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Karl Korsch: A Review Essay

Cyril Levitt

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Karl Korsch: A Review Essay

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Michael Buckmiller, ed., *Karl Korsch Recht, Geist und Kultur. Schriften 1908-1918 Gesamtausgabe Band I.* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt 1980).

Michael Buckmiller, ed., *Karl Korsch: Rätebewegung und Klassenkampf. Schriften zur Praxis der Arbeiterbewegung 1919-1923. Gesamtausgabe Band 2.* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Europäische Verlagsanstalt 1980).

Douglas Keller, ed., *Karl Korsch: Revolutionary Theory* (Austin: University of Texas Press 1977).

"All attempts to restore the Marxist doctrine as a whole and in its original function as theory of the social revolution of the working class are today reactionary utopias."

— *Karl Korsch*, 1950

FEW NORTH AMERICAN STUDENTS of the history of the labour movement and socialism know very much about the life and work of Karl Korsch. Of course, many know *of* him — as the 'poor cousin' of George Lukacs in the school of 'Western Marxism' popularized by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as a Frankfurt School tag-a-long, or as Bert Brecht's close friend and teacher. For historical and linguistic reasons Korsch's work is better known in Germany (more accurately in the Federal Republic of Germany, for Korsch is reviled in the German Democratic Republic), yet even in his native land the general unavailability of many of his writings has prevented even his most enthusiastic readers from grasping the totality of his practical and theoretical contribution to the working-class movement. This is lamentable for Korsch was perhaps the most sensitive student of Marx in the twentieth century. (Franz Borkenau, in a review of Korsch's intellectual biography *Karl Marx*, wrote: "Korsch possesses a model knowledge of every imaginable literature connected with Marxism. . . . I have little doubt that his is the Marx-study most solidly close to the actual teaching of Marx. Where every other author instinctively attempts to reinterpret Marx on his own lines of thought, Korsch, I believe, successfully tries to interpret Marx's own line of thought.")

Fortunately this sorry state of affairs is changing for the better due largely to the efforts of Michael Buckmiller and his colleagues Götz Langkau and Jürgen Seifert, who are bringing out Korsch's collected works (in 12 volumes) over the course of this decade. The recent appearance of the first two volumes in the planned series gives us cause to rejoice.

Cyril Levitt, "Karl Korsch: A Review Essay," *Labour/Le Travailleur*, 10 (Autumn 1982), 175-182.

Karl Korsch was born on 15 August 1886 in Tostedt, a small town in the Lüneburger Heide, not far from the city of Hamburg. Shortly thereafter the family moved to Meiningen in Thuringia where Karl's father, a strict disciplinarian, eventually achieved social standing by becoming the assistant manager of a bank. Karl attended the local *Gymnasium* where he proved himself an extremely capable student. Introverted and lonely, young Korsch withdrew from his family and classmates, moving to the garden house surrounded by his volumes of Goethe and Schiller.

From 1906 to 1908 he studied law, national economy, and philosophy at the universities in Munich, Geneva, and Berlin. In the summer of the latter year he moved to Jena in Saxony where he settled in to complete his legal training. In Jena he became actively involved in the *freie Studentenschaft* (free student body) — a grouping of students who opposed the elitist and anti-semitic traditions and prejudices of the organized student corporations. As editor of the *Jenaer Hochschulzeitung*, organ of the *freie Studentenschaft*, Korsch summarized and criticized various guest lectures given by distinguished and/or controversial speakers invited to Jena. In presenting his analysis on topics as diverse from one another as Japanese labour relations, the women's movement, and land reform, Korsch took stands which were liberal and tolerant in character. (He showed himself to be sympathetic to the ideals of the SPD, although he did not join the party until 1912 when he lined up with the revisionists led by Eduard Bernstein).

Having completed his Ph.D. (summa cum laude superato) on "*Die Anwendung der Beweislastregeln im Zivilprozess and das qualifizierte Geständnis*" (The Application of the Rules of the Burden of Proof in the Civil Process and the Qualified Confession) in 1911, he left the following year for England where he worked under the distinguished jurist Sir Ernest Schuster in London. Korsch remained there until shortly before the outbreak of World War I. He married Hedda Gagliardi in 1913 and both of them became active members of the Fabian Society. Now nothing would appear more natural than for a German revisionist Social Democrat living in England at the time to join the Fabians. After all, was not Bernstein himself considered to have been a Fabian on German soil? And was not his revisionism considered to have been a reformulation of Fabian principles in the German context?

But there were several important differences between the German revisionists and the British Fabians. As Buckmiller points out (I,51) the reformism in the SPD was founded upon a weak German liberal tradition, whereas Fabianism in England was based upon a strong liberalism facing a crisis. Furthermore, Bernstein (as well as his theoretical opponent Kautsky) was opposed to constructing a finished plan for the socialization of the economy; the Webbs and their followers, however, were attempting to develop precisely such a plan. It was just this concrete, practical engagement of the Fabians which attracted Korsch to them.

In his legal studies, Korsch had come under the influence of the neo-Kantian jurist Rudolph Stammler. Stammler had argued that the proponents of the materialist view of history had confused *causality* and *teleology* in advancing the thesis of the historical inevitability of socialism. (Both the German Marxists *and* the Fabians believed in the historical inevitability of socialism; in practice, however, only the Fabians engaged in wilful, conscious attempts to hasten its advent.) According to Stammler, if socialism were inevitable, decreed by a law of nature, then nothing could be done to hasten or retard its progress. However, if the actualization of socialism were the result of a teleological, human process, then the collectivization of the means of production would be scientifically grounded only if it could be clearly shown to be the right means of achieving a community of freely associated individuals. For Korsch, as Buckmiller argues (I, 57), the Fabians were

attempting to adduce the proof which Stammler demanded.

Korsch was to remain cool toward Marxism until the end of World War I not primarily because it was revolutionary in its aims (even though Korsch opposed class conflict at that time), but for the opposite reason. Marxist practice in Germany, both in the orthodox and revisionist camps, was reformist and did not pose in any concrete way the question concerning the actual, here and now transition to socialism. (Bernstein who was honest enough to want to bring the theory into line with the practice, was later called by the Marxist Korsch: "the most honourable and consistent of all the unsocialist socialists.") Korsch wrote of the Fabians: "The Fabian Society shares with German Marxism the convictions that economic-political socialism (the socialization of the means of production) *will come on its own*.... However, it adds to this theoretical insight a very important *orientation of will*. The practical will: to see to it that in the process of this inevitable transformation of human economy that human culture as well, the *ideal of humanity* will be advanced." (I, 311).

This emphasis upon the practical side has its origins in Korsch's involvement with the *freie Studentenschaft* in Jena. (During the first decades of this century, German youth, especially of the middle class, evinced a populist, romantic spirit committed to the nation, to the people. The cause of serving the nation was actionistic in its thrust and it was directed in support of the interest of the whole above that of any particular group). The *Freie Studentenschaft* shared in the spirit of the times and placed itself in the service of the community by organizing, for example, educational and cultural events for workers. (For the same reason, it opposed the class struggle; the interest of the whole was not served by it.) Korsch's hesitation in joining the SPD is evidence of this unwillingness to make a commitment to only one part of the community. On these grounds, he went so far as to oppose the establishment of the *freie Studentenschaft* as a formal, legal body since it would then become one student organization among many, serving a sectional interest and not the interest of the student body as a whole.

Much of the first volume of Korsch's collected works is taken up with the articles he wrote for the journal *Die Tat* (The Deed) between the years 1912-19. (The journal itself was non-partisan and served as a forum for the expression of conflicting and controversial viewpoints, although socialist thought was not well represented.) Many of Korsch's articles were written during his stay in England (1912-14) and they concerned various aspects of social and political life in that country. As Buckmiller suggests, during this period of his life Korsch was taken with the English way and his articles reflect this enthusiasm. Titles such as "The Fabian Society" (1912), "The Technique of Public Debate in England" (1913), "On the Organization of English Newspapers" (1913) and "Freedom in England" (1913) convey the general sense of Korsch's concerns at that time.

Korsch's idealism and ethical commitment were subdued by his experiences at the front during World War I, but they were not destroyed. (Although the Korsch legend has it that Korsch refused to carry a weapon into battle, Buckmiller questions whether any German soldier could have won the Iron Cross — first and second class — as Korsch had done, without a weapon in his hand!) Nonetheless, Korsch helped organize the workers' and soldiers' councils after the war. This practical experiment in socialization satisfied his want of engagement and provided him with material for further reflection on the possibility of the transition to socialism. Shortly thereafter, he became an assistant to the *Kathedersozialist* Robert Wilbrandt on the Socialization Commission for Coal Mining which was to make recommendations on the restructuring of authority in the coal industry along democratic council *(Räte)* lines. Although Korsche contributed nothing to the four meetings of the Commission which he attended, he did produce a pamphlet entitled: "What is Socialization?" in which he sought to develop a concept of "industrial autonomy" which would avoid the extremes of

centralized, state control of the economy (advocated by the Marxists) and the complete decentralization of the economy (advocated by the anarcho-syndicalists). With the actualization of industrial democracy the opposition of capital and labour would be abolished, according to Korsch, and in its stead a less malignant clash of interests between producers and consumers would appear.

Yet by positing this new 'contradiction,' Korsch, as Buckmiller astutely points out, had tacitly smuggled in a market relation through the back door. (II, 21) But this is entirely in line with the Fabianism which Korsch represented at the time. (In March 1919 he published a journal called *Praktischer Sozialismus* — Practical Socialism — and in April of that same year he called for the establishment of a Fabian Society in Germany.)

It was sometime in summer or early fall 1919 that Korsch broke with the SPD and joined the growing USPD (Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany — originally a pacifist splinter of the SPD which became, after the war, a rallying point for radicals and revolutionaries who were put off by the "putschist" tendencies of the Spartacists) in which he became an important figure after he returned from Berlin to Jena. (In Jena, during the fall of 1919, he successfully defended his habilitation work: "Law and the Protection of Law in the English Civil Process;" he passed summa cum laude).

As it became clear to Korsch that the SPD would take no steps to implement socialism in a practical way, (in fact, in his view, it took steps to hinder its development) he was increasingly drawn toward the Russian experience where the Bolsheviks had proved themselves in fact, to be practical socialists. Korsch, along with most of the USPD, was moving steadily to the left. After the successful general strike in Berlin during March 1920 which broke the back of the Kapp Putsch (the strike was conducted by a co-operative effort of the SPD and USPD), the USPD refused to enter into a coalition with the SPD, foregoing thereby an opportunity of forming a "workers' government." But the USPD was caught in a dilemma, as Buckmiller tellingly relates: "... the clearly socialistically oriented USPD was still a minority in relation to the organized proletariat, in spite of its mass following which it had won in the meanwhile. On the basis of its whole structure and political experience it could *not yet* lead an independent revolutionary struggle; however, on the basis of its substance could no longer co-operate with the SPD." (II, 44)

It was precisely at this political juncture that Korsch began his first systematic study of the texts of Marx. It is only at this point that Korsch sheds his Fabian cocoon and emerges as the Marxist butterfly. As the Korsch legend would have it, from the beginning of his Marxist period Korsch was an unswerving fighter for a non-dogmatic, libertarian socialism, accepting only briefly, and for tactical reasons, the Leninist fetters upon the left. Buckmiller has decisively demonstrated in his anthology that this view is entirely without substance. Korsch not only led the fight within the USPD to accept Lenin's 21 points for admission to the Third International unconditionally (a move which led to the formation of the VKPD — the United Communist Party of Germany — the result of the union of the left-wing of the USPD and the KPD); he remained positively oriented to Leninism until after his expulsion from the Party in 1926!

Yet Korsch's early adherence to Leninism was a result of his consistent belief in the practical side of socialism which Leninism alone at the time seemed to represent. In fact, it was the realization that the Bolshevik leadership (especially Stalin) was putting the national interest of the Russian state ahead of the general interest of the workers' International which ultimately led Korsch to turn against Leninism (by this time the statist ideology 'Marxism-Leninism') and to move decisively into the Left-Opposition.

During his first years in the KPD, however, Korsch was an important figure in the Party, and, until the fall of 1923 he faithfully defended the Party line in public. In fact, he stood solidly behind Brandler's right-wing of the Party in its attack upon the left-wing at the 8th Party Congress in Leipzig (January 1923) on the tactic of forming a united front with the SPD. Korsch argued then that the left should forget its "chemically pure formula" of the dictatorship of the proletariat. The KPD is only one proletarian party among many (and so is the SPD). What is needed is a united front to begin to bring about real unified proletarian action.

However, Korsch moved further to the left after his experiences as Minister of Justice in the coalition SPD-KPD government in Thuringia, during fall 1923. The SPD had refused to participate with the KPD in calling the workers to arms to protect the coalition against the Reich's army which had descended upon Thuringia (as it had done upon Saxony) to dissolve it. (The Brandler faction, one should note, was also reluctant to recommend direct action.) This experience forced Korsch (who went underground for a time) to re-evaluate his position on the united front. He now became convinced that a coalition with the SPD was useless and that the KPD had to lead the proletariat against the fascist (and social fascist) threat. Korsch was now solidly in the leftist camp which had taken control of the Party by mid-1924. He was appointed editor of *Die Internationale*, the prestigious theoretical organ of the KPD in May 1924.

Korsch's most important theoretical work during this period was his "Arbeitsrecht fur Betriebsräte" (Labour Law for Factory Councils) in which he attempted "... to present for the first time an entire area of law down to the most concrete details from the point of view of the class struggle, carried out methodically and strictly." (II, 281) He proceeds to a detailed analysis of the labour law concerned with all facets of authority within the factory and across entire industries. One of his major concerns is the delineation of those laws which further the interests of the proletariat in the class struggle and to contrast them with other laws which are reactionary in character. The law is not substantially at issue; it is for Korsch another weapon in the class struggle: "From the standpoint of the class struggle, all the so-called rights of control and co-determination which capitalism has already granted or will grant to its wage slaves, signify for these wage slaves only a further means with which the class struggle is to be conducted against the possessing capitalist class in a new and more effective form. Actual 'rights of co-determination' of the worker, those which deserve this name, will only exist when the worker is no longer the bought labour power of a capitalist factory owner, but rather is self activated as a full-fledged member in the *community of labour* which is based upon co-operation and the division of labour." (II, 456) The working class must also conduct the class struggle on the legal battlefield as well, during the period of the transition to socialism. According to Korsch: "The general character of the transition which characterizes the present epoch, must of course be expressed in the legal consciousness of this epoch as well." (II, 391)

Volume 2 of Buckmiller's edition takes us up to March 1923, the middle of Korsch's right-wing period in the KPD. The editor has carefully followed the transition which Korsch made from Fabianism and Revisionism to Marxian socialism. He summarizes the main points of change in Korsch's views during this transformation period as follows: first, Korsch gave up his elitist, technocratic prejudice that socialism will be established by a self-selected group of bourgeois intellectuals; he now embraced and preached the class struggle. (Later he was to accuse Leninism, and still later Marxism of this same elitism). Second, he discovered the fetishistic character of the categories of

political economy. Third, he developed an identity theory of knowledge and action (theory/practice), moving from his early neo-Kantian separation of the two toward a Hegelian appreciation of their identity.

We owe Buckmiller and his colleagues a great debt for the scholarly presentation of so much missing Korsch material and we await their future efforts with eager anticipation. However, since the majority of potential Korsch readers in North America do not have the requisite facility in German to make serious use of the texts, we must be grateful to Douglas Kellner for providing a volume which contains an excellent sample of Korsch's writings in translation along with copious notes on Korsch's life and work. Because it spans the entire range of Korsch's labours it is broader in scope than the two volumes edited by Buckmiller, even though it does not approach their thoroughness and originality. Indeed, much of what Kellner has to say about Korsch by way of praise and criticism retraces in English the lines laid down by Buckmiller and his colleagues in German.

Revolutionary Theory is divided into two parts. The first consists of an introduction to Korsch's intellectual and political odyssey, written by Kellner, which is in turn divided into three further subsections: "Korsch's Road to Marxian Socialism," "Korsch and Communism," and "The Crisis of Marxism." The second and somewhat longer part of the book contains in 6 sub-sections various writings of Korsch in English translation (many in print for the first time) in chronological order. Since Kellner's treatment of Korsch's intellectual and political biography to March 1923 adds little to Buckmiller's exhaustive presentation, we pick up the former's exposition at the point where the latter's ends.

In the late summer of 1923, Korsch's famous work *Marxism and Philosophy* appeared in Grünberg's *Archiv*. Kellner is right in his general assessment of this work and his brief portrayal will serve to put it in its historical context. It was written to accomplish several tasks: it was to investigate the relationship between Marxism and ideology in general, philosophy in particular; to enhance the role of ideological struggle within the Marxist critique (practical as well as theoretical) of the bourgeois order; and to apply the principles of Marxism (namely historical specificity and the unity of theory and practice) to the history of Marxism itself. As Kellner points out, there is no inconsistency between the substance of *Marxism and Philosophy* and the theory and practice of V.I. Lenin, at least not as they were understood by Korsch at that time. Kellner is also right in suggesting that Korsch's appreciation of Leninism then was highly selective, bearing only a distant resemblance to the actual theory and practice of Leninism in the Soviet Union. (Lenin's great epistemological critique *Materialism and Empirio-criticism* did not make an appearance in German until 1927.)

Korsch's troubles with the Comintern (and thus with the Executive Committee of the KPD) began long before his break with Leninism. Zinoviev's attack upon the author of *Marxism and Philosophy* at the Fifth World Congress of the Comintern in early summer 1924 was just the opening shot in what was to become an all-out assault upon Korsch (and the leftists in the KPD). Yet Korsch himself consistently defended what he considered to be orthodox Leninism against both the left and right all through 1924. Kellner successfully questions the myth cultivated by so many authors (for example, E.H. Carr, Paul Breines, Fred Halliday) about Korsch's so-called left-oppositionism at that time. It was only *after* the publication of a letter from the Soviet leaders of the Comintern to the German Party late in August 1925 demanding that the German comrades adhere more closely to the Russian line that Korsch ("aggressively," as Kellner puts it) came out fighting as a left-oppositionist. (He had already been forced out of the editorship of *Die Internationale* in March of that same year.)

After fighting a losing battle against the policies of the Comintern and against the Russian domination of the German Party, Korsch was finally expelled from the KPD in 1926. (He refused to resign his seat as a member of Reichstag, however, and he vigorously opposed the new treaty between Germany and the Soviet Union.) It was only after this turn of events that Korsch began to attack not so much the historical Lenin, but the ideology of Leninism which had been pushed into the service of the counter-revolution and red terror in the Soviet Union. Unlike Trotsky, who considered the Soviet Union to be a (deformed) worker's state, Korsch's critique of Stalinism was much more sweeping and fundamental; in Russia (as elsewhere) the working class was enslaved. For this reason Korsch called for "an *immediate* and total break with Leninism which — whatever its character in the past — has today in its content and function become a seemingly classless but in reality *bourgeois and anti-proletarian state ideology*."

Politically Korsch attempted but failed to pull together the forces of the Left-Opposition in the late 1920s. After the Nazi accession to power, Korsch emigrated to England and then (1936) to the United States where he found only temporary and sporadic work at different American universities. (A friend of Korsch has confided in me that leading members of the Frankfurt school actively interceded with the administration of one university to block Korsch's appointment there.) He wrote many articles for small, revolutionary journals such as Paul Mattick's *Living Marxism* and generally kept in touch with various radical groups during the 1930s and 1940s. (He was extremely pessimistic about the possibilities for radical action in the United States and developed a thesis, which, according to Kellner, foreshadowed the famous criticism of American society developed later by Herbert Marcuse, especially in *One Dimensional Man*.) Korsch wrote about the United States: "... despite all fluctuation on the surface, there is no dangerous crisis-like state, no conflict that isn't neutralized, no idea that is not at once ideologized and welcomed as a novelty by the dominant ideology."(92)

Theoretically, Korsch broadened his attack upon Leninism to include orthodox Marxism. In a 1929 critique of Kautsky's recent work *Die materialistische Geschichtsauffassung*, Korsch demonstrates how the chief theorist of orthodoxy emasculates Marxism by transforming it into an objectivistic, positivistic science of society. But even the revolutionary thrust of Marx's own writings, according to Korsch, is coloured and limited by its reliance upon the bourgeois revolutionary practice of the past (especially of the French revolution; later Korsch was to criticize even the Paris Commune for following a bourgeois model of revolutionary organization). Marxism, as an expression of its own time, must itself be overthrown and replaced by a theory and practice which are not fetters upon the working-class movement but are clearly living expressions of its present condition.

There are a number of problems with Kellner's book. Korsch was born in *Tostedt* not *Todstedt*, as Kellner suggests. Marx's dictum that "Communism, for us, is not a state of things to be established nor an ideal to which reality must adapt itself ... etc." is not found in the *Communist Manifesto* as Kellner indicates, but in the first chapter of *The German Ideology*. Korsch's articles on Hugo Stinnes were written in 1922, not in 1923-24. According to Bukharin, Korsch was 'spiessbürgerlich' not 'speissburgerlich', and Franz Mehring did not spell his name Mëhring (which is incorrect German). And Kellner does not seem to know that Marx's own views on the future of socialism in Russia were much more agnostic than the position implied on page 77. (See Marx's letter and various drafts thereof to V. Zasulich.)

But there are more serious problems with Kellner's book. Keeping with Korsch's spirit, the editor promises us an

"attempt to elucidate 'the close connection with the historical conditions and concrete action which entered into every theoretical concept'" (4) when developing Korsch's intellectual biography. But unlike Buckmiller, who does present the general economic and social background against which Korsch's work was written, rarely does Kellner rise above a presentation of political and ideological matters. Furthermore, he offers no support for his patently gratuitous and in fact meaningless assumption "that Korsch is not as sophisticated or brilliant a dialectician as Lukacs, the members of the Frankfurt School, or even Gramsci." (38)

More ominously, Kellner uncritically links the revival of interest in Korsch with the rise of the New Left in the 1960s. In this sense he sees Korsch as a man "ahead of his times." But Korsch's work was too intimately connected with the fate of the proletariat to serve as the basis of New Left theory, which, in so far as it was New Left, sought to disengage itself precisely from the proletariat. Furthermore, Korsch was too keen a student of Hegel to believe that he or anyone for that matter could be "ahead of his times." "Even the worst reality, would be better than merely standing in thought," Korsch wrote to a friend.

Buckmiller's assessment of Korsch's life's work, and his death in relative obscurity in 1961, is more faithful to the views of the man himself: "If one portrays Korsch's development as the individual failure of a theoretician of the labour movement, one thereby justly designates the failure of the labour movement of the past itself. Korsch's theoretical and practical evolution is nothing more than the carrying out of the materialist view of history as reflected experience."