutionary act.⁸⁷ Korsch posed the question whether one could be certain of the victory of the proletariat, and he answered that historical struggles could end either in revolutionary change or in the common “downfall” of the struggling classes.⁸⁸ But this should not be a

⁸⁰Korsch, “Kernpunkte,” 171.

⁸¹Korsch, *Quintessenz*, 5.

⁸²*Ibid.*, 5.

⁸³*Ibid.*, 19.

⁸⁴In *Marxism and Philosophy* Korsch raised the suggestion that the scientific pretensions of Second International Marxism were similarly due to “practical and tactical considerations.” He dismissed the possibility. Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 62 n. 34.

⁸⁵Korsch, *Quintessenz*, 20. Lenin is also front and center in Korsch’s introduction to the *Critique of the Gotha Program*, though significantly, in this popular text, Korsch presents Lenin’s ideas as simply the “consistent development of the basic insights that Marx first developed.” See Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 159–60.

⁸⁶Korsch, *Quintessenz*, 20.

⁸⁷*Ibid.*, 21–2.

⁸⁸*Ibid.*, 23. This was a reference to the *Communist Manifesto*, one that was often expressed in the period as the alternative of socialism or barbarism.

reason for despair. Instead, it was a call to action. The final question asked, “What, then, should every individual proletarian and communist, who ‘has raised themselves up to the level of comprehending theoretically the historical movement as a whole,’ do for the realization of communism?”⁸⁹ Korsch’s answer was that they should throw themselves into the class struggle.⁹⁰

That Korsch understood the *Quintessenz* to embody the most modern and updated version of Marxism, a shift from old pieties in response to a newly revolutionary age, can be seen in his response to a particularly hostile, but also nit-picking, review, written by Hermann Duncker for the Communist Party journal, *Die Internationale*.⁹¹ Before the war, Duncker had been an itinerant lecturer for the SPD, and had joined the faculty at the party school in Berlin in 1912. In 1925 he would cofound a parallel organization for the KPD: the Berlin Marxist Workers’ School. He was thus a leading figure of the Communists’ educational project. But for Korsch, Duncker represented the past. His criticism of the *Quintessenz* was simply a litany of those moments in which Korsch had deviated from the version of Marxism that the older man had “for decades now presented to his audiences orally and in writing.” But simply pointing out the differences was inadequate, because, as the title of Korsch’s response had it, Duncker and his generation had only had Marxism “on lease” (*Erbpacht*). That lease, Korsch implied, had now run out, and the working masses needed a new generation to take over the party’s educational project, and update it for a new age.⁹²

The popular Marxism of the *Quintessenz* was thus distinct from what Korsch called “vulgar Marxism.” The two might resemble each other in their suggestion that Marxism was a disinterested and timeless science, and in their overriding concern with the economic base. But the *Quintessenz* was saved from the debilitating flaws of a vulgar Marxism because it was informed by the educational ideals Korsch had laid out in *Marxism and Philosophy*. However much workers might see the *Quintessenz* as a compendium of ahistorical truths about society, the pamphlet presented an up-to-date and historically specific form of Marxism tailored to their present needs. And however much it seemed to focus on economic processes, it did not neglect consciousness. It simply saw the workers’ understanding of economics as the most important battleground in the ideological struggle. A contribution to the project of worker education, the *Quintessenz* contradicted vulgar Marxism by its very existence.

Between the party and the masses

Read in light of the *Quintessenz*, *Marxism and Philosophy* foregrounds a set of ironies in Korsch’s thought: Marxist intellectuals would recognize the necessity of forging a truly proletarian science through their engagement with one of the most difficult traditions of bourgeois philosophy; and, on appreciating the critical role

⁸⁹Interestingly this is a reference to the passage in the *Communist Manifesto* referring to bourgeois ideologies coming to support the proletariat.

⁹⁰Korsch, *Quintessenz*, 23.

⁹¹Hermann Duncker, “Die Quintessenz des Marxismus,” *Die Internationale* 4 (1922), 537–40, 562–3. Duncker considered the final section of the essay to be the most successful.

⁹²Karl Korsch, “Marxismus in Erbpacht: Eine Antikritik,” in Korsch, *Gesamtausgabe*, 3: 237–42.

played by culture and ideology in the revolution, they should focus their efforts on educating the workers, not about philosophy, art, and literature, but about the workings of the economic system. Philosophy brought intellectuals into close contact with the mass of the workers, while drawing a sharp distinction between the two. Korsch's answer to the problem of worker education thus set up an unstable relationship between the working masses he hoped to empower and the party elite he tasked with empowering them.

At first, Korsch emphasized the necessity of a party as the bearer of an advanced and dialectical consciousness to guide a working class who were, for the most part, denied it. In two reviews published in the first half of 1924 for the journal *Die Internationale*, Korsch defended Lukács from communist critics, by mobilizing Lenin's 1922 injunction for Communists to study Hegel's dialectic.⁹³ This was especially important in the context of the "united-front" policy of the Comintern, according to which the proletariat had to reach out to other classes, both peasants and colonized subjects, and exercise "hegemony" over them. That is why Korsch endorsed Lukács's account of the party as the "conscious leadership of the proletariat," and criticized Luxemburg's marginalization of the party as "one-sided and insufficient."⁹⁴ Korsch's theoretical writings set him up for political office. The French invasion of the Ruhr and the Rhineland in January 1923 caused significant economic and political disruptions that weakened the SPD and raised the profile of the Communists. In October, Korsch was chosen as minister for justice in the Thüringen state government. Korsch turned out to be an ineffective politician, and already in November he had to go into hiding, as the government banned the KPD along with the Nazi Party in an attempt to stem rising radicalism.⁹⁵

Though in his embrace of the party Korsch explicitly aligned himself with Lenin, this did not prevent conflict with the Comintern. In the Fifth Congress, Grigory Zinoviev attacked Korsch alongside Lukács for offering a "revisionist" and "professorial" reading of Marx. The onslaught followed Korsch back to Germany, most notably in an "open letter" written by Zinoviev in 1925 against the "ultra-left." Korsch read Zinoviev's criticism as an attack on dialectical forms of Marxism, and this led him to reassess Soviet theory and the place of the party. Perhaps the party leadership did not empower the proletariat by providing them with the appropriate theory. Perhaps it used education to control the workers. The dialectic in this way wasn't a bourgeois imposition; it was the only way to keep a strong bond between Marxist theory and the workers' movement. On 9 September 1925 Korsch denounced the "red imperialism" of the Comintern, and in response he was forced to give up editorship of the party journal. He was expelled from the KPD the following year.⁹⁶

Korsch's changing view of the Soviet Union led him to reassess the main fault lines of Marxist theory. In the 1930 reedition of *Marxism and Philosophy*, Korsch added a new introduction presented as an "anti-critique." Here he aligned

⁹³Korsch, "Über Materialistische Dialektik," 376–7.

⁹⁴Korsch review of Lukács, *Lenin, Die Internationale* 6 (1924), 413–14.

⁹⁵See the account in Goode, *Karl Korsch*, 100–2. Korsch had called for an armed uprising. See Buckmiller, "Einleitung des Herausgebers," in Korsch, *Gesamtausgabe*, 4: 60–62.

⁹⁶See Russell Jacoby, *Dialectic of Defeat* (Cambridge, 1981), 98.

Lenin with the “vulgar” Kautsky. Against both, Korsch placed himself (albeit with some reservations) alongside Lukács: “I still believe to this day that Lukács and I are objectively on the same side in our critical attitude towards the old Social Democratic Marxist orthodoxy, and the new Communist orthodoxy.”⁹⁷ According to this new reading, Lenin, like Kautsky, had sacrificed the “dialectical” parts of Marxism, which as we saw were so crucial for encouraging theorists to remain attentive to the particular perspectives and conditions of the workers.⁹⁸ In this way, he had cut the fragile link between movement and theory. This meant that Lenin’s theory could only be an imposition on the workers “from the outside.”⁹⁹ Korsch thus held Lenin responsible for the subsequent development of Soviet politics. Insofar as Leninism was imposed on the workers, the Soviet Union had become a dictatorship *over*, not *of*, the proletariat.¹⁰⁰

In this context, Korsch came to reconsider the arguments that earlier had made party leadership seem necessary. He attributed to Luxemburg the position that “only in socialist society [will] the Marxist method of analysis, in particular, become the full property of the proletariat,” but rejected it because it implied that Marxist theory stands ahead of revolutionary practice, the party ahead of the people.¹⁰¹ The implication is that, unlike in 1923, Korsch now thought that the workers would be able to gain a truly dialectical understanding of Marxism themselves (such that it would no longer come from “the outside”). The simplifications he had accepted for the *Quintessenz* were no longer required.

We can see the results of this shift in Korsch’s approach to workers’ education. Rather than writing an updated textbook, Korsch devoted himself to preparing an unabridged edition of Marx’s *Capital*, volume 1. In 1932 he published a cheap version of the work, printed in 50,000 copies for the workers to read themselves.¹⁰² Certainly, in approaching this material, many readers would need some help. Korsch translated most of Marx’s foreign words and quotations, and smoothed out what he saw as unfortunate anglicisms in the style, a result of Marx’s decades-long residence in the United Kingdom. *Das Kapital*, Korsch thought, needed to be translated into German.¹⁰³ And in the introduction, Korsch gave advice about how best to approach the volume. He pointed his reader to the more accessible Chapters 8, 11–13, and 24, while suggesting that at first he or she skip over the more difficult opening pages, starting with Chapter 5.¹⁰⁴ The most challenging sections, such as that on the value form in the first chapter and on money in the third chapter, followed from Marx’s use of the “dialectical method” and were essential for

⁹⁷Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 102.

⁹⁸*Ibid.*, 129–33.

⁹⁹*Ibid.*, 114. Korsch was referring here to a Kautsky article that Lenin had quoted approvingly in *What Is to Be Done?*

¹⁰⁰Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, 143.

¹⁰¹*Ibid.*, 116 n. See also 113 and n.

¹⁰²For these details see Karl Korsch, “Kommunistische Kassenkampf gegen Marx’ Kapital,” *Die Aktion* 22 (1932), 36–42, at 40.

¹⁰³Karl Korsch, “Geleitwort zur neuen Ausgabe,” in Karl Marx, *Das Kapital* (Berlin, 1932), 6–33, at 31–2.

¹⁰⁴*Ibid.*, 14–17.

understanding the book. But Korsch offered some tips for approaching them.¹⁰⁵ Overall, Korsch argued, the interest of the book was enough to spur even the “unschooled” to overcome these difficulties, and thus they could grasp Marx in all his complexity.¹⁰⁶ Of course, Korsch had previously thought that some workers would be able to work through *Capital* by themselves, and he had presented his *Quintessenz* as preparation for this task. But now he posed a worker’s personal reading of *Capital*, not as the natural extension of party education, but rather as a necessary counterweight. In a defense of his text published later that year against another critical review from the KPD pedagogue Hermann Duncker, Korsch suggested that his edition of *Capital* shifted power away from party leaders, whom he attacked as “monopolists of Marxist theory.”¹⁰⁷

By 1937, and writing in English, Korsch went a step further. Criticizing what Kautsky had seen as the application of bourgeois science to the problems of the workers’ movement, Korsch argued that the “‘final goal’ which according to the words of Rosa Luxemburg should be everything, and by which the Social Democratic movement of that time was distinguished from the bourgeois reform politics, revealed itself in subsequent actual history as in fact that *nothing* which Bernstein, the sober observer of reality, had already termed it.” Korsch still opposed reformism, but he rejected the idea that the proletariat could discover their revolutionary drive through the embrace of a particular theory, especially one that bore the markings of its bourgeois heritage. Luxemburg’s error was then repeated by Lenin, who adopted a “wholly *ideological platform* ... he sought the guarantee for the ‘revolutionary’ character of the labor movement, not in its actual economic and social class content, but expressly only in the *leadership of this struggle by way of the revolutionary PARTY guided by a correct Marxist theory.*”¹⁰⁸ The following year, he extended this judgment to Marx himself, whom he now presented not as the midwife of an essentially proletarian theory, but as the spokesman of the radical revolutionary bourgeoisie. Marx thus subordinated the “multiple activities exerted by the masses in their daily class struggle to the activities exerted on their behalf by their political leaders.” Korsch countered Marx in his own words: “*the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves.*”¹⁰⁹ In his final publication, 1950’s “Ten Theses on Marxism Today,” Korsch came to the ultimate conclusion of this development: revolutionaries should break the stranglehold of Marxist theory, and instead work for the direct control by all oppressed classes over their own lives.¹¹⁰ In seeking to resist authoritarian tendencies in worker education, to find a theory that was genuinely “of, by, and for” the workers, Korsch had reached the point where he felt it necessary to jettison Marx.

¹⁰⁵Ibid., 21–7.

¹⁰⁶Ibid., 13.

¹⁰⁷Korsch, “Kommunistische Kassenkampf,” 41–2. The title of the review is a joke referring to the Communist Party’s belated attempt to bring out their own popular version of *Capital*.

¹⁰⁸Karl Korsch, “The Passing of Marxian Orthodoxy: Benstein-Kautsky-Luxemburg-Lenin,” *International Council Correspondence* 3 (1937), 10–11, original emphasis.

¹⁰⁹Karl Korsch, “Marxism and the Present Task of the Proletarian Class Struggle,” *Living Marxism* 4 (1938), 115–19, at 119, original emphasis.

¹¹⁰See Goode, *Karl Korsch*, 182.

Conclusion: Western Marxism and worker education

Korsch was not the only “Western Marxist” involved in the project of worker education. When he served as deputy commissar for culture and educational affairs in the Hungarian Soviet Republic in 1919, Lukács was charged with organizing school curricula, building a “red guard” of culture, and promoting the further development of historical materialism.¹¹¹ Education was also crucial to the political work of Antonio Gramsci. When he became leader of the Italian Communist Party in 1924, he personally organized and wrote a correspondence course for Marxist theory that enrolled six hundred students.¹¹² Like Korsch, participation in this project drove much of their later thinking. Lukács’s understanding of “class consciousness” needs to be understood in relation to the institutions and practices with which communists sought to awaken that consciousness amongst the workers, and Gramsci’s grappling with the concept of “hegemony” in the *Prison Notebooks* was in large part a reflection on the successes and failures of the PCI’s earlier attempts to bring Marxist theory to the masses.¹¹³ Moreover, as Charles Clavey has recently demonstrated, debates over the best approach to worker education form the essential background to many of the empirical studies undertaken by the Frankfurt school in the 1930s and 1940s, which in turn shaped its developing theory.¹¹⁴

“Western Marxism” as a topic of scholarly research has fallen out of fashion. In its heyday in the 1970s and 1980s, intellectual historians and others saw it as a source of sophisticated critiques of capitalism that avoided the blind alleys of Soviet ideology.¹¹⁵ Afterwards, however, scholars came to doubt whether, given the early Western Marxists’ allegiance to Lenin, there was something distinctively “Western” about their work.¹¹⁶ And, to the extent that it could be regarded as peculiarly “Western,” it seemed to reinforce a broader Eurocentrism within the Marxist tradition, given that the historical narrative at its base follows from the experience of a small number of European states.¹¹⁷ Consequently, many historians have rightfully turned attention to non-Western forms of Marxism, seeking to understand how they subverted its narrative to apply it to new situations.¹¹⁸

By foregrounding the project of worker education, however, it is possible to reassess these issues. However much he might have been initially enthused by

¹¹¹See David Kettler: “Culture and Revolution: Lukacs in the Hungarian Revolutions of 1918/19,” *Telos* 10 (1971), 35–92, at 77.

¹¹²Antonio Gramsci, *La Costruzione del Partito Comunista, 1923–1926* (Turin, 1971), 50.

¹¹³See Edward Baring, “Who Are You Calling Vulgar? Lukács, Kautsky, and the Beginnings of Western Marxism,” *Rethinking Marxism* 35/3 (2023), forthcoming.

¹¹⁴See Charles Clavey, “‘The Stereotype Takes Care of Everything’: The Critical Theory of Working-Class Antisemitism during World War II,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, forthcoming.

¹¹⁵See Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London, 1976); Martin Jay, *Marxism and Totality* (Berkeley, 1984); and Jacoby, *Dialectic of Defeat*.

¹¹⁶See, for instance, Peter Ghosh, “Gramscian Hegemony: An Absolutely Historicist Approach,” *History of European Ideas* 27/1 (2001), 1–43.

¹¹⁷For the classic articulations of these arguments see Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism* (London, 1983); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, 2000); Gayatri Spivak, *Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge, MA, 1999).

¹¹⁸See, for instance, Harry Harootunian, *Marx after Marx* (New York, 2015); Adom Getachew, *Worldmaking after Empire* (Princeton, 2019); Ben Baer, *Indigenous Vanguard* (New York, 2019).

Lenin's revolution, the ideals of worker education offered Korsch the means to separate his work from "Eastern Communism." And while their break was not always as clear or as open, similar considerations led the other Western Marxists to criticize the Soviet Union.¹¹⁹ Both within the communist camp and outside it, Western Marxists saw in worker education a way to promote revolutionary politics without subscribing to the more elitist implications of Lenin's vanguardism.

Moreover, an analysis of Western Marxism in relation to worker education offers another avenue for understanding the European specificity of their theory. As Korsch argued, intellectuals needed to adapt Marxism not just to the economic conditions in the countries in which they were working, but also to the diverging experiences and outlooks of the working class there, both to ensure that it was not an alien set of doctrines imposed from without, but also to facilitate its uptake and thus promote revolutionary action. Only then could Marxism live up to its democratic aspirations. Similar considerations led Lukács to emphasize the importance of a living connection between party and masses and thus criticize "bureaucratization." And they encouraged Gramsci to propose the cultivation of "organic intellectuals" who would develop "the philosophy of praxis" in dialogue with exploited groups.¹²⁰ Worker education might have been an international project, but it focused attention on local populations.

The demands of worker education thus led intellectuals to "provincialize" Marxist theory, but they did so consciously, aware that it would have to be provincialized differently elsewhere.¹²¹ The challenge was particularly great for those Marxists in countries without a large industrial working class. No longer able to rely on the supposed compatibility of Marxist theory with the proletariat, they had to adapt that theory to appeal to other potentially revolutionary groups. It was on these lines that José Carlos Mariátegui sought to revise Marxism to speak to indigenous groups in Peru in the 1920s, which he noted made up "four-fifths of the population."¹²² The goal was not a "copy or imitation" of European ideas, but a "heroic creation. We have to give birth to Indo-American socialism with our own reality, in our own language."¹²³ And when Léopold Sédar Senghor presented his African socialism in the 1950s and 1960s as the basis of a mass, and not simply proletarian, party, he sought to align it with what he called "Negro-African" or "Negro-Berber" ways of thinking.¹²⁴ Of course, such conceptualizations of political education could fall prey to their own phantasms,

¹¹⁹See Andrew Feenberg, "Post-utopian Marxism: Lukács and the Dilemmas of Organization," in J. McCormick, ed., *Confronting Mass Technology and Mass Democracy: Essays in Twentieth-Century German Political and Social Thought* (Durham, NC, 2002), 45–69; and Pietro Maltese, *Gramsci: Dalla scuola di partito all'anti-Bucharin* (Palermo, 2018).

¹²⁰See Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge, 1971), 319, 335–6. Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, vol. 3 (New York, 2011), 199–210.

¹²¹It provided the institutional space for what Spivak has called the "ab-use" of Marxist theory; that is, its assumption and transformation from below (*ab*). See Gayatri Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA, 2012), esp. 11–12.

¹²²José Carlos Mariátegui, *Seven Interpretative Essays on Peruvian Reality* (Austin, 1971), 16.

¹²³José Carlos Mariátegui, *An Anthology* (New York, 2011), 129.

¹²⁴See, for instance, Léopold Sédar Senghor, *On African Socialism* (New York, 1964), 72, 78. On Senghor's African socialism see Gary Wilder, *Freedom Time* (Durham, NC, 2015), Ch. 8.

idealizations of the “indigenous” or the “subaltern.”¹²⁵ But insofar as they opened up rather than foreclosed a real dialogue, they allowed Marxists to engage exploited groups not just as objects of analysis, but also as interlocutors.

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¹²⁵See on this Baer, *Indigenous Vanguard*s.

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