

## Karl Korsch: To Make the Right Marx Visible through Hegel

*Anders Bartonek*

In the following I will examine in what sense the Marxist thought of Karl Korsch (1886–1961) can be understood as a form of Hegelian Marxism, that is, how does Korsch employ Hegel with the purpose of developing a certain type of Marxism? This reconstruction of Korsch's thinking contains two main questions: first, what is the character of his Marxism? And second how can Korsch's interpretation be construed as a Hegelian Marxism? Korsch formulates his Marxist theory in contrast to several other Marxist and Social democratic alternatives, and in doing so, it is the figure of Hegel who plays a significant role in Korsch's undertaking. In 1920, Korsch began his studies of Marx and Marxism.<sup>1</sup> What initiated these studies was an investigation into whether anything had been lost in the disappearance of the Hegelian legacy from both bourgeois and Marxist thought. Here, we can say, Korsch seeks to revive Marxism with some help from Hegel's spirit. This addresses the explicitly philosophical dimension of Korsch's work. In one and the same gesture, though, he tries to keep this theoretical dimension of Marxism alive (seeking to strengthen it) at the same time he seeks to revive the revolutionary force of Marxism. Korsch's second purpose with Marxian theory is thereby essentially extra-theoretical, that is, the end of theory is to prepare and to lead to the fulfillment of the Marxist workers movement in a total social revolution, the result of which would mark the sublation of philosophy.<sup>2</sup> Seung-Hoe Koo formulates this in terms of

<sup>1</sup> Michael Buckmiller, "Zeittafel zu Karl Korsch: Leben und Werk", in Buckmiller (ed.), *Zur Aktualität von Karl Korsch* (Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1981), p. 165.

<sup>2</sup> See Patrick Goode, *Karl Korsch: A Study in Western Marxism* (London: Macmillan Press, 1979), p. 2; Gian Enrico Rusconi, "Dialektik in pragmatischer Anwendung: An-

Korsch trying to mediate the idea of the proletariat (theory) with the real movement of class (praxis).<sup>3</sup> But at the same time, Korsch continuously points to the significant role that both theory and philosophy play within this historic ambition, and it is precisely for this reason that Hegel is of especial importance. Korsch also underlines how Marx himself defended the Hegelian and dialectical heritage, even if he did this in an inverted and praxis-oriented form. According to Korsch, the role of philosophy within the movement towards revolution cannot be underestimated, even if the proletarian revolution would mean the fulfillment and end of philosophy.

Korsch's theoretical work is being performed in a context of direct political engagement and official work within political parties. During 1919 he was first a member of USPD (Unabhängige Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands) and later enrolled into the KPD (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands), and during a short period of time he was appointed as minister of justice in the coalition of SPD and KPD in 1923. Already in 1923, Korsch received harsh critique for his book *Marxism and Philosophy*, and by 1926 he was excluded from the party. A further seven years later, Korsch was forced to emigrate.<sup>4</sup> That his theoretical work had a practical purpose becomes further visible in light of a course compendium he wrote on the "quintessence" of Marxism from 1922 (*Quintessenz des Marxismus, Eine gemeinverständliche Darlegung*). There, in a pedagogical manner, Korsch presents the foundations of Marxist and communist economic theory. The compendium consists of a very general account of this theory, and is not specifically connected to Korsch's own research, theoretical work or specific Marxist position.<sup>5</sup>

Korsch's texts can to a large extent be viewed as having been written from the standpoint of Marxism, both as a theory and practice, being in crisis. In the text "The Crisis of Marxism" (1931), he endeavors to formulate this crisis. It is not just a crisis because of the direction that Marxism took after Marx and Engels, but rather it points to a crisis within Marxism itself. The attempts to identify a pure core of Marxism (the theoretical elements of

merkungen zu einer neuen Korsch-Rezeption", in Claudio Pozzoli (ed.), *Über Karl Korsch* (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1973), p. 138.

<sup>3</sup> Seung-Hoe Koo, *Karl Korsch und die Historisierung des Marxismus* (Darmstadt, 1992), p. 11.

<sup>4</sup> Koo, *Karl Korsch und die Historisierung des Marxismus*, pp. 3-14; Goode, Karl Korsch, pp. 1ff.

<sup>5</sup> Karl Korsch, *Quintessenz des Marxismus: Eine gemeinverständliche Darstellung* (Leipzig: VIVA, 1922).

which are constructed by the original architects), only then to view the historical development as a deviation from the original sources of Marxism is for Korsch precisely a symptom of this crisis. Insensitivity toward the theoretical dimension of Marxism is also essential, and Korsch writes that while Marxist theories only can be understood as the joint result of all past class struggles, theory (in his own time) no longer appears to be connected to current class struggle. What therefore is missing is a contemporary Marxist direction that really gives expression to the practical needs of the proletariat.<sup>6</sup> Korsch tries to handle this sense of crisis by formulating what a contemporary Marxism needs to be and in so doing he indirectly tries to become a spokesperson for the proletarian class. A crucial dimension of this theoretical effort is to re-actualize, via Hegel, the revolutionary and dialectical foundations of Marxism. This lesson in crisis management entails not only the development of new forms of Marxism as such, but also necessitates the relativization of earlier and other contemporary positions taken up within the fields of Marxist and social democratic theory. As Koo writes, Korsch deals with the problem surrounding theoretical positions with help from his own historical periodization of Marxism, to which I will return later.<sup>7</sup> It is precisely in being placed in such a historical overview that these positions are relativized and can be transcended.

This essay is divided into two main parts: the first one aims at presenting the central characteristics of Korsch's Marxism in three steps, while the second part aims at a reconstruction of his Hegelian Marxism. Out of Korsch's entire oeuvre, it is his *Marxism and Philosophy* (1923) and *Karl Marx* (1938) that are generally considered to be his two most important works.<sup>8</sup> Therefore these texts will be the principal objects for this study. They are of further interest here, since it is within their pages that the connection between Korsch's Marxism and the philosophy of Hegel reveals itself. Several additional texts, written during the 1920s, are relevant for this topic too, and so will also be considered. The secondary literature on Korsch's interpretation of Marx and Marxism as well as on his understanding of Hegel is generally limited;<sup>9</sup> this is especially the case regarding the

<sup>6</sup> Korsch, "The Crisis of Marxism", in Douglas Kellner (ed.), *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1977), pp. 171ff.

<sup>7</sup> Koo, *Karl Korsch und die Historisierung des Marxismus*, pp. 76ff.

<sup>8</sup> See for example, Goode, Karl Korsch, p. 1; Koo, *Karl Korsch und die Historisierung des Marxismus*, p. 8.

<sup>9</sup> For Marx, see Koo, *Karl Korsch und die Historisierung des Marxismus*; Goode, *Karl Korsch* and Tom Meisenhelder, "The Contemporary Significance of Karl Korsch's

relation of his Marxism to Hegel.<sup>10</sup> There are no studies that discuss in detail Korsch's Marxism as being Hegelian, even if the theme is touched upon more or less superficially in some contributions. This means that, for the sake of space, this particular text will not enter the most controversial questions that have been discussed in relation to Korsch, principally his understanding of Lenin.<sup>11</sup> Interest in Korsch reached its height in connection with the 1968 movement, and this interest was sustained for about ten or fifteen years after these events. This period, we can say, marked a fertile period for Marxist research in general.<sup>12</sup> Thereafter, only occasional works on Korsch's thinking have been published. With respect to the limited discussion on Korsch's Hegelian Marxism—a label that is itself questioned by different commentators—many contributions have only sought to interpret his reception of Hegel in a narrow sense: for them, Korsch is only interested in Hegel as a theoretical instrument for praxis and for purposes of fulfilling the Marxist revolutionary aim (Cerutti, Koo, Rundell). Even if this is true, it is easy to forget Korsch's other main aim with Hegel: to make Marxist theory anew with Hegel.

Marxism", *Nature, Society, and Thought*, 14:3 2001. For Hegel, see Koo, *Karl Korsch und die Historisierung des Marxismus*; Goode, *Karl Korsch* and Andrew Giles-Peters, "Dialektik und Empirismus", in: Buckmiller (ed.), *Zur Aktualität von Karl Korsch*.

<sup>10</sup> For Hegelian Marxism, see Koo, *Karl Korsch und die Historisierung des Marxismus*; Giles-Peters, "Dialektik und Empirismus"; Furio Cerutti, "Hegel, Lukács, Korsch: Zum dialektischen Selbstverständnis des kritischen Marxismus", in Oskar Negt (ed.), *Aktualität und Folgen der Philosophie Hegels* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971); John Rundell, "Karl Korsch: Historicized Dialectics" (<http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/072551368100300110>); Kellner (ed.), *Karl Korsch*, and Rusconi, "Dialektik in pragmatischer Anwendung, Anmerkungen zu einer neuen Korsch-Rezeption".

<sup>11</sup> One should also briefly mention Korsch's relation to Lenin, who was important for his thinking, not least since Lenin was influential in the return to Hegel (Goode, *Karl Korsch*, p. 70). Koo highlights Lenin's significance for Korsch, but also how Korsch later would turn against Lenin. As a member of KPD Korsch was a part of Leninist politics, but in theory he criticized Lenin's undialectical thinking. Some years after he would defend Leninism without criticism, which Koo explains in terms of Korsch's supposed ambition to find an efficient organization for Communism. First in 1927, Korsch turned away from Lenin, and one main argument is again connected to the question of dialectics: since dialectics for Lenin alone belongs within the subject and not within the object, the subject will only be able to be a reflection of the objective processes of reality (Koo, *Karl Korsch und die Historisierung des Marxismus*, pp. 32 ff. and 52ff.). But it was Lenin's early return to Hegel that inspired Korsch to do the same (Goode, *Karl Korsch*, p. 70), but in the end, Korsch understood Lenin as a philosophical, but not a dialectical materialist (Koo, *Karl Korsch und die Historisierung des Marxismus*, p. 58).

<sup>12</sup> Buckmiller, "Aspekte der internationalen Korsch-Rezeption", in Buckmiller (ed.), *Zur Aktualität von Karl Korsch*, p. 25ff.

## Korsch's Marxism

Korsch opposes several contemporary and older forms of socialism, communism and Marxism, and he seems also to have the self-image of being the righteous manager of the legacy of Marx and Engels. Korsch's Marxism, through its proximity to party politics (in contrast to so-called Western Marxism), as well as through its revolutionary character, is thereby situated in a multi-front-war. It is mainly critical towards, on the one hand, the contemporary reform-oriented social democratic tendency, and, on the other hand, towards Marxist factions, which of course were more radical than social democrats, but still had degenerated into what Korsch calls vulgar Marxism. Although in many ways different, social democracy and vulgar Marxism united around a dismissal of the revolutionary. On the one side, the critique of social democratic reformism exposed the revisionist tendencies of the social democrats; it was a standpoint entirely compatible with contemporary society. What was needed was a theory that could satisfactorily represent the economic effort of the unions and the political effort of the proletariat. On the other side, the critique of vulgar Marxism targeted an approach that was too weighed down by tradition; it held onto the original form of Marxism in a problematic way, such that it became abstract and was cut adrift from new forms of class struggle.<sup>13</sup> To sum up, one can say that Korsch's Marxism is a Marxism that remains close to party politics and a Marxism that refused to consider Marxism having been fulfilled by the Russian revolution. Rather, the revolution remains the task of Marxism. Korsch's unwavering proximity to politics marks out a notable difference to other later Western Marxists (for example Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse), who essentially chose to keep their distance from party politics in order to restore a certain theoretical independence from party interests.<sup>14</sup> A main dimension of Korsch's Marxism is also his strong will to hold onto Hegel's dialectical heritage in opposition to anti-dialectical interpretations, where Marxism becomes more a means for the acquisition of power rather than a philosophy of freedom.

Korsch's Marxism will firstly (a) be presented in a general manner, and then, secondly (b), be reconstructed in relation to the concepts of dialectics, revolution and the question of theory and praxis, and finally (c), be examined from out of its understanding of materialist history.

<sup>13</sup> Karl Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008), pp. 65ff.

<sup>14</sup> Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: NLB, 1976).

a) *General remarks on Korsch's Marxism*

A crucial question for Korsch and for this examination of his thought is the relation between the thinking of both Marx and Engels and those bourgeois thinkers antedating them, especially the philosophy of Hegel. Korsch underlines the importance of Marxist materialism from the perspective of a historical transition away from bourgeois philosophy, in particular Hegelian dialectical philosophy. Both Marx and Engels were “[i]n contrast to bourgeois thinkers (...) fully aware of the close historical connection between their materialist theory and bourgeois idealist philosophy”.<sup>15</sup> But for a Marxist materialist theory the main aim, according to Korsch, is the sublation of philosophy, despite its close connection to Hegelian philosophy and to the dialectic. In Korsch’s book *Marxism and Philosophy* therefore the question surrounding the relation between Marxism and philosophy has an important status. The task of Marxism not only consists in sublating bourgeois philosophy, as a problematic philosophy, but rather the task is to sublimate philosophy as such.<sup>16</sup> Even if socialism derived from bourgeois philosophy, for Korsch this does not necessarily mean that socialism must remain a philosophy. In the same way as Marx and Engels strive not only to transcend some certain state, but the political state as such, socialism aims at transcending philosophy as such. But according to Korsch, philosophy—or materialist theory—plays a decisive role in the struggle for social revolution. Thus an important question is, as Korsch formulates it, the following: what character does the relation between philosophy and Marxism has in that historical stage when philosophy has not yet been sublated.<sup>17</sup> Is Marxism still philosophy? Is it a philosophy working towards the sublation of philosophy? In any case, the relation between philosophy and the social revolution is a crucial issue for Korsch.<sup>18</sup>

Korsch divides the history of Marxism into three distinct phases. The first comprises of the period between 1843 to 1848, that is, from Marx’s *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right* to Marx’s and Engels’ *Communist Manifesto*. The second “begins with the bloody suppression of the Parisian proletariat in the battle of June 1848 and the reluctant crushing of all the working class’s organizations and dreams of emancipation” and lasts until around 1900. The third phase is, according to Korsch, not yet completed,

<sup>15</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 47.

<sup>16</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 49.

<sup>17</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 52.

<sup>18</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, pp. 70-71.

but is under development when he writes his book *Marxism and Philosophy*.<sup>19</sup> This three-part division contains an understanding of the history of Marxism as, during the first phase, not only a theory of societal development, understood in the terms of a dynamic totality, but also as a theory about the ongoing social revolution.<sup>20</sup> However, this revolutionary form of Marxist theory changes during the second more reactive phase. For Korsch, the scientific socialism of Marx still consists of “a theory of social revolution comprehended and practised as a living totality”,<sup>21</sup> but the different dimensions of that theory—the questions of economy, politics and ideology—are now being separated from one another, handled in isolation, for example in Marx’s *Capital*. But in Marx, this all-encompassing “practice of the revolutionary will”<sup>22</sup> is never too far from sight. The problem is that in the thinking of many of Marx’s followers Marxist theory gradually turns into “a set of purely scientific observations, without any immediate connection to the political or other practices of class struggle”.<sup>23</sup> Korsch writes:

a unified general theory of social revolution was changed into criticisms of the bourgeois economic order, of the bourgeois State, of the bourgeois system of education, of bourgeois religion, art, science and culture. These criticisms no longer necessarily develop by their very nature into revolutionary practice; they can equally well develop, into all kinds of attempts at reform, which fundamentally remain within the limits of bourgeois society and the bourgeois State, and in actual practice usually did so.<sup>24</sup>

That the materialistic understanding of history, which Marx and Engels represented, becomes undialectical in the thinking of their epigones is connected to this point.<sup>25</sup> This development leads to a division between two positions, both of which have, according to Korsch, lost contact with the task of social revolution. On the one hand: “Revisionism appears as an attempt to express in the form of a coherent theory the reformist character acquired by the economic struggles of the trade unions and the political

<sup>19</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, pp. 56-57.

<sup>20</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 57.

<sup>21</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 57.

<sup>22</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 60.

<sup>23</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 60.

<sup>24</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, pp. 63-64.

<sup>25</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 62.

struggles of the working class parties, under the influence of altered historical conditions.” On the other hand:

The so-called orthodox Marxism of this period (now a mere vulgar-marxism) appears largely as an attempt by theoreticians, weighed down by tradition, to maintain the theory of social revolution which formed the first version of Marxism, in the shape of pure theory. This theory was wholly abstract and had no practical consequences—it merely sought to reject the new reformist theories, in which the real character of the historical movement was then expressed as un-Marxist.<sup>26</sup>

The third phase has its starting point within this very situation. But now, however, a development of, and a reconnection to, a genuinely revolutionary theory occurs.<sup>27</sup> Class struggle now enters a new phase, and new theoretical developments are a response to this. Korsch is not so specific about the character of this situation, but notes that the “objectively revolutionary socio-economic position” of the working masses “no longer corresponded to (...) [the] evolutionary doctrines”, as represented by the social democratic Marxism of the second phase.<sup>28</sup> Not least Lenin re-actualized the question of the dictatorship of the proletariat.<sup>29</sup> Korsch’s own work must be understood as belonging to this phase, and he writes programmatically that Marxism must once again become what it was for Marx and Engels, namely “a theory of social revolution that comprises all areas of society as a totality”.<sup>30</sup> Koo’s observation about Korsch—that, because he understood the communist praxis of his time as itself riven with problems meant that it was necessary to return to philosophy, in general, and Hegel, in particular, in order to understand anew which praxis should be followed—appears convincing.<sup>31</sup>

### *b) Dialectics and revolution*

Central to Korsch’s Marxist philosophy is the relation between theory and praxis. The most essential reason for the need to pursue Marxist philosophy is for Korsch the need to fundamentally transform society. For the sake of this, according to Korsch, theory needs to be dialectical, and in *Marxism*

<sup>26</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 65.

<sup>27</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, pp. 67-68.

<sup>28</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 67.

<sup>29</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 68.

<sup>30</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 70.

<sup>31</sup> Koo, *Karl Korsch und die Historisierung des Marxismus*, p. 68.

and *Philosophy* he describes the relation between theory and praxis as itself essentially dialectical. But “[a]mong bourgeois scholars in the second half of the nineteenth century there was a total disregard of Hegel’s philosophy, which coincided with a complete incomprehension of the relation of philosophy to reality, and of theory to practice, which constituted the living principle of all philosophy and science in Hegel’s time.”<sup>32</sup> Not only had Hegel and this dialectical understanding of theory and praxis been forgotten within the bourgeois history of philosophy, according to Korsch, it becomes increasingly clear how

Marxists simultaneously tended in exactly the same way increasingly to forget the original meaning of the dialectical principle. Yet it was this that the two young Hegelians Marx and Engels, when they were turning away from Hegel in the 1840s, had quite deliberately rescued from German idealist philosophy and transferred to the materialist conception of history and society.<sup>33</sup>

It is not only the bourgeois canon that has forgotten Hegel and his dialectical understanding of thinking and reality, Marxism itself has placed this heritage out of sight, a legacy that, moreover, was itself formative for both Marx and Engels, despite their public criticisms of Hegel and Hegelianism. Therefore it is plausible to describe, following Michael Buckmiller, Korsch’s project as a re-actualization of the Hegelian moments within Marxist theory.<sup>34</sup> But what is the nature of the dialectical principle that Marx and Engels received from Hegel and that plays a significant role in Korsch’s own version of Marxism? Even if Hegel continuously is crucial for Korsch, I will here be mainly focusing on his Marxist view on theory and praxis as well as on dialectics. I return to Hegel later.

Korsch discusses how Marx understood the role of philosophy before a revolution as well as Marx’s understanding of the relation between philosophy and revolution as such. To begin with, Marx clearly points out that philosophy and ideology are not mere fabrications, but are rather realities in society. Korsch is quoting Marx from an early newspaper-article from 1842, where he writes that “philosophy does not stand outside the world, just as the brain does not stand outside man merely because it is not in his sto-

<sup>32</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, pp. 34-35.

<sup>33</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 35.

<sup>34</sup> Buckmiller, “Marxismus als Realität. Zur Rekonstruktion der theoretischen und politischen Entwicklung Karl Korsch’s”, in Pozzoli (ed.) *Über Karl Korsch*, p. 15.

mach.”<sup>35</sup> Marx’s understanding of philosophy contains within it not solely a critique of bourgeois philosophy. What is distinctive about this understanding is the importance it places on philosophy’s role for the possibility of revolution. This is the ambivalence of philosophy in Korsch’s thinking: on the one hand, as a problem which needs to be sublated, on the other hand as a tool for this sublation. To start with: philosophy is according to its nature already a part of the reality that it seeks to overcome. But this means that at the same time philosophy has a direct contact with this very problem-riddled reality. Not that this insight is sufficient on its own; the relation between philosophy and reality must be further determined. Marx and Engels never rejected, against the backdrop of their critique of bourgeois philosophy, philosophy as mere ideology, but rather took the step from idealistic dialectics to dialectical materialism,<sup>36</sup> which presupposes that “[i]ntellectual life should be conceived in union with social and political life, and social being and becoming (in the widest sense, as economics, politics or law) should be studied in union with social consciousness in its many different manifestations, as a real yet also ideal (or ‘ideological’) component of the historical process in general”.<sup>37</sup> This means that Marxism, in its critique of society and social consciousness, must depart from “the particular forms of consciousness which have found their scientific expression in the political economy of bourgeois society”.<sup>38</sup> In any case, Korsch shows that the tradition of Marxist-dialectical theory presupposes that the dialectical understanding of reality is the coincidence of consciousness and reality, and without it “this coincidence of consciousness and reality, a critique of political economy could never have become the major component of a theory of social revolution.”<sup>39</sup> Dialectical materialism no longer (in contrast to Hegel) sees scientific thinking as independent from the natural world; rather it views (also in contrast to Hegel) that “forms of consciousness (of bourgeois society) cannot be abolished through thought alone. These forms can only be abolished in thought and consciousness by a simultaneous practico-objective overthrow of the material relations of production themselves, which have hitherto been comprehended through these forms.”<sup>40</sup> Here, it is Korsch’s ambition to show how philosophy receives a decisive

<sup>35</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 73.

<sup>36</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, pp. 76ff.

<sup>37</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 81.

<sup>38</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 85.

<sup>39</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 89.

<sup>40</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 93.

(but limited) place in the thinking of Marx and Engels, and is not merely understood negatively or as ideology. Crucial here also is how dialectical materialism understands philosophy and reality as dialectically connected, since it is only from this vantage point that philosophy can be regarded as an effective critique of reality. Thinking and social reality must be revolutionized synchronically:

Theoretical criticism and practical overthrow are here inseparable activities, not in any abstract sense but as a concrete and real alteration of the concrete and real world of bourgeois society. Such is the most precise expression of the new materialist principle of the scientific socialism of Marx and Engels.<sup>41</sup>

In a shorter text on “Der junge Marx als aktivistischer Philosoph” (1924), Korsch discusses the question about the status of philosophy in Marx and Engels and the relation between theory and praxis. In a similar way to *Marxism and Philosophy*, he criticizes the factions of Marxism of his own time for being vulgar Marxists, because they have dropped entirely the contact to its philosophical history (here mentioned as the idealistic tradition of Kant, Fichte and Hegel) and thereby believed to have left every philosophical standpoint behind. But, according to Korsch, this has nothing to do with the dialectical materialism of Marx and Engels and their relation to their philosophical predecessors. Even if, according to Korsch, Marx and Engels were open about the origins of their own thinking, and how they sought to transmit essential dimensions of their heritage from the idealistic philosophy of Hegel, here merely negative aspects of Hegel (when it comes to theory and praxis) are highlighted. Marx tries to transcend the philosophical standpoint, but he does this by not only opposing philosophy, but rather by struggling against the world in its entirety, since this contradiction is not only theoretical, but practical. According to Korsch, Hegel indeed gave philosophy a theory-transcending and practical dimension, but this dimension only contained the insight that reason (as self-conscious spirit) was reconciled with existing reality through its concepts. In Marx, and according to the famous last thesis on Feuerbach, the task of philosophy is not merely to interpret the world, but to the change it. Korsch therefore underlines a contradiction between Hegel’s “reconciliation” and Marx’s “change”, but he remains clear that philosophy does not end being a philo-

<sup>41</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 95.

sophy because it has this revolutionary task. The ambition of philosophy to change the world means that it can no longer remain only theoretical, but rather has an extra-philosophical motivation. In the end, Korsch understands Marx's goal of carrying out its revolutionary struggle within the theoretical sphere, the purpose of which is none other than the sublation of philosophy that runs parallel with society, because philosophy cannot be sublated without being realized.<sup>42</sup> This means that philosophy in this Marxist sense must be theory-transcending and lead to praxis, while Hegel's philosophy reconciles thinking with reality, only for reality to remain untransformed.

In "The Marxist Dialectic" (1923) Korsch highlights Marx's extraordinary theoretical accomplishment for the sake of the praxis of the proletariat's class struggle. Marx gave the existing consciousness of the proletariat an adequate scientific content, seeking though to raise it to a higher level.<sup>43</sup> A main argument for Korsch here is that, within this development, the dialectical method is not something exchangeable for something else, it is instead indispensable to the whole process. Korsch writes in relation to this that "Marx's 'proletarian' dialectic" is "just that form in which the revolutionary class movement of the proletariat finds its appropriate theoretical expression."<sup>44</sup> The main purpose of this text is to highlight Marx's understanding of the dialectical method, as distinct from Hegel's, and to show that this Marxist method is closely connected to the progress of the proletariat, from its undeveloped understanding of the class problem to the scientific formulation of the class question. The proletariat can only become aware of its situation and the need to overcome it through its inherent dialectical method and movement. Where the idealistic dialectics, according to Korsch, reached its endpoint in the bourgeois state and therefore only puts an end to the relation between rich and poor within the idea, the Marxist dialectics is a dialectics that sublates the bourgeois state.<sup>45</sup>

In his text "On Materialist Dialectic" (1924) Korsch discusses the same problem and criticizes his contemporary, Marxist August Thalheimer's formulation of the idealistic dialectics as the demonstration of the connection of the determinations of thought as a system. For Korsch, the content of

<sup>42</sup> Korsch, "Der junge Marx als aktivistischer Philosoph", in *Geistige Politik* (Leipzig 1924), pp. 41-45.

<sup>43</sup> Korsch, "The Marxist Dialectic", in Kellner (ed.), *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory*, pp. 135-136.

<sup>44</sup> Korsch, "The Marxist Dialectic", p. 138.

<sup>45</sup> Korsch, "The Marxist Dialectic", pp. 135-140.

(materialist) dialectics is rather connected to the historical situation: “Apart from its respective concrete historical content a real ‘materialistic’ dialectic can state nothing at all about the determinations of thought and the relations between them.”<sup>46</sup> Materialistic dialectics is not to be understood as one of several sciences, but aims at being “applied concretely in the practice of the proletarian revolution and in a theory which is an immanent real component of this revolutionary practice.”<sup>47</sup> This means that philosophy turns into an expression of the proletariat and its struggle, and simultaneously pushes its state of consciousness forward in relation to the prevailing situation. Philosophy must be dialectically directed against the bourgeois order of society.

The dialectical method is also the topic for Korsch’s theory in a later text, entitled “Die dialektische Methode im ‘Kapital’” (1932). The question treated here is what part does this method play in Marx’s *Capital*? According to Korsch, Marx’s method is close to the rational core of dialectics in Hegel.<sup>48</sup> Once again Korsch underlines how the dialectical theory in Marx not only is dialectical when it comes to his method or scientific presentation, but the dialectical method is materialist in the sense that it becomes the adequate way to relate to and follow its object. Marx’s thinking is dialectical because it develops a science that does not aim at restoring and refining the capitalist order, but to revolutionarily overthrow it.<sup>49</sup> The dialectical method of science is not therefore external to its object, it is rather immanent to it, trying to produce its negation from within. According to Korsch, Marx continuously tries to point out how capitalist society is perishable and how it carries inner contradictions within itself.<sup>50</sup> This question of the method and heritage of *Capital* is also the theme in the preface (*Geleitwort*) that Korsch wrote for Marx’s book (1932). Here, Korsch claims that the dialectical method for Marx is not only a theoretical expression, which he uses here and there, it is rather connected to the analysis of an inner principle of the movement of history. For Korsch, dialectics makes Marx’s analysis of the entire concrete reality of society possible, its genesis

<sup>46</sup> Korsch, “On Materialist Dialectic”, in Kellner (ed.), *Karl Korsch*, p. 144.

<sup>47</sup> Korsch, “On Materialist Dialectic”, p. 144.

<sup>48</sup> Korsch, “Die dialektische Methode im ‘Kapital’”, in Korsch, *Die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung* (Frankfurt am Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1971), p. 174.

<sup>49</sup> Korsch, “Die dialektische Methode im ‘Kapital’”, p. 177.

<sup>50</sup> Korsch, “Die dialektische Methode im ‘Kapital’”, p. 177.

and progress as well as its future decay and its inherent seed to a new beginning.<sup>51</sup>

In the book *Karl Marx*, Korsch describes how Marx and Engels realized that the bourgeois and idealistic dialectics in Hegel was no longer enough for proletarian materialism. They broke with it, or rather placed dialectics on a materialist footing, entirely detached from the earlier connection to restoration. Dialectics should no longer, as in Hegel, artfully perform its movement back and forth in order to produce and present its new content by restoring the old, but to let dialectics bury the old in order to reach its scientific and materialist form.<sup>52</sup> The theoretical critique of political economy can only be fulfilled by the proletarian revolution, destroying the bourgeois order of production and changing the connected forms of consciousness.<sup>53</sup> Where Hegel only reaches a point where the alienation of civil society is sublated, Marx, according to Korsch, reminds us that this thinking is insufficient for achieving such a sublation. A practical transition is itself required.<sup>54</sup>

In the end, the form of this dialectics of thinking and reality is not entirely clear in Korsch; rather, he remains caught within formulations that simply state that thinking and reality are “connected”. If thinking is a part of reality through a dialectical relation, how specifically does this support the possibility of revolution? Indeed, Korsch’s understanding implies that the materialist dialectic must contradict bourgeois philosophy and society in order to produce the negation, which then helps the proletarian sublation of philosophy and society. However, Korsch does not present any detailed answers to how this negativity of philosophy is constituted and how it is supposed to lead to a fundamental transformation in social relations. Nor does Korsch discuss any further how the connection of thinking and reality is connected to the contradiction between, on the one hand, Marxist dialectics and its negation-producing theory, and the bourgeois order, on the other.

<sup>51</sup> Korsch, “Introduction to Capital”, in Korsch, *Three Essays on Marxism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1972), pp. 53ff.

<sup>52</sup> Korsch, *Karl Marx* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1963), pp. 61ff.

<sup>53</sup> Korsch, *Karl Marx*, p. 157.

<sup>54</sup> Korsch, *Karl Marx*, p. 133.

c) *The materialist understanding of history*

For Korsch, the question on how to properly understand history was of great importance. He wrote two texts specifically addressing the materialist understanding of history: *Kernpunkte der materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung: Eine quellenmäßige Darstellung* (1922) and “Die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung” (1929). He also broaches this issue in the later *Karl Marx*. The question whether history is materialistic or idealistic is also essentially connected to the question of the relation between Hegel and Marx.

So, then, what is to be understood as a *materialist* understanding of history? In the text from 1922, Korsch writes that Marx’s theoretical system contains a science (the new science of Marxist economy) as well as a philosophy (the new philosophical-materialistic understanding of the connection of historical societal events),<sup>55</sup> even if the descriptions of economy and philosophy are themselves not entirely unproblematic, since they remain closely bound up with established understandings. But Marxian theory is, according to Korsch, on the one hand connected to bourgeois thinking, at the same time as it seeks to exit from it,<sup>56</sup> and this ambivalence is a dialectical aspect of history. The political-economical dimension of Marx’s understanding of history departs from a critique of bourgeois ideology, but then rather focuses on the real political and economic practices in order to make the real forces that are producing history visible. Through his critique of traditional ideology Karl Marx developed his materialist standpoint, according to which the economic factor, or political economy, appears as the most important and fundamental for the historical and societal life of human kind.<sup>57</sup> This economic and materialist understanding of history and its progression is combined with the more holistic understanding of history as a dialectical mediation of all societal phenomena and a theory about how they are connected. These two dimensions in Marx are interconnected because the economy is the most important factor of mediation. This connection becomes clear when, in *Karl Marx*, Korsch writes that Marx formulates the history of human life as a progress from lower to higher forms of the organization of the materialist states of production. In this development of production lies also the possibility for the transition into a socialist and communist society, introduced and led by the modern indus-

<sup>55</sup> Korsch, *Kernpunkte der materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung: Eine quellenmäßige Darstellung* (Hamburg: Verlag Association, 1973), p. 13.

<sup>56</sup> Korsch, *Kernpunkte der materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung*, pp. 12ff.

<sup>57</sup> Korsch, *Kernpunkte der materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung*, p. 12.

trial working class.<sup>58</sup> In *Kernpunkte der materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung*, Korsch writes, in relation to this connection of economy and historical totality that the anatomy of bourgeois society must be searched for within political economy and that it is the forms of production of material life that determine the social, political and intellectual process of life.<sup>59</sup>

Korsch's understanding of history seems very close to Marx's, not least when he describes how societal being determines human consciousness and not the other way around,<sup>60</sup> or when he describes the process of production as driven by class struggle.<sup>61</sup> But what seems to be a main ambition for Korsch is to reintroduce and re-actualize a dynamic-dialectical version of Marx's thinking in his theory of history, for which Hegel is a crucial source of inspiration. Andrew Gil-Peters points to the fact that, despite understanding dialectics as a principle of methodology, Korsch mainly develops dialectics as a principle of history.<sup>62</sup> Even if, according to Korsch, Hegelian dialectics is in the end limited and only cements the bourgeois order of society, it is Hegel's principle of dialectics that Marx ultimately uses when he tries to transcend bourgeois society and philosophy. Not that this means that Hegel does not face critique. For Korsch, Marx's understanding of history contains an understanding of society dialectically developed through different forms of advancing antagonism, and for which the modern antagonism is the final and strongest.<sup>63</sup> This antagonism must in the end be dissolved through the concrete social revolution in which theory and reality are rendered identical. In this, Hegel provides only an abstract and apparent sublation of the dualism of thinking and being. The antagonism must really and practically be destroyed, it is not enough that it is sublated—conserved—as in Hegel. For Korsch, sublation is not to be understood in this conserving sense, but is rather a sublation of fundamental change and the destruction of the bourgeoisie. Reality is not changed in Hegel's sublation, but is legitimized in its historically established form. History in Korsch (and Marx) must, in contrast, lead to a total transformation of reality with help from the negating intervention of theory. And, for Korsch, this is exactly what is meant when Marx speaks of Hegel's dialectic as standing on its head (on point of fact of it being abstract and idealistic) and that what is required

<sup>58</sup> Korsch, *Karl Marx*, p. 68.

<sup>59</sup> Korsch, *Kernpunkte der materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung*, p. 15.

<sup>60</sup> Korsch, *Kernpunkte der materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung*, p. 15.

<sup>61</sup> Korsch, *Karl Marx*, pp. 167ff.

<sup>62</sup> Giles-Peters, "Dialektik und Empirismus", p. 61.

<sup>63</sup> Korsch, *Kernpunkte der materialistischen Geschichtsauffassung*, p. 15.

is that it be turned around and placed on its feet (become active, able to walk): Hegel's dialectics expressed only its formal and theoretical side, but not the historical-practical dimension, which for Korsch is necessary.<sup>64</sup>

### Korsch's Hegelian Marxism

Despite the fact that Korsch repeatedly presents Hegel's philosophy and dialectics in ways that problematizes both, Hegel nonetheless plays a crucial part in his own contribution to Marxist theory. Indeed, with John Rundell one can say that Korsch is executing a "renewed (Hegelian) analysis [of Marxism] aimed at recovering the original dialectical dimensions of Marxian social theory and philosophy".<sup>65</sup> In the book *Karl Marx*, both the affirmative and problematizing aspects come to the fore in a clear way when Korsch at one point writes of Marx's evaluation of Hegel's dialectic that it received a mystified form by which the predominant state of society was stabilized, but that the rational form of dialectics, on the other hand, as it takes form within Marxism, became a problem for bourgeois society.<sup>66</sup> It might err on the side of exaggeration to call Korsch's thinking a Hegelian Marxism—maybe this over-emphasizes Hegel's role—but Hegel surely is present in Korsch's texts, and arguably he appears most when Korsch is seeking to describe in what the "right" Marx and the "best" form of Marxism consists. To be sure, Hegel is at times only mentioned in order to delimit Marx from Hegel, but overall, Hegel is used and treated as a vital philosophical component for Marxism. Even if, for Korsch, Marx's materialist dialectics transcends Hegel's idealist dialectics it is necessary to highlight how important Hegel is for Marxism. It is precisely through the reconnection with Hegel that Korsch thinks Marxism can reconquer its revolutionary potential.

I will now show: (a) how Hegel's thinking, generally, and his understanding of dialectics, specifically, are limited according to Korsch; (b) in what way Hegel's philosophy still contains a revolutionary potential, and finally (c) I will conclude by considering the question whether Korsch's thinking can ultimately be called a Hegelian Marxism.

<sup>64</sup> Korsch, "Die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung", in Korsch *Die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung*, pp. 16-17.

<sup>65</sup> John Rundell, "Karl Korsch: Historicised Dialectics", p. 115.

<sup>66</sup> Korsch, *Karl Marx*, pp. 45ff.

a) *The limits of Hegel*

I have already suggested that Hegel's historically significant position is an expression of both his limits and his greatness. On the one hand, Korsch sees how Hegel developed the last great system of classical philosophy and therefore can be seen as the highest point of this tradition, not only as a summary of its entire process, but also through its ability to already show the inner contradictions of classical and modern bourgeois philosophy (and therefore indicates a direction out of it). In Hegel (and Ricardo) bourgeois society reaches its highest level of self-critical insight.<sup>67</sup> On the other hand, Hegel's philosophy is limited because it remains within philosophy and an idealistic version of dialectics. In part, Hegel's idealistic dialectics stay within the realm of thought and the revolution can only be a theoretical one.<sup>68</sup> In part, Hegel remains squarely within and, according to Korsch, unable to exit the bourgeois paradigm and in a materialist manner is incapable of producing the concrete and fundamental transformation needed in society.<sup>69</sup> The connection between these aspects can arguably be formulated in the following way: by remaining within the philosophical realm, Hegel has no interest in the practical task of bringing down bourgeois ideology and contributing to its end.

Here it is important to address Korsch's discussion of bourgeois society and how he understands Hegel's and Marx and Engels' relation to it. For Korsch, to begin with it is problematic that Hegel understands bourgeois society as a timeless concept: even if Hegel writes about it in terms of societal progress, he never transcends the bourgeois understanding of society. His theory of society is bound to bourgeois society and its categories.<sup>70</sup> Even if bourgeois society is understood within the frame of a metaphysical logic of progress, this concept of society is closed and can only see itself in other and earlier forms of society. The new, critical and materialist understanding of society and its concept of progress are in contrast open to all earlier forms of society to itself, viewing them as independent forms rather than as reducible to its present manifestation. As a consequence, it is the materialist understanding of society that is open to the real possibility of transcending bourgeois society. This point is related to Korsch's already mentioned critique of Hegelian dialectics, namely that it has no practical effect, but

<sup>67</sup> Korsch, *Karl Marx*, pp. 61-62.

<sup>68</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 41; Karl Marx, pp. 61ff.

<sup>69</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 93.

<sup>70</sup> Korsch, *Karl Marx*, pp. 47ff.

remains abstract, remaining within the limits of bourgeois society. In addition, Korsch argues that while for Hegel dialectics belong to the past, it is the tool for revolutionary change for Marxist materialism.<sup>71</sup> According to Korsch, Marx replaces the Hegelian “contradiction”, a category too closely tied to bourgeois society, with “class struggle”. He substitutes the dialectical “negation” with the proletariat and the dialectical “synthesis” with the proletarian revolution and the transition to a higher historical stage in the history of society.<sup>72</sup> The point here is that Marx regards bourgeois society as a perishable form of societal organization.<sup>73</sup> In Hegel, bourgeois society and the bourgeois state become the political end points. When it comes to Hegel’s understanding of the inner logic of the progress of bourgeois society, his fundamental limitation becomes apparent when he can only register the class that Marx will otherwise name the proletariat as the rabble. The rabble is something to be avoided in Hegel, it is deprived entirely of its revolutionary force.<sup>74</sup> For Marx, the proletariat is rather something that needs to be developed as a political agent.

Korsch underlines the fact that Marx took a lot of strength from Hegel’s preparatory work, but he took the idea of the state out of the political idea of progress.<sup>75</sup> Bourgeois society shall rather lead to the classless society. One can say that Korsch tries to mobilize Hegel’s revolutionary impulse beyond the frames of the bourgeoisie and to inject it into Marxism’s political struggle.

### *b) Revolution in Hegel’s thought*

Hegel’s dialectics remain a vital impulse for Korsch’s version of Marxism. Despite Hegel’s limitations, no form of dialectics, not even Hegel’s, can entirely be robbed of its revolutionary dimension. Korsch writes:

For the coincidence of consciousness and reality characterizes every dialectic, including Marx’s dialectical materialism. Its consequence is that the material relations of production of the capitalist epoch only are what they are in combination with the forms in which they are reflected in the pre-scientific and bourgeois-scientific consciousness of the period; and they could not subsist in reality without these forms of consciousness. Setting aside any philosophical considerations, it is therefore clear that without this coincidence of consciousness and reality, a critique of

<sup>71</sup> Korsch, *Karl Marx*, pp. 24, 52ff.

<sup>72</sup> Korsch, *Karl Marx*, pp. 181-182.

<sup>73</sup> Korsch, *Karl Marx*, p. 22.

<sup>74</sup> Korsch, *Karl Marx*, p. 63.

<sup>75</sup> Korsch, *Karl Marx*, p. 181.

political economy could never have become the major component of a theory of social revolution.<sup>76</sup>

This seems to soften the distance between the idealistic and materialistic dialectic, even if it does not erase it entirely. Also Hegel's dialectics seem, according to Korsch, to contain a revolutionary potential through its inherent point of departure in the coincidence of consciousness and reality. Marx and Engels clearly realize that Hegel's dialectics must be reshaped, but they still, initially and consciously, relate to Hegel.<sup>77</sup> This delimitation from the bourgeois world results in a certain amount of ambivalence on the part of Korsch, since he simultaneously must integrate Hegel in the materialist effort as well as seek to sublimate, or rather dissolve, bourgeois thinking and its concomitant societal form.

In connection to the way in which he divides Marxism into three phases, as discussed above, Korsch states how Hegel's dialectics is something to which it is important to hold on: "But the only really 'materialist and therefore scientific method' (Marx) of pursuing this analysis is to apply it to the further development of Marxism up to the present. This means that we must try to understand every change, development and revision of Marxist theory, since its original emergence from the philosophy of German Idealism, as a necessary product of its epoch (Hegel)."<sup>78</sup> This examination he discusses is that of the origin of Marxism and its process of development, as well as the necessity of dialectically understanding all its different forms within its entire historical and societal process.<sup>79</sup> This clearly shows that Hegel and his dialectics must properly be integrated into present and future Marxisms. Dialectics should not only be a method for showing how Marxist theory develops in relation to bourgeois thinking, but dialectical thinking must itself be essential for the possibility of leading thinking and society to its negation.

The philosophical development up to Hegel and beyond is not a mere event within the history of ideas; the process and progress of thought must be thought rather with respect to the societal context and the category of "social totality". This makes it possible for Korsch to connect the philo-

<sup>76</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, pp. 88-89.

<sup>77</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 90.

<sup>78</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>79</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, pp. 54ff.

sophical development with the existing revolutionary movement.<sup>80</sup> Hegel's dialectics must thereby be freed from its bourgeois framework and be transformed into a tool for materialist and political struggle. According to Korsch, "Hegel wrote that in the philosophic systems of this fundamentally revolutionary epoch, 'revolution was lodged and expressed as if in the very form of their thought.'"<sup>81</sup> For Korsch, this contains a critique of Hegel in terms of how his thinking can only lead to a revolution of thought, as well as a sign that nonetheless reveals the revolutionary dimension that can also be found there. Korsch writes that "[t]he greatest thinker produced by bourgeois society in its revolutionary period regarded a 'revolution in the form of thought' as an objective component of the total social process of a real revolution."<sup>82</sup> Surely, the formulation on revolution having its place in thought implies that the revolutionary is connected to the bourgeois process of liberation. However, this does not stop the revolutionary character of thought from being connected to the historical process. According to Korsch, the bourgeois class lost its revolutionary dimension in its societal praxis and thinking.<sup>83</sup> In Hegel's dialectics the critical and revolutionary principle was present formally, but it was used for the purposes of restoration and reconciliation, and not for change.<sup>84</sup>

In the text "Thesen über Hegel und die Revolution" (1932), Hegel's relation to the question of revolution is presented in more positive terms, or, at the very least, here the aim is to highlight Hegel's positive contribution more clearly, even if this will not mean an absence of critical remarks. Korsch starts by writing that one cannot understand Hegel and his dialectics if one does not connect it to the theme of revolution. Partly, the Hegelian dialectic was developed within the (bourgeois) revolutionary movement, and partly it succeeded in formulating this movement in thoughts. Moreover, a dialectical thinking is revolutionary on account of its formal character: it frees itself from the immediately given, assumes the principles of contradiction and negation, and contains the principles of qualitative change. Having said all this, the revolutionary dimension in Hegel is limited and leads to restoration: his thinking turns dogmatic and

<sup>80</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, pp. 40ff.

<sup>81</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 41.

<sup>82</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 41.

<sup>83</sup> Korsch, *Marxism and Philosophy*, p. 43.

<sup>84</sup> Korsch, *Karl Marx*, 55; see also Korsch, *Karl Marx* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1981), pp. 30-31.

cements the bourgeois order.<sup>85</sup> But despite this criticism, Korsch's verdict over Hegel is generally affirmative: Hegel's philosophy is not only important historically, it lies in his philosophy to be revolutionary.<sup>86</sup>

With respect to his interpretation of *Karl Marx*, Patrick Goode has described the ambivalence running through Korsch's reception of Hegel, which shifts between a materialist reading of Hegel and a critique surrounding Hegel's restorative tendencies. In the end, this is supposedly to lead Korsch to an understanding of Marx's theory as replacing Hegel's timeless system:<sup>87</sup> "Despite all 'speculative mystifications' Hegel stands out from his idealist contemporaries, the theorists of the organic state and historical school. Hegel had grasped the material relation between men and things, but had concealed this under the apparently speculative connection between concepts".<sup>88</sup> Goode puts his finger on this ambivalence, but I cannot agree with him when he writes that Korsch becomes more critical towards Hegel in his later writings (*Karl Marx*). Rather, I would prefer to say that, throughout his intellectual work, Korsch continuously highlights both positive and negative dimensions in Hegel.

Enrico Rusconi is one of a few who explicitly and thoroughly makes Korsch's understanding of dialectics his main object of analysis. Rusconi focuses on a number of texts written by Korsch around 1930, a period in which he spent most of his time engaged in theoretical reflection and was not as politically involved as before. As far as Rusconi is concerned, this often aporetic connection of theoretical and political activity is in general the most fruitful context for Korsch's work.<sup>89</sup> But this period away from politics is interesting since it clarifies the role Korsch gave to theoretical reflection. In connection with Korsch's defense of the autonomy of theory during this time, Rusconi highlights that Korsch tried to free dialectics not only from Hegel, but also from certain Marxist usages of it.<sup>90</sup> A difficulty detected by Rusconi, which Korsch had reflected upon when he tried to transfer dialectics into a materialist theory, was that dialectics needed to receive a new form and structure, it could not only be a matter of changing the name.<sup>91</sup> Of course, Korsch tries to develop a different and practically

<sup>85</sup> Korsch, "Thesen über 'Hegel und die Revolution'", in *Gegner* (3/6 1932), pp. 11-12.

<sup>86</sup> See Koo, *Karl Korsch und die Historisierung des Marxismus*, p. 64.

<sup>87</sup> Goode, *Karl Korsch*, pp. 160-161.

<sup>88</sup> Goode, *Karl Korsch*, p. 162.

<sup>89</sup> Rusconi, "Dialektik in pragmatischer Anwendung", p. 138.

<sup>90</sup> Rusconi, "Dialektik in pragmatischer Anwendung", p. 140.

<sup>91</sup> Rusconi, "Dialektik in pragmatischer Anwendung", p. 146.

potent materialist dialectics, but, as Rusconi writes, there are according to Korsch no clear criteria for how the dialectical method should be used rightly. Hegel “solves” this problem by placing dialectics on the level of the absolute.<sup>92</sup> The text which Rusconi is discussing is Korsch’s “Der Empirismus in der Hegelschen Philosophie” (1931), in which Korsch examines the connection between empiricism (within the tradition of natural science) and Hegel’s philosophy.<sup>93</sup> Rusconi’s position seems to be that it is possible to recognize a certain displacement in argumentation between this empiricism-text and the abovementioned text on Hegel and revolution. However, this is not to be understood as a contradiction. While the text on empiricism defends Hegel on a more formal and scientific level (for example, when it comes to his expansion of the concept of experience), without denying the political question, the text on revolution more clearly points toward the idea that Hegel’s philosophy already contains political dimensions within its formal character, but that these are in themselves not enough. In the end, an epistemological break must occur with Hegel in order to break definitively with the bourgeois world.<sup>94</sup> The risk of an unreflected transformation of dialectics is that it could turn into a new ideological dogma.<sup>95</sup> It is here that Rusconi’s interpretation differs from Goode’s, according to which Korsch supposedly thought that Marx’s thinking replaced Hegel’s: Hegel’s heritage was still present. Rusconi highlights Korsch’s difficult theoretical task, which, in the absence of clear criteria for the future usage of dialectics, had to navigate between Hegel’s limitations and possibilities on the one hand and the potential and existing crisis of Marxism on the other. It is insufficient to only spread dialectics to materialism, importantly one must draw the line between the positive and negative in Hegel, and also to struggle against certain uses (or non-uses) of dialectics within Marxism as well as to distinguish what in Marx and Engels’ theoretical legacy is fruitful for the future.

### c) Hegelian Marxism?

There are different positions within the research on Korsch about whether Korsch’s theory is to be understood as a Hegelian Marxist or not. On the

<sup>92</sup> Rusconi, “Dialektik in pragmatischer Anwendung”, p. 147.

<sup>93</sup> Korsch, “Der Empirismus in der Hegelschen Philosophie”, in Korsch, *Krise des Marxismus. Schriften 1928–1935* (Amsterdam: Stichting beheer IISG, 1996).

<sup>94</sup> Rusconi, “Dialektik in pragmatischer Anwendung”, pp. 149ff.

<sup>95</sup> Rusconi, “Dialektik in pragmatischer Anwendung”, p. 140.

one hand, Koo describes him as such. Koo presents Korsch's Hegelian Marxism as essentially directed against Lenin's reduction of dialectics and the relation between societal being and all forms of consciousness to a question of the relation between the subject and object of knowledge.<sup>96</sup> This connection seems quite vague. But it rather contained not only a reintroduction of the Hegelian dimensions into Marxism on a philosophical level, but a reintroduction of Hegel connected to the revival of the revolutionary and practico-critical aspects of Marx's theory. Via Habermas, Koo states that Korsch saw the possibility of saving the philosophical side of Marxism only at the price of its Hegelianization. But for Korsch, this was not only a matter for philosophy, and a strength of Korsch is not only to have opened up for new ways of interpreting Marx. Koo rather states that Korsch was interested in the revolutionary in Hegel, essential for the practical efforts of Marxism. On the contrary, as Koo points out, Korsch meant that it is only possible to understand Hegel on the prior condition that he is related to the revolution. In this regard, Korsch's Hegelian Marxism turns also into a Marxist Hegelianism.<sup>97</sup> On the other hand, Kellner writes:

Korsch's defense of the importance of philosophy and his claim that understanding the relation between Marxism and philosophy requires grasping the Hegelian roots of Marxism has given rise to the interpretation of *Marxism and Philosophy* as a classic of "Hegelian Marxism", and has led to the picture of Korsch as one of the creators of a current that was in opposition to the dominant Marxist orthodoxy.<sup>98</sup>

Kellner thinks it is inappropriate to call Korsch's theory a Hegelian Marxism, precisely because Korsch's reception of Hegel was hugely selective while also remaining generally critical towards Hegel (as well as towards Marxism).<sup>99</sup>

Kellner's objection seems reasonable and it is important to be cautious when labelling Korsch's thinking in this way. It seems hard to label Korsch a Hegelian in a one-sided fashion, and as a result the concept of Hegelian Marxism becomes uncertain. Instead it seems sufficient to regard him as a Marxist theoretician who strategically used Hegel in order to develop a Marxism needed for his own times. Still, this does not change the fact that,

<sup>96</sup> Koo, *Karl Korsch und die Historisierung des Marxismus*, p. 32.

<sup>97</sup> Koo, *Karl Korsch und die Historisierung des Marxismus*, pp. 109-111.

<sup>98</sup> Kellner (ed.), *Karl Korsch*, p. 35.

<sup>99</sup> Kellner (ed.), *Karl Korsch*, pp. 99-100.

from the 1920s onwards, Hegel becomes a steady and indispensable source for Korsch. Without Hegel we would not have Korsch's Marxism. And maybe it was as a result of going first through Hegel that Korsch realized which path is right for Marxism? From this perspective, the label of Hegelian Marxism seems reasonable after all. Even if it is a simplifying and somewhat misleading label, it nonetheless elucidates essential dimensions of Korsch's thinking.

Even Furio Cerutti, who in his text "Hegel, Lukács, Korsch, Zum dialektischen Selbstverständnis des kritischen Marxismus" (1971) discusses the Critical Marxism of Korsch and its relation to Hegel, is skeptical about the concept of "Hegel-Marxism". According to Cerutti, it is better to use the concept of Critical Marxism, instead of Hegel-Marxism or Western Marxism, since it is not the only ambition of Korsch (or Lukács) to reintroduce Hegel into Marxism. Rather such an effort is a part of the bigger project of rediscovering the revolutionary dimensions in Marx.<sup>100</sup> This is a thesis often repeated in the commentaries, but it is not always so clear that Korsch wanted to revive the philosophical dimensions of Marx's work. It is important to establish a balanced perspective on Korsch, ensuring that both these dimensions are equally attended to.

To mediate the essential focus on praxis within Marxism with the theoretical, not only as a necessary evil, but as an absolutely decisive driving force of Marxism, is not an easy task, especially with Korsch's historical situation in mind. But one can say that it was this balancing act that Korsch tried to master: how can Marxism and philosophy be brought together in such a way that both parties become stronger. Philosophical thinking in general (and Korsch's project in particular) arguably aims at strengthening the idea of praxis in Marxism and the concrete political struggle of the proletariat. Marxism and philosophy are continuously balancing on this edge: how to upgrade philosophy and its significance for the political struggle, without establishing a distance to praxis? Korsch refuses to choose between the options of theory and praxis; both are needed, but it should not be a simplifying compromise. Philosophy and politics are made stronger through this encounter. And for this non-compromise Hegel is crucial. Via Hegel, Korsch seeks to present the inherent revolutionary character of thinking and Marxism, as well as to reinforce the centrality of political struggle through this Hegelian and theoretical transformation of Marxism.

<sup>100</sup> Cerutti, "Hegel, Lukács, Korsch", p. 199.