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The Vicissitudes of the Politics of “Life:” Max Horkheimer and
Herbert Marcuse’s Reception of Phenomenology and Vitalism in Weimar Germany¹

In the 1920s and early 1930s both Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse engaged critically with phenomenology and vitalism. But their reception of these two broad and heterogeneous philosophical movements differed in important respects. Examining these differences will help us understand not only Horkheimer and Marcuse’s intellectual development and the origins of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School; it will also illuminate the important role that phenomenology and vitalism played in setting the terms of intellectual and cultural debate in Weimar Germany. Phenomenology and vitalism contributed significantly to a widespread revolt against science, positivism and rationality more generally, which began at the end of the nineteenth century and reached its peak in Weimar Germany. In what follows I will reconstruct Horkheimer and Marcuse’s reception of phenomenology and vitalism in order to illustrate how the two of them interpreted and participated in this broad critique of rationality. I would like to demonstrate, in particular, that Horkheimer became aware before Marcuse of the limitations and dangers of the increasingly popular and popularized versions of

¹ This essay is based on a paper presented in September 2006 at the conference, “Living Weimar: Between System and Self,” sponsored by the Department of Germanic Studies at the University of Indiana Bloomington. I would like to thank the participants in the conference – especially Ben Robinson, William Scheuerman, and Helmut Lethen – for their helpful comments and criticisms.

phenomenology and vitalism in Weimar. Despite his deep appreciation of phenomenology and vitalism, Horkheimer had already begun in the late 1920s to argue that these philosophical critiques of positivism were devolving into a rejection of reason as such, which played directly into the hands of increasingly powerful conservative political currents in Weimar. Marcuse, for his part, remained more enthusiastic about the phenomenological and vitalist critique of rationality until 1933. Between 1928 and 1933 Marcuse was a student of Martin Heidegger's at the University of Freiburg. During this time Marcuse developed an idiosyncratic version of Hegelian-Marxism, which incorporated key elements of Heidegger's phenomenology. It was only after Heidegger's surprising embrace of National Socialism in 1933 that Marcuse reassessed his relationship to phenomenology and vitalism.

In my reconstruction of Horkheimer's reception of phenomenology and vitalism I will draw primarily on a series of lectures he gave in the late 1920s.² The title of these lectures, "The Emancipation of Philosophy from Science," suggests the overall trajectory of Horkheimer's intellectual historical narrative. The historical point of departure for Horkheimer's lectures was the 1850s. This was a time when, as Marx put it, the decomposition of the Hegelian absolute spirit was largely complete – the widespread influence of Hegel's philosophy in Europe had given way to a new realism and a general disdain for "German metaphysics." The rapid advance of the natural and physical sciences in nineteenth-century Europe seemed to confirm August Comte's prediction that the theological and metaphysical stages of human evolution would soon give way to a

² These lectures have been published in: Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 10, ed. Alfred Schmidt (Frankfurt a.M.: Fischer, 1990), pp. 169-419.

new “positive” epoch in which science would not only guarantee unlimited progress, but would also become the sole arbiter of truth. Horkheimer demonstrates that philosophy was able to salvage a small and a rather insignificant place for itself within the changed intellectual division of labor of the 1850s, 1860s and 1870s only by subordinating itself to science and dedicating itself to working out the epistemological foundations of scientific method. Horkheimer explains the rise of neo-Kantianism in German academic philosophy in the second half of the nineteenth century precisely in these terms. The pioneers and leading figures of Neo-Kantianism, such as Hermann Cohen, returned to Kant in order to secure the epistemological foundations of the natural sciences, not to revitalize Kant’s concerns with ethics, aesthetics or metaphysics.

Horkheimer viewed the neo-Kantians as taking the first tentative step toward reestablishing the legitimacy of philosophy in a positivist epoch. But the first truly substantial attempt to break the monopoly of positivism and to reestablish philosophy as an autonomous discipline came with the publication of Edmund Husserl’s *Logical Investigations* in the year 1900.³ In that work Husserl argued that all forms of positivism, including psychology and other natural and social sciences, were relativistic insofar as their findings were always ultimately based on empirical evidence. Philosophy, on the other hand, could make justified claims to absolute truth insofar as it is based on the immutable foundation of pure logic. But Horkheimer believed that Husserl’s attempt to reestablish the logical foundations of philosophy was beset with many problems. Whereas the positivists had relied too exclusively on sense impressions, Husserl was too quick to sever philosophy from empirical considerations. Horkheimer’s critique of Husserl marks an important turning

³ For Horkheimer’s discussion of Husserl, see the lectures cited in the footnote above, pp. 299-316 and pp. 377-98.

point in his narrative of the history of recent philosophy. Whereas academic philosophy had been thoroughly subordinated to science in the late nineteenth century, Husserl's *Logical Investigations* marks the beginning of movement in the opposite direction, a movement to separate philosophy from science and, ultimately, to subordinate science to philosophy. In Husserl's case, however, Horkheimer stresses his intellectual probity and his insistence upon conceptual rigor. Although Husserl had mounted an important critique of positivism and the limitations of scientific rationality, he had by no means abandoned conceptual knowledge as such; on the contrary, he believed that his *Logical Investigations* attained a more rigorous form of philosophical knowledge, based on the immutable foundations of pure logic.

Horkheimer portrays vitalism, or *Lebensphilosophie*, as it was called in Germany, as the next historical step in the emancipation of philosophy from science. Definitions of philosophical vitalism differ, but Friedrich Nietzsche, Wilhelm Dilthey and Henri Bergson are usually considered its main representatives. Although Horkheimer does address both Nietzsche and Dilthey elsewhere in his work, in these lectures he focuses primarily on Bergson, because he best exemplified the shifting relationship between science and philosophy that interested Horkheimer.⁴ As we have seen, Husserl subordinated science to philosophy, but he still considered philosophy to be a logically rigorous and strictly theoretical undertaking. Bergson, in contrast, rejected conceptual knowledge as inadequate for the purpose of understanding reality. For Bergson, all forms of conceptual knowledge, including science, do not reveal to us the way things are "in themselves" but are instead useful devices for manipulating reality, particularly "lesser" forms of reality, such as nature or inert matter. Bergson argues that reality in its highest and most authentic form is the unceasingly active, inexhaustible creative will of life, and the further one distances oneself

⁴ Ibid., pp. 269-87, 399-419.

from this *élan vital*, the less authentic one's findings become as a form of knowledge. If one hopes to access life directly, one must rely on *intuition* not rational concepts. Horkheimer summarizes the significance of Bergson's position within the larger trajectory of recent philosophy in the following way:

Scientific knowledge, understood in the traditional theoretical sense, was given a philosophical foundation by neo-Kantianism, demoted to the position of a subordinate and particular type of knowledge by phenomenology, and completely rejected as a means of finding truth in the vitalistic philosophy of Bergson.⁵

Despite his grave criticisms of the irrationalist tendencies in Bergson's philosophy, Horkheimer also praises him for making important contributions in certain areas. For example, he viewed Bergson's rejection of the application of the mechanical methods of the natural sciences to the human psyche as an important step beyond the scientific psychology of the nineteenth century. Bergson's critique of science also pointed to the necessity of not separating conceptual knowledge from the social and historical contexts in which it is produced.

Among his contemporaries in Weimar Germany, Horkheimer considered Max Scheler to be the philosopher who developed the impulses of phenomenology and vitalism in the most fruitful and rigorous manner.⁶ Horkheimer points, for example, to Scheler's appropriation of Husserl's concept of the intuition of essences [*Wesensschau*]. Whereas for Husserl, *Wesensschau* could provide access to essences only insofar as they existed *logically*, Scheler claimed it could unlock the *metaphysical* essences of objects and provide the key to their being as such. Scheler believed, at this time, that *Wesensschau* might even help liberate Europe from the iron cage of rationalization into which it had haplessly maneuvered itself.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 400-1.

⁶ Ibid., pp. 323-33, 392-99.

In 1919, Scheler described the reenchantment of the world, which could be brought about by phenomenology, in the following glowing terms:

It will be like the first step into a garden in full bloom of someone who has been living in a dark prison for many years. And this prison will be our milieu, which has been restricted by an understanding directed merely toward the mechanical and mechanizable [Mechanisierbare], with its “civilization.” And this garden will be the colorful world of God, which we will see – if only in the distance – opening itself up and greeting us warmly. And this prisoner will be the European man of today and yesterday, who enters sighing and groaning under the burden of his own mechanisms and who, with nothing but the earth in view and with heaviness in his limbs, has forgotten his God and his world.⁷

Scheler’s evocative and provocative statements here clearly demonstrate how the abstract and philosophically rigorous doctrines of phenomenology, as formulated in Husserl’s pre-war writings, were being placed in the service of a much broader critique of civilization in the Weimar period.

But, as was the case with Husserl and Bergson, Horkheimer still took Scheler seriously as a philosopher. He recognized the important moment of truth in Scheler’s argument, while at the same time taking issue with his one-sided critique of science and rationality. Horkheimer was ultimately more concerned about the popularizations of phenomenology and vitalism than with the philosophical doctrines themselves. One important example that Horkheimer gives of such a popularization was Oswald Spengler’s *Decline of the West*, which enjoyed wide popularity in Germany in the 1920s, especially among culturally conservative circles. Horkheimer dismisses Spengler’s study as an eclectic and superficial synthesis of poorly understood material from a wide variety of fields. He is particularly vehement in his rejection of Spengler’s facile comparison of the development of human culture with the life cycle of plants. For Horkheimer, there is no comparison between genuine *Lebensphilosophie* and popularizers like Spengler. He states,

Whereas Bergson [was] very much aware of the internal difficulties associated with *Lebensphilosophie* in all its forms, insofar as it calls the absolute validity of thought and science into

⁷ Quoted by Horkheimer, *ibid.*, p. 324.

question, without, however, diminishing the emphatic claim to truth for its own arguments [...] Spengler blithely and pathetically presents his sweeping views about the relativity and transience of all types of science, indeed, of culture in general, while at the same time drawing on every page upon claims that he has appropriated [...] from this same science.⁸

Horkheimer sees this increasingly popular and superficial rejection of science, as represented in Spengler's work, as part of a larger tendency, which was anticipated and influenced by phenomenology and vitalism. Horkheimer argued that the attempt to rehabilitate metaphysics, which spread quickly from Scheler and other students of Husserl to the influential phenomenological movement as a whole, and the rejection of conceptual knowledge in favor of intuition, which characterized the popularized versions of both phenomenology and *Lebensphilosophie*, were part of a much larger cultural current in Europe during the first decades of twentieth century. Horkheimer characterizes this current in the following way:

At this point phenomenology merges with the widespread contemporary trend toward a new romanticism which has as its motto, to genuine reality, to the concrete and primordial, away from decadent, Western European, intellectualized man, and which is fascinated with primitive cultures, foreign cultures in general, classical antiquity and the Middle Ages.⁹

Not surprisingly, another defining characteristic of this intellectual and cultural movement was its rejection of the Enlightenment.¹⁰ In fact, many of its adherents viewed the Enlightenment, which had mounted the first concerted attack on metaphysics and rejected appeals to legitimacy based on authority or intuition, as the source of their problem. Horkheimer was deeply concerned about this widespread sentiment and he took it very seriously. In lectures he had given in previous semesters on the history of modern philosophy, Horkheimer devoted an inordinate amount of time to the Enlightenment.¹¹ He stressed, in particular, the need to recover the materialist and radical political impulses of the

⁸ Ibid., pp. 295-6.

⁹ Ibid., p. 331.

¹⁰ Horkheimer notes, for example, "in the last decades in Germany one has become accustomed to seeing the two words, Enlightenment and superficiality, as belonging together, even as meaning the same thing." GS 11, p. 205.

¹¹ See his "Vorlesung über die Geschichte der neueren Philosophie," in Max Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 9, ed. Alfred Schmidt (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1987), pp. 294-401.

French Enlightenment. This was truly an exceptional argument at this time, for the invidious comparison of French “civilization” to German *Kultur*, popularized by Spengler, still played an important role among Weimar intellectuals, especially those on the political right. But the critique of “shallow French civilization” was part of a popularized, nationalist version of a much deeper critique of rationality, which was by no means limited to conservative thinkers. The radical critique of scientific rationality initiated by Husserl and the vitalists also had a substantial influence on left-wing intellectuals in Weimar Germany.¹²

As noted, Horkheimer, too, recognized an important moment of truth in these criticisms. His interpretation of the history of contemporary philosophy was structured largely as a dialectic of Enlightenment which played itself out in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The dialectic began with the collapse of the original, politically and ethically driven Enlightenment project into a monolithic scientific worldview whose limitations soon became apparent. The crisis of liberalism in the late 19th and early 20th century was at the same time a crisis of an increasingly narrow concept of scientific rationality, which no longer seemed like it could realize the Enlightenment promises of a society that would guarantee more justice and happiness for all. Put another way, one of the paradoxical consequences of the Enlightenment quest to perceive reality free from the distortions of metaphysics and myth, and to bring nature under man’s control, was to undermine the very political and ethical ideals in the name of which this scientific process had been initiated in the first place. In his lectures, Horkheimer describes this process in the following way:

If no other realities existed beyond the world of physics and psychology, then the ideals which had guided the early development of this society and which justified the efforts of its individual members

¹² See, for example, *Intellektuellendiskurse in der Weimarer Republik: Zur Politischen Kultur einer Gemengelage*, ed. Gérard Raulet (Frankfurt: Campus, 1994).

– be it human dignity, morality, freedom or something similar – were at best imagined or even fictitious [...] At no other time did the consciousness of the meaninglessness of the natural reality threaten to become so strong as in the present, in which this natural reality alone is considered valid.¹³

The next step in this dialectic of Enlightenment, according to Horkheimer, was a pronounced reaction against the rational disenchantment of the world. The emergence and popularization of phenomenology and vitalism represented a sweeping return of all that positivism had repressed. The increasingly irrational forms in which this reaction manifested itself deeply troubled Horkheimer as did its tendency to reject the legacy of the Enlightenment *tout court*. For Horkheimer was convinced that the only way beyond the contemporary crisis was a discriminating reappropriation of the Enlightenment legacy. For example, Horkheimer too was convinced that the traditional model of science was in crisis, but he was not prepared to abandon science altogether. As he put it:

In response to the question of where, in my opinion, those elements are to be found that point beyond the present situation, I would say first, wherever intellectual inquiry is pursued in an upright and rigorous manner. [...] In contrast to most all of the previously mentioned philosophers, I still believe that scientific understanding and its labors will contribute more to moving beyond the current intellectual situation than those schools of thought that believe we should do without it.¹⁴

It was largely in response to this crisis that Horkheimer developed his critical theory of society in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Horkheimer's critical theory was put into practice and developed further when he became director of the Institute for Social Research in 1931. One of the main arguments I make in my forthcoming book on Horkheimer,¹⁵ but which I don't have time to spell out here, is that Horkheimer's intellectual trajectory in Weimar differed in important respects from most of the leading figures associated with the Institute for Social Research and/or Western Marxism, such as Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch and Georg Lukács. Horkheimer was less influenced by the sweeping rejection of positivism, or at least became aware of its shortcomings before the others did,

¹³ GS 10, pp. 319-20.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 332-3.

¹⁵ John Abromeit, "The Dialectic of Bourgeois Society: An Intellectual Biography of the Young Max Horkheimer, 1895-1941." Currently being reviewed for publication.

and as a result was more open to the continuing critical potential not only of the Enlightenment, but also the social sciences. Without this openness, the crucial integration of empirical social research and psychoanalysis into this Critical Theory in the early 1930s would never have occurred.

Whereas the general outlines of Horkheimer's reception of vitalism and phenomenology emerge clearly from lectures he gave in the late 1920, in order to justice to Marcuse's reception it is necessary to focus on two different phases in his intellectual development. The first phase, in the early 1920s, was defined by a lengthy dissertation he wrote at the University of Freiburg in 1922 on the subject of the German artist-novel, or *Künstlerroman*.¹⁶ Marcuse's interpretation of the *Künstlerroman* was heavily influenced by the vitalist historicism of Wilhelm Dilthey and the romantic anti-capitalism of the early Georg Lukács. During the second phase, which lasted from 1928-33, Marcuse was also in Freiburg, but this time in order to study philosophy with Martin Heidegger. During this time Marcuse wrote a series of substantial essays and a second dissertation on Hegel, in which he developed an idiosyncratic version of Hegelian Marxism, which demonstrated not only the continuing influence of Dilthey's vitalism, but also, and more importantly, an effort to appropriate certain aspects of Heidegger's phenomenology. In contrast to Horkheimer, who had already clearly recognized in the 1920s that the phenomenological and vitalist critique of science and rationalism could also be appropriated for right-wing political projects, Marcuse did not articulate a serious critique of these tendencies until after 1933, when he joined Horkheimer at the Institute

¹⁶ Herbert Marcuse, "Der Deutsche Künstlerroman," *Schriften*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978), pp. 7-343.

for Social Research. It was not just Heidegger's enthusiastic embrace of National Socialism in 1933 that made Marcuse aware of the dangers of his appropriation of vitalism and phenomenology. Marcuse had also written an article in 1931 praising Hans Freyer's attempt to provide a phenomenological foundation for sociology.¹⁷ Like Heidegger, Freyer would soon become an outspoken defender of the National Socialist "revolution from the right." In his 1934 essay, "The Struggle Against Liberalism in the Totalitarian View of the State,"¹⁸ Marcuse articulated a powerful critique of the vitalist and phenomenological currents which had prepared the way intellectually for the Nazi seizure of power. Central to Marcuse's critique and self-critique was a reevaluation of philosophical rationalism, which remained a strong tendency in his thought throughout the 1930s and which culminated in his 1940 study of Hegel, *Reason and Revolution*.¹⁹

The importance for Marcuse of the vitalist revolt against positivism and rationalism was clearly apparent in his 1922 dissertation on the German Artist-Novel. Methodologically, Marcuse's study was part of the revival of human sciences or *Geisteswissenschaften* in Germany, which had been decisively influenced by Wilhelm Dilthey. Although Horkheimer did not include Dilthey in his lectures on the "emancipation of philosophy from science," he very easily could have. Dilthey's efforts to articulate the methodological foundations of the *Geisteswissenschaften* and to separate them clearly from the *Naturwissenschaften*, represented a crucial step in overcoming the dominance of positivism in Germany in the late 19th and early 20th century. Dilthey's

¹⁷ "Zur Auseinandersetzung mit Hans Freyers 'Soziologie als Wirklichkeitswissenschaft,'" Herbert Marcuse, *Schriften*, vol. 1, op. cit., pp. 488-508.

¹⁸ Herbert Marcuse, "The Struggle Against Liberalism in the Totalitarian View of the State," *Negations*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon, 1968), pp. 3-42.

¹⁹ For Marcuse's essays from the 1930s, see the volume cited above, *Negations*.

1905 study, *Das Erlebnis und die Dichtung*, in particular, had a huge impact on the study of literature in Germany. Dilthey placed the concept of experience and the intuitive interpretation of the subjective expression of meaning in different historical epochs at the center of the human sciences. He demonstrated that the natural sciences were incapable of answering the most important questions about human existence. These questions were historical and cultural and could only be answered by the studying the meanings embedded in the cultural production of past epochs. Following Vico's *verum-factum* principle, Dilthey argued that we could understand history much better than we could nature, since we had created history ourselves and we were essentially historical beings.

In his interpretation of the German Artist-Novel, Marcuse followed Dilthey's approach in important respects. By immersing himself in this sub-genre of the *Bildungsroman*, in which artists were the main protagonists, Marcuse believed he could uncover the essence of the society and the historical epoch in which they were written. But Marcuse departed from Dilthey in one crucial respect. Whereas Dilthey had followed his mentors in the German historical school, such as Leopold von Ranke, who believed that all epochs "were equally close to God," Marcuse argued that the modern, bourgeois society was characterized precisely by a widespread loss of meaning and community, which made it qualitatively different from classical antiquity and the Middle Ages. Marcuse's argument here was clearly indebted Georg Lukács' *Theory of the Novel*, which was published in 1916 and was also heavily influenced by Dilthey. In *The Theory of the Novel*,²⁰ Lukács too argued that the essential characteristic of modern bourgeois society was that meaning no longer inhered in the totality of life. Lukács' argument rested upon a comparison of the dominant aesthetic forms in ancient Greece

²⁰ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel*, trans. Anna Bostock (Boston: MIT Press, 1971).

and modern Europe. Whereas the Homeric epic expressed the integrated civilization of ancient Greece, in which art and life were still one and meaning inhered in society, the form of the novel expressed the diremption of art and life and the loss of meaning in modern bourgeois civilization. In modernity, according to Lukács,

the old parallelism of the transcendental structure of the form-giving subject and the world of created forms has been destroyed and the ultimate basis of artistic creation has become homeless. German romanticism posited a close connection between the concept of the novel and the concept of the Romantic, and rightly so because the novel form is, like no other, an expression of this transcendental homelessness.²¹

Marcuse's study of the German Artist-Novel could be seen as an extended rumination on Lukács' poignant lament on the separation of art and life and the loss of meaning and community in modern bourgeois society.

In his study Marcuse distinguishes between two types of artist-novels: a subjective romantic version, which expresses the genre in its purest form, and an objective-realist version, which tends more toward a traditional *Bildungsroman*. Examples of the latter included Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* and the second edition of Gottfried Keller's *Der Grüne Heinrich*. In both of these novels the protagonist overcomes his alienation and his inability to reconcile his consuming interest in art and the demands of everyday life. But, Marcuse argues, this integration into bourgeois society comes at a high price. The protagonist must reduce art either to an occasional educational experience, or to a profession which no longer reflects the fundamentally critical and transcendent aesthetic ideals he once held dear. Examples of the subjective-romantic artist-novel include Karl-Philip Moritz's *Anton Reiser*, Novalis' *Heinrich von Ofterdingen* or the first edition of Gottfried Keller's *Der Grüne Heinrich*. In these and the other romantic artist-novels Marcuse discusses, the protagonist sees no possibility of

²¹ Ibid., pp. 40-1.

a reconciling himself with bourgeois society; he remains alienated and usually suffers a tragic fate. In both types of artist-novels, however, Marcuse argues that the form of the novel reflects the fact that life has become “prosaic” in modern bourgeois society, that the “integrated totalities” of classical antiquity, in which art and life were still unified and meaning inhered in the social totality, no longer existed. As Marcuse states in the introduction to his study: “The artist-novel is not possible until the unity of art and life is sundered, the artist is no longer satisfied with the existing forms of life and he or she awakes to self-consciousness.”²² This yearning for meaning and community, which is projected onto classical antiquity or other pre-modern social forms clearly mark both Lukács’ and Marcuse’s youthful works as romantic revolts against capitalist modernization. Marcuse’s study of the German artist novel was at the same time a vitalist inspired critique of the instrumental rationality of bourgeois society. As such it can certainly be seen as part of the broader revolt against positivism in Germany at this time, which Horkheimer outlined in his lectures.

Marcuse’s concern with the alienation and reification of “life” in modern bourgeois societies would remain an important theme in his writings between 1928 and 1933.²³ In 1928 Marcuse returned to the University of Freiburg to study with Martin Heidegger. By the mid 1920s Marcuse had, like Lukács, moved from a romantic critique of bourgeois society to a revolutionary Hegelian-Marxism. Marcuse had participated in a revolutionary soldiers’ council in Berlin in 1918-19 and sympathized with the Independent Socialist Party (USPD) and early Communist Party (KPD), so his transition

²² “Der Deutsche Künstlerroman,” p. 12 (my translation).

²³ For Marcuse’s essays from this period, see Herbert Marcuse, *Heideggerian Marxism*, eds. John Abromeit and Richard Wolin (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005).

to a critical Marxist position in the mid 1920s was not surprising. More enigmatic is why a young leftist like Marcuse would be attracted to Heidegger, whose attempts to recover the question of the meaning of Being seemed very far removed from the pressing concerns of crisis-ridden Weimar Germany. In contrast to many of Heidegger's students at this time, Marcuse's deeper commitments to Hegelian Marxism prevented him from ever becoming a disciple of Heidegger. His interest in Heidegger's philosophy was instrumental from the very beginning. Marcuse believed that certain aspects of Heideggerian phenomenology could contribute to a revitalization of Marxist theory and practice. Marcuse was critical of both the reformism of the German Social Democratic Party and the "Dialectical Materialism" which had become official doctrine in the Soviet Union. Marcuse believed the theoretical shortcomings of both could be traced back to the influence of positivism, which had influenced not only "bourgeois" philosophy, but also Marxist theory as well. As Lucien Goldman would put it later, in a comparative study of Lukács and Heidegger:

The evolution from Marx to Bernstein, Kautsky and Plekhanov is quite homologous to that which caused the German university philosophy of Hegel and the Young Hegelians to pass, via Schopenhauer and Haym, to Neo-Kantianism and university positivism. It was in relation to this positivism, both university and Marxist, that the beginning of the century was to produce a rather profound break.²⁴

Goldman goes on to argue that Lukács' critique of reification in *History and Class*

Consciousness and Heidegger's critique of Western rationality in *Being and Time*

resemble one another in crucial ways. His demonstration that both Lukács and Heidegger were reacting against positivism helps us make sense of Marcuse's interest in Heidegger.

There were two aspects of Heidegger's phenomenology, in particular, which Marcuse believed could contribute to overcoming the positivist depredations of Marxist theory:

²⁴ Lucien Goldmann, *Lukács and Heidegger: Toward a New Philosophy*, trans. William Q. Boelhower (London: Routledge, 1977), p. 3.

first, Heidegger's critique of the rationalist concept of subjectivity and, second, his ontological concept of historicity.

One of Heidegger's main aims in *Being and Time* was to demonstrate how an abstract rationalist notion of time and subjectivity had dominated Western philosophy since classical antiquity. According to Heidegger, this tendency had already become dominant in the philosophy of Aristotle, as could be seen by his definition of time in terms of abstract notions of space.²⁵ The tradition of abstract rationalism was rearticulated and reinforced at the beginning of the modern period by Descartes, who reduced subjectivity, as *ego cogito*, to an external and passive observer of mechanical natural laws.²⁶ According to Heidegger, nineteenth-century positivism was simply a more advanced version of the dominant rationalist tendency in Western philosophy. One of the most important consequences of the positivist reliance upon natural scientific methodology was its attempt to eliminate the role of the subject in the process of knowledge. The natural sciences were supposed to produce "objective" truths through rational reflection and empirical experimentation. Truth obtained in this manner could be reproduced by any individual anywhere willing to engage in the same process of reflection or to replicate the same experiments. Thus, for positivism, the implicit collective subject of scientific knowledge was a passive, knowing subject who exists outside the world and has no effect upon its operation. It is what Heidegger would call a "world-less" subject. It is fundamentally an *epistemological* subject insofar as its primary purpose is to obtain knowledge and insofar as it rests upon a fundamental distinction between a knowing subject and a known object. To provide an alternative to

²⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper, 1962), p. 472-84.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 122-34.

this “world-less” epistemological subject Heidegger engaged in an existential analytic of Dasein, which he calls “Being-*in*-the-world.” In other words, Heidegger analyzes the *ontological* foundations of subjectivity and the ways in which subjectivity is always already embedded in particular contexts of meaning and action. Heidegger attempted to demonstrate how the concrete particularity and ontological characteristics of human Dasein have been consistently obscured by the rationalist conception of subjectivity that has dominated Western philosophy and Western science.

Insofar as Marxist theory had been contaminated by the passive, epistemological conception of subjectivity implicit in positivism, Marcuse believed it could benefit from a critical appropriation of Heideggerian phenomenology. Anticipating similar arguments by his future colleague Walter Benjamin, Marcuse rejected the quietist view that Marx had discovered the scientific laws which proved the inevitability of socialism. This overemphasis on the “scientific” character of Marx’s theory, which dominated the Second International, had led to the revisionism of the Social Democrats and the vanguardism of the Bolsheviks, which both viewed the working class as passive objects. But in his 1928 article, “Contributions to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism,” Marcuse argued that “The truths of Marxism are not truths of knowing, but rather truths of happening.”²⁷ Marcuse’s appropriation here of the Heideggerian concept of “happening” (Geschehen), demonstrated his conviction that contemporary Marxist theory could be revitalized by Heidegger’s attempts to reveal the *ontological* foundations of subjectivity, which had been concealed by the rationalist tradition of Western philosophy. Heidegger’s efforts in *Being and Time* to uncover the ontological foundations of Dasein, culminated in his claim that Dasein is by its very nature a *historical* being. With his

²⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *Heideggerian Marxism*, op. cit., p. 1.

concept of *historicity*, Heidegger offered an alternative to the various inauthentic modes of Being-in-the-World, to which Dasein could fall prey. Living authentically, in accord with the ontological historicity of Dasein, was possible only by tearing oneself away from the bad immediacy of the present, consciously appropriating the past and realizing its highest potential in future-oriented activity. It is not difficult to see why this ontological concept of historicity, which posited a fundamentally active concept of subjectivity, appealed greatly to Marcuse, who was determined to overcome positivist influences on Marxist theory.

While he was studying with Heidegger in Freiburg, Marcuse became increasingly interested in the philosophical origins of Marx's critical theory. Like Lukács, Marcuse believed that the serious shortcomings of the dominant positivist interpretation of Marx could be countered by reexamining Marx's theoretical debt to Hegel. This was precisely the project that Marcuse attempted to carry out in the *Habilitationsschrift*, *Hegel's Ontology and the Theory of Historicity*, which was published in 1932.²⁸ As the title of the study suggests, Marcuse was still very much interested in Heideggerian phenomenology and in the concept of historicity, in particular. In his *Habilitationsschrift*, Marcuse argues that Heidegger's concept of historicity was based on Wilhelm Dilthey's concept of "life," which Dilthey, in turn, had taken from Hegel's early writings.²⁹ Thus, in order to examine the ontological foundations of historicity, Marcuse undertakes a sweeping reinterpretation of Hegel's work as a whole. The unifying and guiding thread of Marcuse's interpretation of Hegel was the distinction between *epistemological* and *ontological* notions of subjectivity, as suggested by Heidegger.

²⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *Hegel's Ontology and the Theory of Historicity*, trans. Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987).

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

Marcuse tries to demonstrate, in particular, how the concept of “life” in Hegel’s early writings expressed the fundamentally critical and active “ontological” tendency in his thought, but that this tendency was increasingly marginalized and finally eliminated altogether by the “epistemological” tendency in Hegel’s later work, which stressed the ultimate primacy of absolute knowledge.

Although still couched in Heideggerian terminology, Marcuse’s study was clearly an attempt to uncover the origins of the Marxian dialectic in Hegel’s philosophy. Marcuse’s explorations of the philosophical origins of Marx’s theory in Hegel’s thought had begun to push him away from Heidegger. The publication of Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts* in 1932 was further evidence for Marcuse that the philosophical resources needed to overcome the positivist depredations of Marx’s theory could be found in Marx’s own early work. By the end of 1932 the need to supplement Marxism with Heideggerian phenomenology no longer seemed as urgent to Marcuse.³⁰

Even though Marcuse began to move away from Heidegger in the early 1930s, he did not fully break with him until 1933, when Heidegger became an outspoken supporter of the National Socialists. As we have seen, not only Heidegger’s phenomenology, but also Dilthey’s vitalism remained a strong presence in Marcuse’s thought in the early 1930s. Further evidence of Marcuse’s continued fascination with phenomenology and vitalism – but also of the potential dangers of this fascination – can be found in an article that Marcuse wrote in 1931 about the German sociologist Hans Freyer. Although Marcuse’s engagement with Freyer was not as profound as his engagement with Heidegger, it is instructive insofar as Freyer’s theoretical position during the Weimar

³⁰ See my piece, “Herbert Marcuse’s Critical Encounter with Martin Heidegger, 1928-33” *Herbert Marcuse: A Critical Reader*, eds. John Abromeit and W. Mark Cobb (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 131-51.

period was quite similar to Marcuse's. The fact that Marcuse praised Freyer as late as 1931, shortly before Freyer published an open defense of a "revolution from the right,"³¹ highlights the precarious position into which his reception of phenomenology and vitalism had led him.

Before and during WWI, Freyer had been heavily involved in the German youth movement. His first publication, *Antäus*, was an collection of expressionist prose poems and aphorisms that was written during Freyer's combat duty in the trenches on the Western front. It was warmly received, not just among the youth movement, but also by leading intellectuals of the period on both the left and the right. In the 1920s, Freyer developed a theoretical position that was – like Marcuse's – heavily influenced by Dilthey and by his vitalist interpretation of Hegel, in particular. Also like Marcuse, Freyer was very much interested in Marx. In the late 1920s, Freyer defined sociology as the self-reflexive "science of the class society of high capitalism."³² At a time when its leading thinkers were trying to depoliticize sociology in order to establish it as a legitimate scientific discipline, Freyer railed against value-neutrality and insisted that sociology was political by its very nature. Freyer's arguments carried some weight, particularly after 1925 when he became the first person in Germany appointed to a professorship solely for sociology, at the University of Leipzig. Freyer's work was praised in the 1920s by other luminaries in the field, such as Georg Simmel, Karl Mannheim and even the young American, Talcott Parsons. Freyer went on to form the "Leipzig School" of sociology, whose members included his students Arnold Gehlen and Helmut Schelsky. But Freyer was also one of the most prominent Weimar intellectuals in

³¹ Hans Freyer, *Revolution von Rechts* (Jena: E. Diedrichs, 1931).

³² Hans Freyer, *Soziologie als Wirklichkeitswissenschaft: Logische Grundlegung des Systems der Soziologie* (Stuttgart: B.G. Teubner, 1930), p. 8.

the so-called conservative revolutionary camp. Although he became disillusioned with the Nazis fairly quickly, between the years 1931-5, he actively supported a “revolution from the right” in Germany and he believed that the National Socialist “movement” could perhaps bring about this transformation.³³

The article Marcuse wrote on Freyer in 1931 was a review essay of a study Freyer had published the year before called *Soziologie als Wirklichkeitswissenschaft* (Sociology as a Science of Reality). The title of Freyer’s study highlights his critique of overly rationalistic approaches to the study of society, which he called *Logoswissenschaften*. With this term Freyer criticized not only the mainstream German sociology of a Weber or Tönnies, but also Dilthey. Despite his praiseworthy efforts to recover Hegel’s philosophy and to separate the human sciences from the natural sciences, Freyer believed that Dilthey’s method remained too beholden to the rational core of Hegel’s philosophy, i.e. to *Geist* and its logocentric ideal of absolute knowledge. According to Freyer, it was not enough for sociology to be a *Logoswissenschaft*, it must become a *Wirklichkeitswissenschaft*, which recognizes and studies the non-rational sources of social and cultural institutions and dominant forms of knowledge. Everything that Hegel considered “objective spirit” had its origins in the non-rational processes of human “life” and voluntary acts of subjective will. By recovering the non-rational and subjective foundations of society, sociology as a science of reality would also become more conscious of its own role in *changing* society. Freyer argued that all previous attempts to found a science of society, including Dilthey, have had a passive epistemological relationship to their object. Freyer takes recourse to phenomenology in order to lay the

³³ For a description of Freyer’s politics during this time, see Jerry Z. Muller, *The Other God That Failed: Hans Freyer and the Deradicalization of German Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1987), pp. 122-61 and 223-66.

foundations for a more active approach which insists that the study of society is also necessarily linked to its transformation. According to Freyer, in other words, sociology should not just interpret the world, but should also play an active, even revolutionary role in *changing* it.

The deceptive proximity of Freyer's understanding of sociology to Marx's emphasis on the unity of theory and praxis helps explain Marcuse's interest in Freyer. Marcuse praised Freyer's *Soziologie als Wirklichkeitswissenschaft* "as the most profound attempt at theoretical self-reflection in contemporary sociology; indeed, in comparison to the other theoretical and methodological discussions of sociology that exist, it is the only radical attempt at self-reflection that exists at all."³⁴ Marcuse praises Freyer, in particular, for recognizing that the foundations of sociology must be sought in philosophy, and for turning to phenomenology, Dilthey's vitalist historicism, Hegel and Marx in order to recover these foundations. In addition, Marcuse praises Freyer's critique of mainstream sociology as a *Logoswissenschaft* as well as his recourse to the concepts of life and historicity in order to recover its active, political dimension. Indeed, for Marcuse, Freyer does not go far enough in this direction. Marcuse argues that Freyer's attempts to establish sociology as a *system* and his unbroken belief in the existence of a timeless realm of the spirit are irreconcilable with his desire to reestablish sociology as a self-reflexive and thoroughly historical critique of modern bourgeois society. In order to criticize these remnants of traditional scientific methodology and idealism that still existed in Freyer's work, Marcuse takes recourse to a Heideggerian concept of historicity. Marcuse argues that the full historicity of sociology can only be established by recovering the ontological characteristics of Dasein. But Marcuse moves

³⁴ *Schriften*, vol. 1, p. 488.

beyond Heidegger to Marx, when he argues that these ontological structures have been suppressed, not by an obscure process of *Seinsvergessenheit*, which has its roots in the rationalistic biases of ancient Greek philosophy, but in the proliferation of the commodity form and the rise of abstract labor in modern capitalism. Marcuse would attempt to explain this “theory of historicity” in detail in his *Habilitationschrift* on Hegel. For now, it must suffice for us to note that Marcuse’s interest in Dilthey’s vitalist historicism and Heidegger’s phenomenology had brought him very close indeed to Hans Freyer’s project of establishing a philosophical foundation for sociology based on the phenomenological concept of historicity and the vitalist notion of life.

During the next two years, Freyer would publish an inflammatory political tract called “Revolution from the Right;” Heidegger would embrace National Socialism, and Marcuse would be forced to flee Germany. While in exile in Geneva and later in New York, Marcuse wrote an essay for the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, i.e. the house journal of Max Horkheimer’s Institute for Social Research, for which Marcuse was now working. In this essay, which was called “The Struggle Against Liberalism in the Totalitarian View of the State,” Marcuse articulated for the first time a serious critique of those aspects of vitalism and phenomenology which had prepared the way ideologically for the Nazi seizure of power. Marcuse’s critique focused, in particular, on two broad tendencies, which he labeled “irrationalistic naturalism” and “political existentialism.” Although Marcuse included *Lebensphilosophie* under the rubric of “irrationalistic naturalism,” he was, like Horkheimer, careful to distinguish the proponents of vitalism who had made genuine philosophical contributions from those who developed a popularized version which contributed to the spread of various irrational ideologies in

Weimar Germany. Marcuse placed Dilthey and Nietzsche in the former camp, since their work was of the first order philosophically and represented a legitimate critique of the limits of the late nineteenth-century liberal notion of rationality. In the latter camp Marcuse placed a number of conservative, conservative revolutionary and openly Nazi philosophers and literary figures, including Oswald Spengler, Müller van den Brück, Ernst Jünger, Ludwig Klages, Ernst Krieck and Alfred Bäumler.

Marcuse identified several broad tendencies that unified these purveyors of “irrationalistic naturalism.”³⁵ First, all of them subordinated reason to irrational and putatively “natural” givens, which were accorded the power of ineluctable and irrefutable norms. In the crudest manifestations of this ideological worldview, irrationalist and allegedly natural sources of life, such as “race” and “blood and soil” acquired the status of such unquestionable norms. The second primary characteristic of “irrationalist naturalism,” according to Marcuse, is a “depravation of history” and a reduction of history to affirmative myth. Marcuse even extends his critique of the denigration of history to Heidegger’s concept of historicity, which had been so important for his own writings prior to 1933. In a clear reference to Heidegger’s alarming political development, Marcuse writes, “the strong emphasis on the historicity of existence reveals itself as empty [...] Genuine historicity presupposes a cognitive relation of existence to the forces of history and, derived from it, the theoretical and practical critique of these forces. But in existential anthropology the corresponding relation is limited to one of accepting a ‘mandate’ issued to existence by the ‘folk’.”³⁶

³⁵ “The Struggle Against Liberalism...”, op. cit., pp. 5-6.

³⁶ Ibid., p. 34-5.

Marcuse's reference to "existential anthropology" here, points to the second main category in his critique of phenomenology and vitalism, namely "political existentialism." With this term Marcuse targets not only Heidegger, but also Carl Schmitt. Marcuse refers to "political existentialism" in order to distinguish it from "philosophical existentialism." Even after 1933, Marcuse maintained his conviction that Heidegger had made important contributions to philosophy, but that the political realization of his ideals also revealed some serious shortcomings in his philosophy. The same could be said for Schmitt. Marcuse is less willing to separate Schmitt's theory from his politics, but at one point in the essay he does acknowledge the "brilliance" of Schmitt's critique of "liberal rationalism."³⁷ Once again, however, the partial realization of Schmitt's political ideals of the total state left no doubt about the fundamental problems in his work. Marcuse identifies several characteristics which define the "political existentialism" of Heidegger and Schmitt: their voluntarism and decisionism, their theory of the total state, and their abstract negation of the rationalism and political ideals of the Enlightenment. Marcuse describes the voluntarism and decisionism of political existentialism in terms of a "total activation, concretization and politicization of all dimensions of existence. [...] The autonomy of thought and the objectivity and neutrality of science are repudiated as heresy or even as a political falsification on the part of liberalism."³⁸ Marcuse goes on to describe the "sorry picture that 'existential' anthropology paints of active man. He acts – but he knows not what for. He acts – but he has not even decided for himself in favor of what he acts. He simply 'takes sides' or

³⁷ Ibid., p. 272.

³⁸ Ibid., p. 33.

‘goes into action’ [...] This anthropology derives its pathos from a radical devaluation of *Logos* as knowledge that reveals and decides.”³⁹

Marcuse then demonstrates how the voluntarism and decisionism of political existentialism leads to a theory of the total state. He writes,

The existential as such is exempt from any rational standard or norm lying beyond it; it is itself the absolute norm and is inaccessible to any and all rational criticism and justification. Accordingly, political conditions and relationships are now posited as the most emphatically significant factors ‘deciding’ existence. And within the political sphere all relationships are oriented in turn toward the most extreme ‘crisis’ [...] The true possessor of political power is defined as beyond all legality and legitimacy: “Sovereign is he who decides on the state of emergency.”⁴⁰

Marcuse goes on to show how the non-conformist, “authentic” individual, with which philosophical existentialism had begun, is reduced to blind obedience to the “community of destiny” and the total state. Summing up Heidegger’s development on this particular issue, Marcuse writes,

In philosophy, existentialism begins as the antagonist in a great debate with Western rationalism and idealism, intending to save their conceptual content by injecting it into the historical concretion of individual existence. It ends by radically denying its own origin; the struggle against reason drives it blindly into the arms of the powers that be.⁴¹

In short, what began as a justified critique of the limits of liberal rationality, its inability fully to realize the political ideals of the Enlightenment, ended as an abstract negation of those ideals themselves. Rather than attempting to preserve and build upon those ideals to develop a rational critique of liberalism, as Hegel and Marx had both done, political existentialism falls behind the critical ideals of the Enlightenment into an irrational affirmation of the status quo.

Thus, in the end, Marcuse developed a critique of phenomenology and vitalism which was quite similar to that of Horkheimer. Like Horkheimer, Marcuse recognized the truth content of its original critique of positivism and liberal rationalism at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. But the popularization and politicization of

³⁹ Ibid., p. 34.

⁴⁰ Ibid., pp. 35-6.

⁴¹ Ibid., p. 40.

phenomenology and vitalism, which reached its peak in the Weimar period, eventually transformed this critical truth into an apologetic and irrational defense of an authoritarian regime. Against these developments, both Horkheimer and Marcuse attempted to recover the critical content of Enlightenment rationalism and materialism. This reevaluation of rationalism and materialism continued to play a strong role in Marcuse's thought through the 1940s. It culminated in his pathbreaking study of Hegel's critical and dialectical rationalism, *Reason and Revolution*.⁴² Whereas Marcuse had placed the concept of "life" at the center of *Habilitationschrift* on Hegel, written in 1932 for Heidegger, in *Reason and Revolution*, Marcuse interpreted Hegel's philosophy as attempt to preserve and rework the critical rationalism of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution.

We have seen how Horkheimer began vigorously defending the Enlightenment in general, and the critical political thrust of the French Enlightenment in particular, already in the 1920s. But it is interesting to note that Horkheimer's interpretation of the Enlightenment began to shift in the mid-1930s. After he had emigrated to the U.S. and began to see how dominant the positivist tradition still was in the U.S., Horkheimer believed a critique of the limitations of positivism was still important. This tendency was reinforced by Horkheimer's increasing proximity to Adorno, who finally joined the Institute as a full time member in 1938. Horkheimer's collaboration with Adorno's in the next few years would, of course, result in the publication of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in 1944. The predominantly pessimistic view of the Enlightenment and the sciences put forth in that book has obscured the much more positive assessment of the Enlightenment and the sciences which Horkheimer articulated in his early work, largely in response to

⁴² Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (New York: Oxford UP, 1941).

popularized versions of phenomenology and vitalism. I think it is important to recover the defense of the tradition of critical Enlightenment rationalism and materialism, which one finds in the early thought of Horkheimer – and Marcuse as well – in order to distinguish them more clearly from recent post-structuralist critiques of reason and to counter the claims of Jürgen Habermas and others that the early Critical Theorists defended a totalizing critique of modernity.