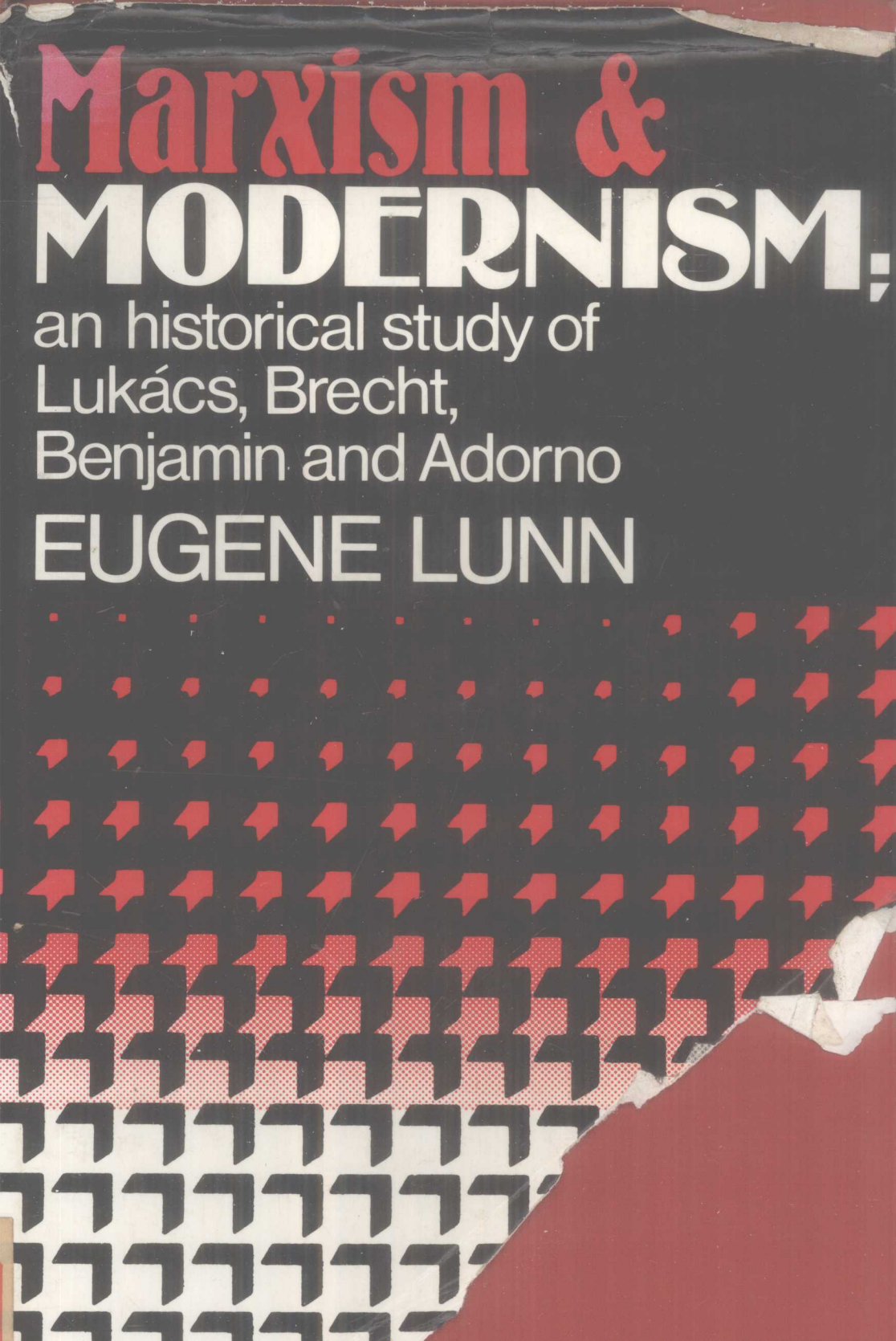
Marxism & MODERNISM:

an historical study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno

EUGENE LUNN



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To Donna, Rachel, and Benjamin

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Contents

Introduction

In the late 1960s, George Lichtheim, the discerning historian of Marxism and of twentieth-century Europe, wrote: "West Germany today, unlike its Eastern neighbor beyond the wall, provides a meeting place of Marxism and Modernism. Some such encounter had already begun in the later years of the Weimar Republic and, but for the catastrophic eruption of counter-revolution and war, might have set the tone for the intellectual élite in the country as a whole."[1] The book that follows is an inquiry into the historical sources and many-sided contours of this political-aesthetic "encounter." The focus will be upon the writings of its major articulators: Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor Adorno. I have four major purposes in this study: (1) to contribute to a firmer understanding of the pivotal role of aesthetic modernism—its reception and critical analysis—within the renaissance of a dialectical "Western" Marxian theory since the 1920s; (2) to explore the varieties of European "avant-garde" culture of 1880–1930—the analysis of which has up to now been largely parceled out amongst critics of the various arts—as a subject of serious interest to intellectual historians of twentieth-century Europe; (3) to analyze four specific confrontations between Marxism and modernism which have served to benefit each of these traditions (one of the four writers, Lukács, allowed the critique to proceed in only one direction, and I have therefore been most critical of his approach); and (4) to contribute new

1. George Lichtheim, *From Marx to Hegel* (London, 1971), p. 130.

insights and perspectives (particularly of an historical nature) on the work of and interrelation between Brecht, Lukács, Benjamin, and Adorno, each of whom has come to be regarded as a major figure of European cultural and intellectual life in this century.

I have not attempted to deny or escape my own ambivalence toward both Marxism and modernism, though I judge each to be of vital concern to contemporary intellectuals. Instead, I have hoped to put to good use the potential strengths of this dual attitude. Let me briefly enumerate, prior to their fuller elaboration later on, some of the strengths and weaknesses of the two traditions which are pertinent to this study of their encounter. (This book is not an overall theoretical inquiry into the relation between these currents, but an examination of four historically specific forms of their interfacing; yet, it may be worthwhile, at the outset, to mention my own general attitudes toward Marxism and modernism.) At its best, Marxism contains penetrating, indispensable, historically defined criticisms of capitalist economy, society, and culture, and a powerful method of dialectical analysis. At the same time, these are often coupled (in Marx's own work and in much later "Marxism") with a dogmatic faith in historical inevitability, an exclusive focus upon the capitalist sources of modern oppression, and a tendency (in some of Marx's later writings, which was much accentuated by the "orthodoxy" which followed) toward a "copy" theory of consciousness as a "reflection" of so-called "objective" social processes. Modernist culture contains ingredients which may aid in the overcoming of these problems (ingredients which are latent in Marx's own work, as we shall see in Chapter 1, but very often absent from that of his "followers"), e.g., an intense concern with the mediation of "content" by form; use of synchronous montage as an alternative to merely linear additive time; techniques of "de-familiarizing" the object-world; cultivation of paradox and ambiguity as opposed to monolithic notions of a single objective reality; and exploration of the fragmented and alienated experience of individuals in modern urban and industrial societies (which may throw light on both capitalist and bureaucratic socialist worlds). Modernist art in some of its phases contains weaknesses of its own, however, which a culturally sensitive Marxism may historically clarify and fruitfully criticize—e.g., an aristocratic cult of hermetic art; a suggestion of an ahistorical and timeless "human condition," or an endlessly repetitive cycle of "mythical" recurrence; and a form of narrowly cultural revolt which facilitates the absorption of art, as fashion, into advertising or into "shocking" entertainment and new consumer products for the

well-to-do. (That Marxist understanding, however flexible and unorthodox, will not alone provide an adequate historical assessment of modernist culture will be suggested by the approach of Chapter 2. There I will attempt an historical overview and comparative analysis of those modernist currents to be treated by the four writers; but I shall do this with largely non-Marxist perspectives. In addition, Chapter 2 will introduce the contrasting aesthetic sources of the thought of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno.)

Each of the four figures studied here developed different wide-ranging historical frameworks for the analysis of modern art and culture. They did so, however, within a series of debates among themselves. It was through these confrontations (between Brecht and Lukács on the one hand, and Benjamin and Adorno on the other) that a serious and flexible Marxist aesthetics for the twentieth century began to emerge for the first time. (Marx's own writings on art are suggestive on this score, but fragmentary and thin, and not entirely equipped to address the problems of twentieth-century cultural life.) In this book, each debate will be analyzed and amplified in terms of its roots in contrasting personal biographies and historical experiences, and assessed in relation to the variety of overall approaches to Marxism and modernism which the four writers articulated. The emphasis throughout will be upon comparative analysis. This procedure is not only appropriate to the mutually relational manner in which their thoughts were often formed and crystalized (the multiple interactions amongst the four thinkers are a fascinating aspect of this material); it is hoped that this method will also clarify the very plurality of the Marxist-modernist "encounters" involved. Comparative treatment of the four writers will provide alternative vantages beyond the necessarily limited purview of each of them, and will highlight the wide variety of plausible Marxist approaches to modernist culture. These comparisons will often be elucidated, in turn, through contrasts among the modernist movements themselves (in particular, symbolism, cubism, and expressionism, and their later offshoots). All four writers came to Marxism only after having been sophisticated critics or practitioners of the modern arts and after developing strong cultural, aesthetic, and social views, both of which experiences were to influence their various constructions of a Marxist aesthetics; they did not merely apply a preformed Marxism to the visual arts, literature, or music. It will be a central concern of this study, in fact, to carefully delineate the different strands of modernism to which each was indebted, or toward which each turned his critical eye.

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The book will concentrate on the period 1920–50, and especially 1928–40, for I am studying the formative years of these theoretical "encounters." (Actually, Benjamin died in 1940, and Brecht in 1956.) I have alluded to some of the major pertinent writings published by Adorno and Lukács after 1950: both were quite productive until their deaths in 1969 and 1971, respectively. But I have found the responses to modernism contained in this later work to be largely an extension of the positions and analyses developed in the years before 1950.

One other question of scope is worth clarifying at the outset. It could be argued that a fifth important Marxist intellectual, Ernst Bloch, deserves also to be considered here. Bloch was an important defender of expressionism against Lukács's strictures upon the movement in the 1930s, and his voluminous writings on aesthetics and literature were influenced by modernist premises. Yet, he did not concentrate his attention upon modernism or develop a sustained analysis of it. Rather, he sought in his work to elucidate utopian longings in an extremely wide range of world art from the last three millennia. Although I have made reference to relevant aspects of his work, I have chosen not to include him as a major focus—especially as I also needed to be carefully selective, given the already massive body of material on Marxism and modernism, and on the four chosen writers, which I decided to include.

In much of the immense literature which now exists on Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno, their theories and analyses have been treated with little attention to the concrete historical experiences out of which their respective work grew. This study, however, will emphasize the diverse, historically conditioned currents of aesthetics, philosophy, and political theory which they absorbed. It will examine the various urban settings which helped form each of them (e.g., Berlin, Moscow, Paris, or Vienna in the 1920s). In addition, their reactions to critical developments such as World War I, the Weimar Republic, Nazi Germany, and Stalinist Russia will be carefully analyzed. These historical currents, situations, or events, mediated through their own particular responses, are not merely a "background" or even "context" for their cultural and social ideas; they are contained within the inner structure and meaning of these ideas. To neglect the historical formation and options of the four writers would be to truncate and falsify their thought and render all the more difficult any judgment on the actual relation between this body of analysis and our own situation. It would also be a failure to apply to social and historical thinkers the approach via history which they encourage us to take to works of art. (This need not be the same

approach, though, as theirs.) It is curious how often Marxist ideas have been treated in historically disembodied form.

A major historical situation, one of the origins of a serious Marxist confrontation with modernism beginning in the 1920s, is worth citing at the outset. The defeat of proletarian revolution in Central Europe (in the years 1918–23), and the victories of Fascism thereafter, both under presumably "advanced" "objective" economic and political conditions, brought a crisis upon traditional Marxian orthodoxy. These developments influenced the unprecedented turn of several independent Marxist thinkers toward questions of "consciousness" and culture as a vital but neglected part of an historical dialectic of society, and as a means of better understanding the stabilizing features of modern capitalism—e.g., Lukács's pioneering investigations of "reified" mental structures in a commodity society, the Frankfurt Institute's use of psychoanalytic theory, or Antonio Gramsci's attention to the cultural "hegemony" of the bourgeois class in the West. (Other examples could be adduced from the writings of Karl Korsch, Ernst Bloch, Wilhelm Reich, Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, or Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno.) This was a major aspect of the "Western Marxist" current, as it has come to be called, which was at odds with both Social Democratic and Communist orthodoxy, and which was centered in Germany in the years 1923–33 and then among intellectual exiles from the Nazis. It was in this body of writings—little known until 1955 or 1960, but intensively studied thereafter—that a creative and undogmatic grappling with problems and inadequacies of classical Marxian theory was best carried out in the era of Hitler and Stalin.

One of the central foci of this strain of thought, and definitely one of its major accomplishments, was the analysis and reception of modern Western art and literature since the late nineteenth century. In his synoptic study of the whole movement, Perry Anderson has recently written: "The cultural and ideological focus of Western Marxism has . . . remained uniformly predominant from first to last. Aesthetics, since the Enlightenment the closest bridge of philosophy to the concrete world, has exercised an especial and constant attraction for its theorists. The great wealth and variety of the corpus of writing produced in this domain, far richer and subtler than anything within the classical heritage of historical materialism, may in the end prove to be the most permanent collective gain of this tradition."[2] Within this corpus, Anderson

2. Perry Anderson, *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London, 1976), p. 78.

cites the exchanges and relations between Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno as forming "one of the central debates in the cultural development of Western Marxism."[3] (I would contend, beyond this, that they are among the richest and most sophisticated in twentieth-century cultural thought as a whole.) One of the attractions of this body of ideas is stated by Henri Arvon: "Marxist Aesthetics remains all the more open to a total and ever-changing application of dialectics in that it is one of the rare branches of Marxist doctrine not to have been crushed and smothered beneath the weight of rigid dogma established once and for all and drummed into its proponents by an almost ritualistic recitation of magic formulas."[4] Arvon's comments serve well to introduce the following study of diverging confrontations between Marxism and modernism.

3. Ibid., p. 76.
4. Henri Arvon, *Marxist Esthetics* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1973), pp. 2–3.

PART ONE

Traditions

CHAPTER ONE

Art and Society in the Thought of Karl Marx

While emphasizing the central importance of the labor process, Marx viewed reality as a relational field comprising the totality of human experience. Hence, it is necessary to understand his interest in art, literature, and culture as dynamic elements which interact with the rest of his lifework. In this chapter, I shall attempt to describe not merely Marx's literary predilections, what he liked and why, but the "relational field" which he saw between art and other aspects of the whole social process. I shall also suggest the implications for aesthetic and cultural analysis of some of the main directions of his economic, social, and historical thought. My central concerns will be Marx's view of: the purposes of art; cultural production and human labor; alienation and commodity fetishism under capitalism; the dialectical course of historical development; the problem of ideology; and the question of literary realism. The chapter will conclude with a brief analysis of Marx's relation to major crosscurrents of European social and cultural theory in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Only by posing the questions in such a broad manner is it possible to assess the Marxian legacy which was to be extended and reworked, within twentieth-century conditions, by Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno.

Marx never developed a systematic "aesthetics." Any description of his views of art and society must be a reconstruction of what are fragmentary and scattered passages whose implications Marx himself never fully worked out. Fortunately, we now have a number of sophisticated attempts to bring together the major aesthetic themes which Marx left

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