

The Legacy of Dewey and Gramsci for Critically Interpreting Interaction

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Keywords: social relations; mutual shared understandings; individuality; John Dewey; Antonio Gramsci; Max Horkheimer; Jürgen Habermas

John Dewey and the Crisis of Twentieth Century Liberalism

The twentieth century saw the rise and fall of authoritarian forms of State communism in many parts of the world. It also witnessed the end of laissez faire liberalism.

For western democracies in Europe and the U.S, the most tumultuous period of history was assuredly the one between the two World Wars. War, along with the Great Depression helped foster general doubt about the peaceful future of pluralist societies. Liberal intellectuals were hard pressed to come up with solutions to the social and economic problems of modern capitalism. As Marx predicted in *The Communist Manifesto*¹ as well as in the pages of *Capital*², the bourgeoisie was creating economic forces that it could no longer master.

Economic instability, social unrest and political organization of the working class combined to create a potentially revolutionary situation. Yet the radical transformation from capitalism to communism never occurred in western democracies. Some liberal intellectuals, such as John Dewey, viewed this as proof that the Hegelian dialectic Marx borrowed to develop a materialist conception of history was fundamentally mistaken. The violent overthrow of capitalism would never occur so long as liberal intellectuals

¹ Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, *Manifesto of the Communist Party in Selected Works Volume One*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1983 (1848)

² Karl Marx, *Capital Volume One, A Critique of Political Economy*, London, Penguin, 1990 (1867)

provided radical reforms to peacefully adapt society to the changing economic circumstances.

In his *Prison Notebooks*, Italian Communist Antonio Gramsci wrote about the resistance of capitalism to revolution. He studied the evolution and predominance of bourgeois elements in civil society in the most economically developed states. Gramsci said that the hegemony of bourgeois policy and ideology managed to stave off a radical transformation of the economy and the State.

For his part, in *The Eclipse of Reason*, Horkheimer also wrote that the restructuring of the economy from small enterprise capitalism to large and powerful corporations completely changed the face of liberalism. This new economic reality, combined with the rise of totalitarian states and ideologies, prevented individuals from recognizing the necessity of changing the world. Reification and alienation were becoming universal. The best that could be done was to try and defend whatever liberty and equality was left.

John Dewey wrote in *Liberalism and Social Action* that liberal thought could be traced far back as the ancient Greeks - but was not explicitly expressed until the time of John Locke in the seventeenth century. This modern liberalism focused mainly on individual political rights. It aimed to protect individual freedom from the oppression of government and allow for the maximization of personal initiative. Dewey said that “The outstanding points of Locke’s version of liberalism are that governments are instituted to protect the rights that belonged to individuals prior to political organization of social relations”.³

³ John Dewey, *Liberalism and Social Action*, New York, Capricorn Books, 1963 (1935), p.4

Dewey saw in this promotion of individual rights one of the origins for the later development of a more economic strand of liberalism. This new strand tended to oppose the individual and the free market to society and the government. It also viewed any political intervention in economic affairs as a dangerous encroachment of political power into the domain of personal liberty. The focus of economic liberalism was purely on the defense of private property and the accumulation of wealth. The maintenance of this narrow view well beyond its socio-political utility for humanity was, according to Dewey, a main cause of the crisis of liberalism in the twentieth century.

As material and productive forces developed in England during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, liberal thought tended to become more interested in the study of laws governing economic development rather than the study of pure political theory. Adam Smith was the first to clearly present the view that the free, untrammelled economic activity of individuals was the source of progress and economic welfare.

Dewey noticed that though many ideas on productive labour found in Smith's work were derived from the French Physiocrats, he made one major modification to their theory. Smith said that agricultural labour was not the only productive form of human labour. He put forth that labour in general was the source of all wealth. This was an important advance for political economy as well as the starting point for Marx's eventual criticism of capitalism.

The major discoveries of laissez faire economics eventually bled into other areas of human organization. Dewey singled out Jeremy Bentham as an experimental liberal. Dewey presented Bentham as the first modern "pragmatist" thinker in action "Bentham's assault was aimed directly, not indirectly, like the theory of the economists, upon

everything existing law and judicial procedure that inflicted unnecessary pain and that limited the acquisition of pleasures by individuals.”⁴ Legal and political reforms were proposed in order to minimize unnecessary government intervention. This seemed like the natural step towards creating a better society in harmony with the natural laws of political economy.

Dewey pointed to Jeremy Bentham as a model for the liberal social engineer. According to Dewey, the reforms enacted or inspired by Jeremy Bentham were highly instrumental and helped England manage its economic growing pains during the industrial revolution. Dewey also wrote about the role of the liberal intellectual. Then as now the liberal interventionist intellectual was someone who could perform great services to society and allow for radical transformations without degeneration into class warfare or violence.

Dewey believed that a radical liberal reform program could not be developed first within the governmental apparatus. New ideas needed first to develop from within civil society and convince people of the necessity of change. This was close to Gramsci’s idea of winning hegemony through active consent. But Dewey thought that individual intellectuals could perform this miracle practically alone. Gramsci clearly understood that although the individual contributions of intellectuals could be of great importance they were not sufficient to bring about real change. He felt, contrary to Dewey, that in the development of new political reforms individual intellectuals no longer sufficed to transform worldviews on a massive scale.

For Gramsci only a collective agency, such as a political party, could develop organic intellectuals capable of uniting socio-political forces on a national scale. Dewey

⁴ Ibid, p.12

never quite understood that a repeat of Jeremy Bentham's individual reformist success in the twentieth century was not possible. Although he promoted a certain historicism, Dewey did not sufficiently consider how the situation had evolved since the nineteenth century.

He claimed to want to surpass the narrowness of individualism but remained convinced that great individual intellectuals were able to suggest all major reforms. Dewey saw that the era of the individual capitalist entrepreneur and captain of industry had ended, but he did not admit the same for the great individual intellectual reformer. Gramsci's collective intellectual was better suited to the circumstances of the twentieth century

Gramsci would likely have agreed with Dewey on the importance of intellectuals for social change to happen. Dewey, like Gramsci, claimed to have discovered the origins of the difficulties of twentieth century liberalism. Dewey wrote that a more social form of liberalism developed after the laissez faire model that viewed the State as a potentially beneficial force. Idealist liberal thinkers such as Thomas Hill Green spread these views and popularized them to a certain extent in the Anglo-Saxon world. According to this liberal and idealist worldview, which Dewey adapted to forge his own alternative to social conflict, the common intelligence shared by all people allowed for a rational and non-violent mechanism for the resolution human problems.

Dewey wrote that these new liberals "fostered the idea that the state has the responsibility for creating institutions under which individuals can effectively realize the potentialities that are theirs".⁵ From that point on an ideological rift was created within liberalism. On the one hand there were those liberals who clung to individualistic and anti

⁵ Ibid, p.27

interventionist views and on the other liberals who believed that the State had a positive role to play in creating a truly free society. Liberty and equality needed to extend beyond the limits bourgeois formalism with an interventionist state.

For Dewey liberalism has failed up to now to live up to its promises and no longer provided every individual with the possibility to fully develop their potential. Too much emphasis was put on individual property rights and the development of the free market at the expense of other forms of political and social freedom. Dewey wrote that so long as liberalism failed to intervene strongly in economic affairs society was doomed to remain in crisis “The demand for a form of social organization that should include economic activities but yet should convert them into servants of the development of the higher capacities of individuals, is one that earlier liberalism did not meet.”⁶ Dewey credited earlier liberalism with having created certain myths about human nature that allowed it to combat the traditional forms of authority that blocked progress. Conservatism and tradition needed to be fought on a terrain on which they could not win. When liberals managed to create a new view of human nature they had a powerful tool to undermine the Church and the feudalistic norms it defended.

Dewey went on to say that in the twentieth century liberals needed to carefully study the changes in the economy and reform their ideology and practice. The truths that the bourgeoisie and its liberal intellectuals propagated no longer allowed most people to participate fully in democracy. Massive concentrations of power and wealth in a small number of hands in capitalist society needed to be addressed by liberals. If these issues were not tackled Marxist and other revolutionary alternatives would eventually prevail.

⁶ Ibid, p.32

In order for this revolutionary tendency not to take over within liberal societies, contemporary liberal thinkers needed to include new elements in their definition of human association. According to Dewey liberals needed to come to terms with the fact that the inordinate amount of focus on the market and exchange as the sole social mediation in human interactions was completely inadequate to fully understand the new socioeconomic dynamics of the twentieth century.

Liberalism needed to renew its contact with all elements in civil society in order to become once again the hegemonic political ideology. In many ways Dewey saw that liberalism was ideologically weak in comparison to its enemies and had failed in its mission to improve the human condition. Liberty could never be a reified concept that had only a single meaning. The very nature of liberty was dependant on the social and historical situation in which it found itself “Today it [liberty] signifies liberation from material insecurity and from the coercions and repressions that prevent multitudes from participation in the vast cultural resources that are at hand.”⁷ During the same time period as John Dewey, the Italian communist Antonio Gramsci was trying to develop an alternative theory of education and moral reform. This reform would allow for a revolutionary appropriation by the masses of all past economic and cultural resources.

Antonio Gramsci and the Power of Liberal Hegemony

From his cell in a fascist geol Gramsci filled in small handwriting about thirty notebooks that covered topics ranging from the development of Marxism to the history of Italian intellectuals. No matter what topic he covered, Gramsci always remained focused on understanding why liberalism had survived in developed countries. He also tried to

⁷ Ibid, p.48

explain why when liberalism failed fascist alternatives rather than communist ones replaced it. Much like John Dewey, Gramsci acknowledged that liberalism in its earlier form was an important point in the development of productive forces and of freer social relations. But Gramsci held very little hope for liberalism to be able to continually adapt itself to the new economic and political realities of the twentieth century. At the same time, Gramsci also felt that the type of Marxism promoted within most of the Second International was highly mechanical.

Marxism was thus defective in its understanding of contemporary politics. Liberal culture had developed powerful cultural and political weapons to defend itself against any revolutionary change. Marxists needed to better understand how liberal hegemony worked in order to defeat it.

Gramsci also tried to understand why, despite two world wars and an economic crisis on a scale never seen before in modern capitalism, the bourgeoisie still maintained its hegemony and political power. In Italy for example, since 1848, liberal hegemony had up until fascism taken the form of transformism. Gramsci described transformism as an enlargement of the ruling class through the absorption into its ranks of oppositional forces. The use of force was thus less necessary to bring about gradual changes.

As a consistent Marxist, Gramsci wished to offer a materialist explanation of the role intellectuals played in creating and maintaining bourgeois hegemony. According to Gramsci even though intellectuals could play a decisive role in maintaining social cohesion and at the very least, in promoting a passive acceptance of the status quo by the subaltern classes, they did not form a completely independent group. They were bound to

certain fundamental classes and could not exist without some form of organic connection with them.

Gramsci described these as “organic intellectuals, the thinking and organizing element of a particular fundamental social class.”⁸ It was the function of the organic intellectuals to promote and articulate the values and socio-organizational model of the dominant class. In doing so they helped make this model the accepted norm for everyone else in society.

Oppositional social classes also developed their own organic intellectuals but were often at a disadvantage when confronting a powerful and well-organized ruling class. The working class did not possess many of the means of communication or ideological tools to promote a radical transformation of society. Before leading the Communist party of Italy, Gramsci attempted to help create an intellectual rallying point for the working class of Turin through the publication and distribution of the weekly paper the *Ordine Nuovo*. The *Ordine Nuovo* tried to encourage a form of direct working class power and autonomy.

Even though Gramsci eventually came to believe that the collective intellectual of the working class needed to take the form of a revolutionary party he never forgot the impact of his earlier efforts. He understood that the workers needed to feel that they could run society in its entirety and that the bourgeoisie was no longer able to promote the expansion of liberty and equality for all. He wrote that George Sorel, the French anarcho-syndicalist, was right to emphasize the importance of this “spirit of cleavage” from the dominant groups. He viewed the study and explanation of how and when subaltern

⁸ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, ed. and tr. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Smith (New York, 1971), p.3

classes developed autonomous forms of self-government as a duty for the integral historian “The historian must record, and discover the causes of, the line of development towards integral autonomy, starting from the most primitive phases; he must note every manifestation of the Sorelian “spirit of cleavage”.⁹ The study of past points of rupture had the potential to inspire future revolts.

In many ways John Dewey understood, much as did Gramsci, that without hegemony in civil society the working class had almost no chance to bring about a radical transformation of society. Dewey thought that any attempt to violently overthrow liberal governments was doomed to failure if the workers did not have an intellectual alternative to build a new society.

Although Dewey never explicitly wrote about Gramsci or his thought, he did write some severe criticisms of revolutionary Marxism. Dewey responded to a text written by Leon Trotsky that was later published under the title *Their Morals and Ours*¹⁰. In his response to Trotsky, Dewey wrote a small essay entitled *Means and Ends*. Dewey felt that Marxists refused to see the possibility of a major reform of liberalism and focused only on class warfare.

He accused Trotsky and other Marxists of explaining all of past history as well as the present and the future exclusively with the principle of the class struggle. Dewey objected to this Marxist view and remarked that the class struggle was only one factor in social evolution “The position I have indicated as that of genuine interdependence of means and ends does not automatically rule out class struggle as one means of attaining

⁹ Ibid, p.52

¹⁰ Leon Trotsky, John Dewey and George Novack, *Their Morals and Ours, The Class Foundations of Moral Practice, A Debate on Ends and Means*, New York, Pathfinder, 2007 (1938)

the end. But it does not rule out the deductive method of arriving at it as a means, to say nothing of its being the only means.”¹¹ Dewey believed that most Marxists had closed their thoughts to any reformist method of social change and only supported the violent overthrow of capitalism.

At the end of *Liberalism and Social Action* Dewey also reminded Marxists that liberal intellectuals and capitalists had major political and ideological advantages over the working class. Without a well-organized counter-hegemony the workers could never replace bourgeois society and its values. Much like Gramsci, Dewey understood that pure force would not succeed in replacing liberalism where it was well protected by the trenches of civil society, “It is said that the dominant economic class has all the agencies of power in its hands, directly the army, militia and police; indirectly, the courts, schools, press and radio. I shall not stop to analyze this statement. But if one admits it to be valid, the conclusion to be drawn is surely the folly of resorting to a use of force against a force that is so well entrenched.”¹² Gramsci himself concluded much the same as Dewey about the strength of bourgeois norms. Although for his part, Gramsci never abandoned hope in a modified form of hegemonic revolutionary Marxism.

Gramsci believed that the strategy of war of movement, which was being promoted by Trotsky at the time, was the wrong way to go about radically transforming society. He came to the conclusion that only a war of position would bring a successful outcome to a communist revolution. By war of position Gramsci meant the gradual taking over of ideological and political hegemony within civil society. Only a revolutionary a

¹¹ Ibid, p.73

¹² Dewey, op.cit, p.84

working class party had the ability to do this. By hegemony Gramsci understood leadership in the cultural and ideological spheres

. A successfully waged war of position could eventually direct society in a new way. Whereas Dewey felt that liberalism could still radically reform itself and bring about the inclusion of the lower classes, Gramsci thought that only a communist transformation could allow the subaltern classes to emancipate themselves.

Another point that Gramsci developed was that although the subaltern classes were often divided into several smaller groups, they tended generally to rally to a fundamental class. In the twentieth century the proletariat represented such a class for Gramsci. The proletariat had the potential, not only to push towards a revolutionary change, but also the means to provide an alternative model of economic production for society as a whole. It had enough energy to lead the other subaltern classes like the peasants.

Of course, in order to perform this task, it needed the assistance of a collective organic intellectual, the political party. The organizational and intellectual strength of the party would help the workers to take over the productive functions of society as well as taking over political power. Gramsci sometimes referred to this new party as the 'Modern Prince'. The communist party would also be instrumental creating the conditions in which the working class would exercise its hegemony in civil society.

Gramsci also tried to ground his political theory of war of position by referring to past political transformations. The Jacobins during the French revolution were an example of a political force that was, according to Gramsci, both revolutionary and progressive compared to other social forces. Without them the revolution would never

have gone as far as it did. Also the terrain for the conflict between the working class and bourgeoisie in France would have been much longer in the making if the Jacobins had not existed.

According to Gramsci, who changed his views on the subject of the Jacobins since his *Ordine Nuovo* days, the Jacobins were “the only party of the revolution in progress, in as much as they not only represented the immediate needs and aspirations of the actual physical individuals who constituted the French bourgeoisie, but they also represented the revolutionary movement as a whole, as an integral historical development.”¹³ Gramsci also took a swipe in passing, at moderate liberal intellectuals who viewed Marxists as religious fanatics, as Dewey often did in his writings.

Gramsci wrote that although the language of the Jacobins appeared to many as “abstract” and “fanatic” it actually was perfectly adapted to the needs of radical change of that time. Without saying it outright, it is clear that much of the accusations of “fanaticism” that were being laid against communists had to do with liberal incomprehension of the subaltern classes desire for radical social change.

Gramsci was not satisfied with simply responding to liberal critics of Marxism. He also had some harsh words for vulgar Marxism and economism. Gramsci noticed that the Marxism of the Second International did not try to create an organic unity with the working classes. It presented Marxism as a purely exterior scientific doctrine that held all the answers to social and economic problems. It did not bother to try and understand the needs and desires of those who were exploited and wanted change. It tended to create debates in which only intellectual specialists could engage and did not care to develop a dialectical relationship between theory and practice. But this connection between theory

¹³ Gramsci, op.cit, p.78

and practice, between thought and action, was exactly what gave Marxism its advantage over other ideologies.

Gramsci looked back at Machiavelli's *The Prince* in order to explain how an ideological force cannot simply be a purely abstract theoretical construct "Machiavelli's *Prince* could be studied as an historical exemplification of the Sorelian myth – i.e. of a political ideology expressed neither in the form of a cold utopia nor as learned theorizing, but rather by a creation of concrete phantasy which acts on a dispersed and shattered people to arouse and organize its collective will."¹⁴ This commentary on Machiavelli was in some ways a continuation of what Marx first explained in the *Communist Manifesto*. According to Marx, communist intellectuals were not, like the utopian socialists, merely speculating on a fictive future society. Communists were extrapolating their conclusions directly from the class conflicts that were going on right before their eyes.

Gramsci felt that Sorel had understood this aspect of Marxism, but still criticized him on one point. He felt that Sorel did never paid sufficient attention to historical necessity and did not fully understand the importance of economic forces in the shaping of permanent social forces such as the political party.

Gramsci tried to unify theory and practice by tying economic transformation with political and ideological changes. He viewed politics as the central mechanism that connected the material forces of society to the superstructural domain of institutions, values and beliefs. His emphasis on the superstructure and civil society allowed him to better understand why rapid and violent revolutionary changes were doomed to fail in advanced capitalism. So long as the bourgeoisie maintained its cultural and political hegemony over the majority of subaltern groups, communism would remain a dream.

¹⁴ Ibid, p.126

Horkheimer and the End of History

If Gramsci still believed that a proletarian revolution was a possibility during the first half of the twentieth century Max Horkheimer had growing doubts. By the end of the Second World War Horkheimer abandoned almost all hope in any kind of radical change. He felt that the window of opportunity for a qualitative transformation of the world had closed. In order to understand how this came about, Horkheimer decided to re-examine the rise of liberalism and of subjective reason.

According to Horkheimer, pre-industrial and pre-capitalist societies held to an objective conception of reason. There existed some kind of rational connection between man and the world. Subjective reason was, on the contrary, purely interested with means and ends and no longer concerned with any sort of larger picture. With this fundamental change in ideological and philosophical outlook “There is no reasonable aim as such, and to discuss the superiority of one aim over another in terms of reason becomes meaningless.”¹⁵ This new relativist worldview had disastrous political effects and undermined the foundations for the creation of a free society.

Originally, much in the same manner as Marx had written, Horkheimer said that the rising bourgeoisie was a progressive social class. This liberal class held firmly to the conviction that reason was an important factor in human affairs and that there existed some objective standards with which to judge human conduct. Legislation and policies were created and enforced in the belief that they were conforming to objective reason. But during the Enlightenment and with the progressive distancing of philosophical thought from religion, objective reason began to be questioned.

¹⁵ Max Horkheimer, *The Eclipse of Reason*, New York, Continuum, 1974 (1947), p.6

Horkheimer wrote that in trying to undo the hegemony of the Church and of traditional beliefs the bourgeoisie shot too far and began to undermine their own principles “The philosophers of the Enlightenment attacked religion in the name of reason; in the end what they killed was not the Church but metaphysics and the objective concept of reason itself, the source and power of their own efforts.”¹⁶ By promoting tolerance, the bourgeois intellectuals were also promoting forms of relativism that weakened its ability to objectively defend the values it once held as self-evident.

Horkheimer also wrote that even the foundations of democracy were originally grounded in objective reason. For example liberal intellectuals held the belief that all human beings possessed a common spiritual nature. The principle of majority was not simply a mathematical proposition but was based on this kind of speculative principle. Gradually these commonly held objective truths began to dissolve. The victory of subjective reason could now be seen in many philosophical systems.

The ideological hegemony of pragmatism in America was for Horkheimer the proof that objective reason had been defeated even in the land of the free “The core of this philosophy [pragmatism] is the opinion that an idea, a concept, or a theory is nothing but a scheme or plan of action, and therefore truth is nothing but the successfulness of the idea.”¹⁷ For Horkheimer this new philosophy fit in perfectly well with the general conditions of monopoly capitalism. When advertising and marketing became universal, it was only natural for thought to become a commodity.

Value was attached to an idea only if it could sell. Politics was reduced to propaganda and manipulation on a massive scale. Education ceased to be about forming

¹⁶ Ibid, p.18

¹⁷ Ibid, p.42

complete human beings even in the upper classes. It now consisted in creating productive members able to integrate into the economic system.

Rather than realizing his human potential, each individual was now being molded to conform to the demands of a rationalized and bureaucratized society. Domination of man over man grew as the domination over nature became more complete. The era where individuality was most celebrated was also the era where the individual must be the most flexible for the needs of the economic system.

Horkheimer wrote that as the means of production developed exponentially so did the alienation of man “The complete transformation of the world into a world of means rather than of ends is itself the consequence of the historical development of the methods of production.”¹⁸ People had a harder time to see through the veil of commodity fetishism described by Marx in *Capital* because the power of things appeared autonomous from direct human control.

Paul Sweezy in *The Theory of Capitalist Development*¹⁹ was one of the first English-speaking Marxists to discuss these issues. Much like Horkheimer, Sweezy doubted that the ills of capitalism could be cured by liberal reforms “Movements of reform are born into and grow up in a society dominated materially and ideologically by capital. If they accept that society, even if (as they imagine) only provisionally, they must attempt to get along with it, and in doing so they are inevitably swallowed up by it.”²⁰ For his part, Habermas later wrote about how Marx had revealed the objective illusion that dominated in capitalism.

¹⁸ Ibid, p.102

¹⁹ Paul Sweezy, *The Theory of Capitalist Development, Principles of Marxian Political Economy*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1942

²⁰ Ibid, p.352

According to Habermas “Marx, confronted with contemporary capitalism, analyzes a social form that no longer institutionalizes class antagonism in the form of immediate political domination and social force; instead it stabilizes it in the legal institution of the free labor contract, which congeals productive activity into the commodity form.”²¹ As capitalism developed even the class struggle became more and more obscured as everyone became integrated in what Herbert Marcuse would later call the one-dimensional world.

Habermas on communication and emancipation

Jürgen Habermas was not as completely pessimistic about the future as was Horkheimer. Habermas believed that open communication would eventually come about in human affairs. Although modern science had taken a positivistic turn and abandoned the philosophical quest for knowledge, it did have the potential for universal human emancipation. Scientific knowledge had the advantage that it rested on an intersubjective consensus “We term information scientific if and only if an uncompelled and permanent consensus can be obtained with regard to its validity.”²² The intersubjective consensus produced was therefore based on universally recognized methodological standards. It was for Habermas an element contributing towards the possibility of a non-coercive form of human interaction. Truth became a public affair and modern science allowed for the open debate of ideas.

But Habermas still wondered if the paradigm of natural sciences was suitable for application in the cultural sciences. Was there not a qualitative difference between the

²¹ Jürgen Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interest*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1972 (1968), p.59

²² *Ibid*, p.91

study of nature and the study of man? Also, even though he credited Hegel and Marx for having first developed the view of the human species evolving in a self-formative process Habermas was not satisfied with their conclusions. He turned to Fichte as a source of inspiration towards the linking of reason to human emancipation “But Fichte, after subordinating theoretical to practical reason, is the first to develop this concept of an emancipatory interest inherent in human reason.”²³ Fichte, according to Habermas, had left certain questions about human psychology unanswered. For that reason, Habermas proceeded to follow Freud and psychoanalysis.

Psychoanalysis helped understand why despite such immense material progress most of mankind still held firmly to illusory beliefs and irrational worldviews. Power relations and taboos restricted public communication. According to Habermas, the great contribution of psychoanalysis was to examine the resistance to new and emancipatory ideas through repression “The starting point of psychoanalytic theory is the experience of resistance, that is the blocking force that stands in the way of the free and public communication of repressed contents.”²⁴ This led to a self-reflective mode of thought that allowed for an opening up to new perspectives.

For Habermas it was clear that Freud wished psychoanalysis to contribute to the emancipation of humankind. Much in the same way as Marx had tried to expose the mechanisms of exploitation, Freud wanted to expose and diminish all forms of unnecessary social repression. Habermas wrote that Freud held views on civilization that were quite similar to those of Marx. Freud was, according to Habermas, much more interested than Marx in the role of collective illusions in preventing social change “ In

²³ Ibid, p.198

²⁴ Ibid, p.228

contrast [to Marx], Freud has acquired in metapsychology a framework for distorted communicative action that allows the conceptualization of the origins of institutions and the role and function of illusions, that is of power and ideology.”²⁵ Like Gramsci, Freud was interested in hegemonic ideological beliefs and in explaining why when liberalism failed people turned to authoritarian alternatives.

The economic crisis that began in 2008 has again thrown liberalism into crisis. On the one hand there sprang forces that were and are pushing for liberation and on the other economic and political elites that wished to limit these tendencies. Habermas was right to indicate that only a critical social theory can truly understand the possibilities for human emancipation. Like Gramsci, Habermas put his hope for the future in the ability of subaltern groups to take conscience of the various forms of oppression they were subjected to.

Gramsci would probably have agreed with Habermas’ view when he wrote that the oppressed masses were always the first to reinvigorate the utopian content of traditional thought during times of crisis “It is in this context that class struggle has its place. The system of power maintains general repressions, which are imposed likewise on all members of society. As long as it is administered by a social class, then class-specific privations and denials are linked to the general ones. The traditions that legitimate authority also must compensate the mass of the population for these specific renunciations that go beyond the general privations. That is why the oppressed masses are the first to be incapable of integration by legitimations that have become fragile. It is they who first critically turn the utopian content of tradition against the established

²⁵ Ibid, p.281-282

civilization.”²⁶ Hegemony is often at its most fragile when it seems to have peaked. Now that the economic crisis is slowly passing it is more important than ever to understand the superstructural moment in order to change the balance of forces in favor of the subaltern classes.

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²⁶ Ibid, p.280