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## No Future

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Sociology

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## NO FUTURE

Postmodernism holds a contentious place in contemporary social theory and philosophy, and is often considered nihilistic. Using the work of Nietzsche and Nishitani, I argue that nihilism is a stage in the dialectical transition away from a dominant form of thought and towards a radically new one. Drawing on Sartre's theory of dialectical praxis and other elements of existentialist philosophy, I argue that postmodernism can act as a bridge towards a theory of praxis and engagement that allows a movement away from the condition of postmodern capitalism. This allows for an understanding of the contemporary conditions that is amenable to a materialist theory emphasising human activity rather than relying on metaphysical approaches, facilitating some rapprochement with Marxist philosophy. To conclude, I argue that postmodernism allows the opening up of future possibilities in response to their foreclosure by the bourgeois philosophy of idealism and universalism that currently dominates society.

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, Marxism, Nihilism, Existentialism, Revolution, Postmodernity, Neoliberalism, Future-Orientation, Sociological Theory, Social Philosophy

## **SUMMARY**

This thesis deals with the issue of how the points raised by postmodernism relate to the possibility of social revolution. In sociology, the idea of revolution is often connected to the ideas of Marx, and Marxist thinkers make certain assumptions about how and why a revolution will happen. Many Marxists reject the claims of postmodernism because they challenge these assumptions and the worldview that supports the idea of revolution as unavoidable. One criticism that is made about postmodernism is that it is a form of nihilism, which these critics say only rejects values and does not offer any new values of its own. I agree that postmodernism is a form of nihilism, but say that nihilism is a more complicated philosophy than that. In this essay, I offer a model of nihilism that is based on the idea of rejecting dominant values in order to accept a very different set afterwards. By accepting these new values, I think we can develop a stronger theory of revolution and connect it more closely with how people live and act in the world. In the end, I contend that we have to change how we understand the present and the future in order to have a proper revolution. Because of this, I see postmodernism as a tool for getting away from the assumptions and limits placed on thought and activity by the powerful.

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*Komm, süßer Tod!*

*Komm, selge Ruh!*

## **CONTENTS**

<b>NO FUTURE</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>SUMMARY</b>	<b>iii</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>CONTENTS</b>	<b>vi</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>I. THE BOURGEOISIE AND THEIR IDEOLOGY</b>	<b>14</b>
<b>II. (POST)MODERNITY</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>III. ON NIHILISM</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>IV. (POST)MODERNISM</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>V. THE WORK OF THE FUTURE</b>	<b>96</b>
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>117</b>
<b>WORKS CITED</b>	<b>123</b>

## INTRODUCTION

Postmodernism, as a form of nihilism that emerges from and in response to the conditions of contemporary capitalism and bourgeois ideology, offers us the ground to formulate a more complete theory of revolutionary praxis than other modes of thought. My understanding of the revolutionary project begins with the principles of Marx's early philosophical and theoretical works, as well as his critique of alienation under capitalism, which outline the context of the contradictions within capitalism and provide an outline of a goal for revolution in terms of allowing the proletariat to escape bourgeois objectification. However, I find in orthodox approaches to Marxism a tendency towards a reification and universalisation of the economic form as well as a type of determinism, both of which are problematic tendencies. I believe that these tendencies are more in line with bourgeois philosophy and ideology than they are with revolutionary thought. To avoid appealing to bourgeois principles, I am bringing in the nihilist critique that was first developed by Nietzsche. This critique rejects the assumptions of Enlightenment thought and reveals the groundlessness of the system of knowledge that is derived from it. I am deploying postmodernism, which derives many of its principles from this nihilist approach, in order to transpose nihilism into a contemporary context. Taking up the perspective of nihilism, with its focus on human action and power projects in the world, I find that it is possible to return to the principles of Marx's historical-materialist framework and to develop a theory of revolution that appeals to human activity rather than to principles or forces that transcend this world. Moreover, I believe that the development of this approach

and this theory entail a serious re-orientation of our perspective on the future and how revolutionary praxis is possible.

In the chapters that follow, I will establish the context of my theory in terms of both bourgeois thought and the particular organisation of capitalism. This requires a development of both the origin of bourgeois ideology in Enlightenment philosophy and rationalist positivism, as well as an explanation of the development of neoliberal capitalism and the changing economic role of the state. From there, I will explain the principles of nihilism in order to develop the idea of active nihilism as a tool of critique and the source of the potential for establishing a new set of values, rather than simply appealing to the old. In order to return to the contemporary, I will then connect nihilism to postmodernism, which critiques modernism as the dominant mode of bourgeois ideology. This critical aspect of postmodernism is, I believe, tremendously useful in grounding revolutionary praxis because it pushes for a style that is radically different from modernism. Ultimately, I will use this framing to build towards a call for re-orientation towards the future as a space for possible revolution, rejecting bourgeois models that favour the reproduction of the current social order.

#### CONTEXT WITHIN THE LITERATURE

In sociology and social theory, a question exists as to the possibility of revolutionary action and change. Whether or not a revolution is desirable and the means by which one should proceed to manage that desire are topics that have been debated throughout the history of the discipline. Its relation to the questions of revolution and social change also brings sociology into contact with larger



questions of power relations and the depth of their ties to the formation of knowledge and society as a whole. In order to understand revolution and to decide whether or not it is a good project to take up, we have to understand the context in which it emerges and what it is meant to accomplish. Within sociology, this debate began primarily with the work of Marx, who aimed to reject the approach to philosophy and theory that was dominant in Germany in the 19th century and to connect the study of society directly to human action (Marx and Engels 1998). Moreover, for Marx, the purpose of theory was specifically to direct change in the world, rather than simply to pursue description of natural phenomena (Marx 1978b). A crucial part of Marx's revolutionary philosophy was the model of class conflict, which emphasises the idea that the bourgeoisie, who own the means of production, and the proletariat, who make their living selling their labour, have conflicting interests and cannot co-exist in absolute harmony (Marx and Engels 2002). It is as a result of this structural divide and the alienation that it engenders that the members of the proletariat can begin to consider and pursue revolutionary action, with alienation being a problem because it separates the living human being from properly grasping their own place in the world and the potential of praxis (Marx 1978a). While Marx provided the initial grounding for critical and revolutionary sociology, however, he did not fully explain the entire process of revolution and there have been several competing schools derived from his initial approach.

One of the most prominent schools of Marxism, orthodox Marxism, has the tendency to take the dialectic that Marx outlined and elevate it to the status of a

historical force, rather than seeing it as a tool of understanding (Albritton 1986). This elevation creates two problems in the discussion of revolution: it posits revolution as an inevitable conclusion, and it moves the focus away from human activity and towards the activity of this supposed dialectic. I find this to be an unacceptable position with regard to the principles of historical materialist analysis. An alternative approach to Marxism can be found within existentialist Marxism, based on the work of Jean-Paul Sartre. In *Search for a Method* (1963), Sartre argued that Marxism and existentialism were complementary schools of thought and began a project of reconciliation between the two. Since existentialism is meant to focus on human activity as the source of meaning in human life, and since it connects human values directly to human activity (Sartre 2007), I find this approach much more in line with Marx's own principles and goals. As such, the Sartrean approach to Marxism is the one I am using in this essay.

Sartre also offers the style of dialectic that I will be taking up for this essay. The dialectic must not be taken as something external to human activity, as such models only serve to objectify human being (Sartre 2004). With this in mind, the Sartrean style of dialectic is meant to connect philosophical thought back to human activity and understanding, and to tie the development of philosophy back to the factual conditions of life and the quest for emancipation (Sartre 1963). Since it is grounded in existentialism, however, this approach also maintains the aspects of projected being and praxis. It also maintains the idea that human beings are not created by divine power and do not have predetermined purposes in the world, which is central to the existentialist perspective (Sartre 1992). I find that the

principles of non-determinism and non-essentialism make this approach particularly useful when dealing with the question of the future as a space of possibility and how we, as active human beings, should relate to it in terms of potentially-revolutionary praxis.

The other major aspect of this essay is the epistemological critique offered by the postmodernists. Postmodernism is an approach that has been derided as nihilistic and anti-revolutionary, opposed to the principles of Marxism (Callinicos 1990). Supposedly, the fact that postmodernist approaches reject absolute totalisations and do not offer many positive ontological claims, instead favouring an approach that emphasises difference and discontinuity, means that postmodernism cannot be amenable to revolutionary praxis (Callinicos 1990). I find, though, that this rejection relies too heavily on the acceptance of the model of orthodox Marxism and the denial of nihilism *tout court*. Postmodernism can certainly be seen as a form of nihilism (see Baudrillard 1994), but the problem is in how one conceives of nihilism. Orthodox Marxism is heavily influenced by positivist thought and, because of this, takes up positivist aims (Sartre 2004); and it is this influence that leads thinkers of this persuasion to be opposed to nihilism. In terms of postmodernism, this opposition is based on a lack of apparent positive content and a lack of faith in the imminence of revolution (Callinicos 1990). I contend, on the other hand, that this is primarily indicative of a poor understanding of nihilism and the goals of nihilist philosophers.

To develop a more complete and correct model of nihilism, I am drawing here on the work of Nishitani Keiji. Nishitani (1900 – 1990) was a Japanese

philosopher generally associated with the Kyoto School who examined the history, importance, and value of nihilism. In his book *The Self-Overcoming of Nihilism* (1990), Nishitani explains the history and the context of, specifically, Nietzsche's thought and how it emerged as a response to the domination of European philosophy by the Enlightenment and positivism in the 19th century. Within Nietzsche's work, there is not only a rejection of those dominant values, but a push for the affirmation of an alternative set of values which puts greater emphasis on human activity and the desire to create an alternative world (Nishitani 1990; Nietzsche 2003a; 2003c). In this essay, I will be using Nishitani's work to develop a model of nihilism that focusses on that affirmative aspect in place of dominant values to show how nihilism does not demand negativity and how it re-centres human will and activity in the world, which allows a contact between nihilism and Marxism that is central to my theory of revolution.

The reconciliation of nihilism and Marxism is also possible through, again, existentialism. Like nihilism, existentialism rejects the idea of divine creation and an otherworldly force that gives humanity meaning (Sartre 1992). Nishitani (1990) discusses the way that Heidegger expanded on Nietzsche's work to present a more complete philosophy of nihilism. Sartre (1992), in turn, builds on Heidegger's work in developing existentialism, examining Heidegger's claims and ideas, but with more of a focus on the human and human potential. Existentialism is not a positivist philosophy and it maintains nihilism's confrontation of being with nothingness, but the more humanist style and Sartre's expressed project of

unification with Marxism make it a useful tool in joining the two seemingly-irreconcilable approaches of Marxism and postmodernism.

Ultimately, the literatures of Marxism, existentialism, and postmodernism are my three bases for this essay. I contend that these are complementary schools of thought and that, by examining their shared principles and goals, it is possible to develop a theory of revolution that foregrounds human activity and re-orient us towards the revolutionary possibility of the future. My theory is that revolution requires a radical breaking away from the principles and structures of bourgeois thought and an affirmation of the possibility of worldly change through human praxis. Connected to this is a belief that we must re-orient ourselves towards understanding the future as an indeterminate space for human praxis, the canvas on which we can inscribe our principles and realise our projects. Moreover, this is a theory that rejects the principles of bourgeois thought and responds specifically to the conditions of contemporary capitalism, making it more timely and historical than approaches aimed at the modelling of abstract and transhistorical forms.

#### THE METHOD OF IMMANENT CRITIQUE

What ties this essay together is a model of dialectical understanding of human activity and the emergence of different projects and schools of thought. Again, this is derived from the Sartrean model and recognises the emergence of philosophy as a response to factual socio-material conditions of life (Sartre 1963), and totalisation as necessarily *ad hoc* and temporary (Sartre 2004). Immanent critique is the method at the heart of dialectical models and unites the content of critical theories with their historical application (Antonio 1981). The model progresses by

examining the principles of a system and how they conflict with the practical reality of that system in order to reveal internal contradictions in the system's logic, which can then be used to undermine the system (Antonio 1981). Marxism emerges as a response to the contradictions of capitalism, highlighting the phenomenon of alienation and the self-destructive tendency of the system as a whole. Nihilism emerges as a response to the contradictions within Enlightenment thought and positivism, rejecting the tendency to universalise and reify principles and connecting the emergence of the social system back to the pursuit of power and human projects. Postmodernism emerges as a response to the style of epistemological and ontological claims made under the modernism of contemporary bourgeois society, rejecting reification and the naturalisation of statistical models, as well as the negative tendency in bourgeois legitimisation of capitalist domination. I see all of these theories as fundamentally critical, emerging as immanent critiques of schools of thought that are linked through their mutual development and support of bourgeois domination of society. As such, I find this to be another connection between these three basic approaches.

Because the styles I am trying to synthesise are so deeply tied to immanent critique, so is my own theory. My proposed model of revolution is based on the rejection of, and escape from, the values and assumptions entrenched in bourgeois society. In this sense, revolution must present a radical break or rupture from the existing system. Otherwise, instead of a revolution, we are offered a program of reform, which is inconsistent with Marx's principles and tends instead towards a bourgeois socialism that maintains the overall form of capitalism (Marx and Engels

2002). I see contemporary society as inseparable from bourgeois ideology, but I also see that bourgeois ideology as deeply flawed. Revolution *must* be founded on human praxis, and so it *must* be understood as a conscious and willful response to the conditions in which people are living. As such, I will be using the logic of immanent critique throughout this essay; it is the only consistent method I can apply.

#### PLAN OF ATTACK

The body of this essay will begin with modelling the bourgeois ideology and its descent from Enlightenment principles and philosophy. I will begin here because I see bourgeois thought as the starting point for the critique of contemporary society. My model holds that the philosophy of the Enlightenment provided a ground for revolutionary bourgeois praxis but that over time, this mode of thought has been transformed into a more conservative ideology. I will attach the bourgeois ideology to principles of universalism, rationality, and perfectibility of the world, which are necessary elements in the way that the bourgeoisie defends its continued existence and continued domination of society. Understanding the principles of bourgeois thought and the transformation of bourgeois philosophy into bourgeois ideology provides a grounding for the rest of the essay and for the project of revolution, which must be oriented towards the establishment of some other set of values that is radically different from, and incompatible with, the bourgeois mode of thought.

The topic of the second chapter is the way that the bourgeoisie became the dominant class in society through developing capitalism as an economic form and

eventually subordinating the existence of the state to the maintenance of capitalism's foundations. In this chapter, I will develop the idea of the bourgeoisie as a praxic class, one that used its praxis to make itself dominant and, once dominant, to reproduce the conditions of that dominance. I also trace the way that capitalism has been internally rearranged since its emergence. Included in these changes is the shift from modernity to postmodernity as bourgeois domination become more complete and the state was fully subsumed into the reproduction of the capitalist social order. Part of this shift to postmodernity is, I contend, the development of neoliberalism, which emerged in the 1970s and combines an economic policy of formal deregulation with state intervention to maintain the capitalist system and which, ideologically, emphasises individual freedoms and responsibilities above all else (Harvey 2005). Part of my analysis of neoliberalism and postmodernity is the idea of metastability as a tool for the defence of the capitalist system in the face of class conflict. Because the process that enriches the bourgeois owning immiserates the proletarian working class, the two are locked in conflict (Marx and Engels 2002). As such, techniques are necessary to prevent this conflict from collapsing the overall economic structure and society with it. As part of neoliberalism, I describe these techniques as being part of metastability because they manage the crisis tendencies of capitalism from without. These internal changes, and the changes in material relations between classes they engender in turn, are also vital to understanding the scope and importance of revolution as a whole. Not only do they provide the worldly target of revolutionary activity, but the structural aspects of capitalism also serve to entrench the bourgeois ideology. As



such, the peculiarities of capitalism provide a necessary second point of context for the critique I will develop.

The third chapter addresses the elements of nihilism and the project of active nihilism directly. Contained in this chapter is my model of the dialectic of nihilism, in which nihilism acts as a negation of the dominant values of the times and a bridge towards the later negation of that negation by affirming a different set of values. Situated as a response to Enlightenment philosophy and the construction of bourgeois ideology, I cast nihilism as a useful tool in revealing the ultimate groundlessness of universalism and perfectibility of society, which allows for a more complete turn towards seeing the world in terms of praxis and conflict between groups. I will also emphasise the importance of understanding the idea of active nihilism, a type of philosophical approach that not only rejects dominant values but also affirms some other set. Adding positive content, as active nihilism does, offers a more useful critical approach than the alternative, passive nihilism, which stops at the point of rejection and meaninglessness. In a sense, passive nihilism can be understood as the acceptance of the lack of values in the world after universalism collapses, while active nihilism is a conscious *nihilation* of those values in order to establish something else.

Building on the theme of nihilism, chapter four addresses postmodernism as a form of nihilism that is specifically adapted to modernism. I see modernism as the dominant ideology of contemporary society, deeply attached to the larger framework of bourgeois thought. Within postmodernism, I find a critique of the values of that ideology that fit the terms and goals of nihilism, and within that

critique, I find the seeds of an active nihilism that can be used to present a theory of revolutionary praxis that breaks with the bourgeois understanding of the world. Active nihilism, because it is not married to the principles of the dominant ideology, is the lynchpin that holds together my theory of revolution as a praxis towards a radically different system of thought and being.

Finally, the fifth chapter addresses the issue of orientation towards the future. I contend that, because of its status as dominant in society and its relation to the reproduction of the conditions of domination, the bourgeois ideology is fundamentally present-oriented. This means that the mode of thought is focussed on the present and the endless reproduction of the conditions of the present, rather than being directed at the future. Innovation under the system becomes only superficial, and the fundamental social relations within the system are not subject to innovation. Because of this, the system makes a priority of reproducing the status quo; within capitalism, the logic of key phenomena such as debt rely on this kind of continuity. However, since revolution is meant to bring a major break away from the dominant conditions, I believe that adopting a revolutionary project requires a shift to future-orientation, in which thought is addressed to the way that the future provides a space of potential for praxis and the creation of something new. Future-orientation of this sort is a conscious response to the way that bourgeois thought reifies the conditions of bourgeois domination and lends ontic status to the relations of capitalism. Emancipation from bourgeois domination means actively working to negate these elements of the bourgeois ideology. In this

way, the final chapter connects the issue of active nihilism to the importance of praxis and a shift in how we understand our potential in the world.

## **I. THE BOURGEOISIE AND THEIR IDEOLOGY**

I am beginning my examination of the revolutionary potential of the future and the relation of nihilism to that future by discussing the form of thought that dominates the present. My approach is based on the fact that criticism must address what currently exists and how it continues to dominate. In capitalism, the bourgeoisie is the class that owns the means of production and therefore controls the relationship of production (Marx and Engels 2002). That is to say, the bourgeoisie is the dominant class of the capitalist social formation. With this in mind, this chapter will examine and explain the bourgeois ideology and the philosophy that first gave rise to it. Responding to the idealist and universalist origins of this school of thought, I will offer a countering framework that tends instead to the materialist and historicist mode of thinking. Rejecting the universalist and abstract style of the bourgeoisie is central in moving towards a theory that is focussed on the development of revolutionary praxis, and equally useful is offering a model of the bourgeoisie that focusses on their historical role as a revolutionary and praxic class. Because it is so vital to understanding bourgeois domination, understanding and attacking bourgeois ideology is the best starting point for moving towards the development of an alternative position, and will also ground my later examination of nihilism and its potential to do this.

In modern capitalism, the bourgeoisie (in the Marxist sense) exists as the dominant class, and the ideas that justify the continuation of that dominance exist as the ideology that naturalises and maintains the social formation. However, we must recognise that these arrangements are neither eternal nor absolute.

Recognising this allows us in turn to begin positing the style of thought that will allow us to oppose ourselves to this society in the search of something that realises our values in the world. I offer in this chapter the beginnings of that alternative theory, drawing on the existentialist Marxism of thinkers such as Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty. Their focus on praxis and how praxis always occurs in relation to others is useful because it offers a theoretical grounding in real existence, rather than being bound to abstract universal forms.

The bourgeoisie and the bourgeois ideology are both particular historical formations, and they became dominant only through the once-revolutionary praxis of the bourgeois class. As such, we must first understand how that history unfolded and the material conditions that led to it. We must also understand that the bourgeoisie, in order to maintain their social power, reject this kind of historicist model and appeal instead to an idealist philosophy based on the principles of Enlightenment thought. Emerging in the eighteenth century, the Enlightenment was a philosophical movement that emphasised the use of Reason and individual freedom, pushing back against the ideas of absolute monarchy and clericalism that were dominant at the time (Hamilton 1996). This mode of thought relies on abstract forms and appeals to the universal, suppressing the subjectivity of humanity to justify the apparently-eternal existence of the bourgeois social order. Moreover, the conversion of the once-revolutionary Enlightenment philosophy to the conservative bourgeois ideology offers a greater understanding of why exactly something different is needed, rather than simply appealing to the principles of the Enlightenment again.

A critique of the bourgeoisie and their order is also furthered by understanding both of these as the results of a form of praxis that has become realised and turned against its original project, that is, as a part of the practico-inert (Sartre 2004). Contemporary society no longer deals with bourgeois capitalism as an emerging form, but as a part of society's given facticity. Connecting that facticity back to human action, rather than to simply the manifestation of the ideal in the real world, also allows the beginnings of the formulation of an alternative praxis, one that can begin to move beyond the bourgeois society. In this way, the ideas presented in this chapter will also serve as a bridge towards the critique presented in the rest of this essay.

#### THE ASCENT OF THE BOURGEOISIE

In short, the beginning of capitalist ideology – and thereby, of anti-capitalist thought – is the ascent of the bourgeoisie as the dominant social class. It is the historical fact of bourgeois revolutions, the praxis of the bourgeoisie, that established capitalism as the dominant economic form. Equally important to the development and maintenance of the capitalist world order is the bourgeois philosophy of liberalism and its use of idealist principles. Although the Enlightenment philosophy that would eventually serve as the basis of bourgeois ideology and its successor capitalist realism pre-existed these revolutions and guided the revolutionary movements, this type of thought could only become hegemonic once the bourgeoisie was established as the ruling class. Exact details, dates, and events in the establishment of the bourgeois world order are broadly outside the scope of this paper, but there must be a brief discussion of the largest

trends that link the development of capitalism to the development of bourgeois development.

The history of the bourgeoisie as the dominant class is not coterminous with the history of capitalism. Capitalism existed in various forms, particularly characterised by the activity of merchants and traders, as far back as the sixth century, without dominating the sphere of production (Kocka 2016). Only with the expansion of capitalism to the level of world-system as markets expanded through colonisation did the conditions develop that made the bourgeoisie the dominant social class (Marx and Engels 2002). Bourgeois society, then, is not exactly the same as capitalism, but only a particular form that emerges within the history of capitalism as a result of particular material conditions and economic interactions. Understanding this assists with the conception of modernity and so on by placing a historical limit on the time frame being discussed. Historicising the bourgeoisie in this way is also vital to founding anti-capitalist thought – the bourgeoisie is only one dominant class in a long history of class conflict (Marx and Engels 2002). Therefore, bourgeois dominance is not a necessary or universal component of society.

Prior to the expansion of capitalism to the sphere of production, it was a minority trend in the economy, which was dominated by subsistence practices and artisanal production (Kocka 2016). In this mercantilist stage, from 1650 to 1755, capital was largely controlled and manipulated by merchants, and the labour relation had not yet been commodified (Albritton 1986). Some wage labour and capitalist production existed, especially in mining and cottage industry (Kocka 2016), but the bourgeois class associated with modern capitalism is characterised

primarily by its control of production and widespread employment of wage labour (Marx and Engels 2002). The historical ascent of the bourgeoisie to power is most concomitant with the liberal phase of capitalism, from 1755 to 1875, which was dominated by industrial capital and the factory production model, as well as being the phase of capitalism in which the law of value was most socially dominant (Albritton 1986). Increasing bourgeois dominance of society and the purity of the expression of the law of value at this time engenders the increasing economisation of human relations and social forms that is associated with capitalism. It is because of this that liberal capitalism can be seen as the ground from which modernity develops.

Before becoming the dominant class, the bourgeoisie had been in conflict with feudal lords and was not in control of the structure of the state, but acted as a revolutionary class (Marx and Engels 2002). Bourgeois dominance was established through such acts as the revolutions in France and the United States, as well as through colonialism and changes made in legal systems, not through debates and the free entry of workers into the capitalist mode of production. Rather than reason being the motor of development, this stage of capitalism had a violent, bloody, and even terroristic history (Marx 1976). This stage of capitalist development was connected to the jockeying of western European states for power as they developed more solid political systems and colonial empires (Marx 1976; Kocka 2016). Material need for the basic resources required for the massive economic growth of this time is what drove the European capitalists to expand their system and allowed the bourgeoisie to establish their political dominance. Conditions such as these are historically contingent and bound directly to a human



perspective, rather than being a manifestation of some transcendent ideal that guides history towards its final, most perfect form. Modelling the rise of the bourgeoisie in such a way is key to a critical approach to history and social theory, but is not part of the model the bourgeois class uses to explain itself and its history. Therefore, this historical materialist approach, based largely on the thought of Karl Marx, is to be taken as one of the most important launching points for serious anti-capitalist thought. However, it is equally important to understand at this point that it is through bourgeois *praxis* – real and projective human activity – that the society of modern capitalism was established, rather than through the playing out of some form of metaphysical/transhistorical dialectic.

The domination of society by the bourgeoisie is the basic relation of capitalist society. Understanding that the bourgeoisie is the dominant class in contemporary society is key to analysis of the present cultural formation. But, in order to properly *critique* this cultural formation, the bourgeoisie must be understood as a class that developed only as the conditions of capitalism reached a fairly advanced stage, and only through a real and revolutionary praxis. These ideas are key to breaking through the ideology that casts the bourgeoisie and their ideals as a universal, totally rational, and transhistorical form. Critical principles that reject this style of thought underlie Marxism, nihilism, and postmodernism, but can only be established once we begin to understand the bourgeoisie as a particular social form tied to a particular social organisation. Here, I am taking up the perspective of examining the bourgeoisie as a group of human beings with human interests, unified in philosophy and praxis, in order to ground the rest of my critique of capitalist society.

## THE VALUES OF THE BOURGEOISIE

In order to properly frame the task of cultural critique and to understand how the system is reproduced, we must examine the values of the bourgeoisie, which act as the backbone of the ruling philosophy of capitalism. The philosophy that underpins bourgeois ideology derives primarily from Enlightenment thought. What begins as a philosophy is converted into an ideology when the class it belongs to becomes dominant and the goal shifts from social change to the maintenance of a social order. I will explore the socio-economic changes tied to the emergence of bourgeois ideology in greater detail in the next chapter. Being tied to the global expansion of capitalism and its capture of the mode of production, this ideology emphasises rationality, economism, and universalism in form, and is used to establish a discourse and model of the human being that is abstracted away from actual productive activity and that emphasises empty essence over all else. Like the bourgeois class itself, these ideas begin as revolutionary and dynamic, but become moribund and regressive as they are transformed into an ideology that aims to maintain power, rather than establishing a new order.

Power is not historically maintained only through activity, but also through the production and reproduction of a set of ideological values. As a given class comes to dominate society, their ideas become the dominant ones and are then raised to the level of universal law to defend the social order (Marx and Engels 1998). The intellectual style of the bourgeoisie is one that is particularly given to the rejection of the concrete and the modelling of universality (de Beauvoir 2012). Over time, the extent and particulars of bourgeois ideology have developed and shifted, but the system of thought as a whole can still be connected to its origins in

Enlightenment thought and idealism. Just as connecting bourgeois dominance to its origins in practical human action and social arrangements helps to break through the veil of transhistoricism and to found a critical response, connecting bourgeois thought to its origins helps to break through universalism and to guide critical thought. Only by understanding the underpinnings of a totalising model of this sort can we begin to properly develop a true alternative.

Enlightenment thought played a major role in codifying the values of the bourgeoisie in formal philosophy and in establishing the basics of the worldview that continues to dominate models of human activity and potential. Preceding the American and French revolutions, the Enlightenment came before the bourgeoisie fully ascended to power, but provided the groundwork for the model of a rational and abstract human being. Philosophers and theorists of the Enlightenment emphasised a universalist model based on the idea that forms arrived at by reason could be accessed and understood by anyone, and that scientific findings derived from the empirical approach could be applied to develop society into a more perfect state (Hamilton 1996). Specifically, the idea of Enlightenment is attached to the use of reason by individuals in questioning the dominant forms of thought and in exercising freedom of thought in life, particularly in response to the domination of life by organised religion (Kant 1996). Scientific method and technical knowledge became indispensable for the Enlightenment thinkers, and were supposed to allow a movement beyond systems of rule based on religion and heredity. Part of this approach was the development of positivism, which aimed at a model of knowledge that was absolute and universal, capable of integrating and predicting all things (Hamilton 1996). Positivism was also deeply embedded in the origins of sociology,

as Comte (2000a) posited a series of universal stages in the development of a society and used this model as a defence for other aspects of his theory, rather than looking at the particular historical factors that affected any single society. Taking this tendency towards universal forms and emphasis on the exercise of reason as a transformational tool, it is clear that the Enlightenment was a body of thought that was neither historical nor materialist, and this is also a vital point in understanding the bourgeois philosophy that is built on it. In order to justify the system of bourgeois capitalism that engenders alienation and exploitation of the majority of the population, the philosophy must be based on a system of thought that abstracts away from the experience and understanding of individuals. This is attached to a belief in a universal form of human nature (Hamilton 1996), in the style that Marx (1978b) would later reject as offering only a superficial, rather than a substantive, unity to human beings and their actions.

In the capitalist system controlled by the bourgeoisie, this unifying principle of human essence is economic rationality. Over time, the meaning of work has shifted, with work under capitalism becoming the ground of the work ethic and attached to a semi-metaphysical understanding of self and one's place in the world (Weber 1930). Economic rationality is a part of this transformation, referring to the way that people come to live and make decisions according to the logic of economic transactions. In this way, economic rationality represents the integration of the ethical and economic worlds. One aspect of this blending is the emergence of the model of *Homo economicus*, an entire structure of subjectivity that integrates economic reasoning, making it central to human existence (Fleming 2017). Taking economic rationalism as the central aspect of humanity is key to the

bourgeois treatment of the human being and the way that the human is modelled in capitalist society. What is offered is a model of an objectified human being, with their subjectivity and capacity for negation and projection stripped away. Under the regime of bourgeois thought and ideology, the human being comes to be understood as an object for scientific reflection and technical/technological perfection. Perfection of this sort is tied to the larger project of social perfection that is inherited from the Enlightenment paradigm and which is connected to the value of accumulating profit and unification of production under the capitalist mode. Fundamentally, all human beings are here modelled on the bourgeoisie and their principles, and the styles of social thought, social philosophy, and social science that flourish under this configuration tend to reflect its underlying bourgeois principles, often unknowingly or unintentionally. Of course, this kind of reflection is one of the most fundamental elements of ideology, which places constructed ideas and forms above the people who constructed them and the actions that facilitated this construction (Marx and Engels 1998). Subordinating human existence to its principles is a key part of the bourgeois cultural formation that grows and transforms in modernity, and identifying this process is, in turn, central to the development of a theory that can justify and facilitate revolutionary action.

In order to allow its principles to rule over material conditions, the bourgeois philosophy is necessarily an idealist one. Idealism offers a framework that focusses on the development of spiritual forms or ideas over time, generally moving towards perfection. Materialism, on the other hand, examines relations in the world and their mediation through things like scarcity. Models that emphasise

perfectibility and universality, then, belong to the idealist camp; a materialist standpoint on human action and human essence doesn't allow for the modelling of some perfect specimen it might come to align with (Horkheimer 1995). Specifically, Hegel's model of absolute knowledge and the transcendent dialectic ruled German philosophy and were the centre of philosophical development and debate at the time that the bourgeoisie was developing as a class (Marx and Engels 1998; Nishitani 1990). In the Hegelian model, there is a movement towards the identity of truth and reality that is facilitated by reflection on consciousness and ideas, and the overall project and process of philosophy is tied directly to universality (Hegel 1977). Combined with the proclamations of thinkers such as Kant and Descartes, especially their belief in the utility of reason, the form of idealism that descends from Hegelian thought is the cornerstone of the philosophy that was transformed into bourgeois ideology. A belief in the universality of Reason and a perfect form that exists above the actual provide the basis for the Enlightenment model of a perfectible society. Idealism grounds the episteme of universality and scientism that seeks to dominate all worldly phenomena and categorise them according to an absolutising and totalising logic. This begins with the reduction of human beings to naturalistic human essence and, over time, is extended to cover all elements of society and even to extend the model of society into the natural world. Just as with the historicity of bourgeois dominance, it is necessary to recognise bourgeois philosophy as universalising and idealist in order to develop a complete theory of modernity and revolutionary thought.

Not only is the existing world order raised to the level of universal law in idealism, but this episteme acts as the grounding for the idea that history and

society can be changed through debate and right-thinking, or that human beings can access absolute truth. This is the context for all that will follow in this paper, as the bourgeois society – in a form – continues to be the dominant mode. Just as the bourgeoisie can be examined as a product of historical events and action, bourgeois ideology can be examined as a product of definite philosophical trends and developments. I am beginning here with the ideas of the bourgeoisie because bourgeois dominance underlies contemporary social relations. The domination of society by capitalism and the conversion of bourgeois philosophy to bourgeois ideology provide the ground for later critical movements. Modernity, nihilism, and future-oriented thought can only be fully understood in the context of the historicised bourgeoisie and their ideology, which promotes idealist logic and abstract universalism. Moreover, it is only from this point, which recognises these particularly as historical and human forms, that the theory of revolution I propose here can be developed to its fullest extent.

#### BOURGEOIS REVOLUTION AND PRACTICO-INERTIA

Because of its historical role as a class with a revolutionary praxis, and because of the radical transformation of society under modern capitalism that came with its dominance, we must work to understand the way that the bourgeois revolution became a part of the practico-inert. Practico-inertia is a condition whereby human activity (i.e., praxis) results in some completed state of affairs that ends up having a different role than its initial purpose (Sartre 2004). I am using the concept of practico-inertia to explain the shift from bourgeois philosophy to bourgeois ideology because it allows this to be connected to the material relations and human projects of the bourgeoisie as a social class. Bourgeois domination of contemporary

society did not emerge as the result of a superhuman process, but from the changing social role of the bourgeois philosophy and from its shift into ideology. This transformation is as much a part of the history and ideology of the bourgeoisie as the overall development of capitalism, and connects the entirety of the system it has developed back to human praxis. Again, this serves to further develop the theory of revolution in contemporary society, as it moves away from the idealist model of analytical critique and towards the historical-materialist model of revolutionary praxis.

Originally, the impulse of the Enlightenment and of the bourgeoisie was towards the institution of a freer human society. It was in this capacity that capitalism emerged as a response and alternative to the conditions of feudalism and at that time the revolutionary activity of the bourgeoisie dismantled and replaced many of the existing social forms and structures (Marx and Engels 2002). The structures that were instituted in their place can be understood, then, as a realised and crystallised form of bourgeois praxis which becomes the given ground of modern capitalism (Sartre 2004). I will examine this further in the next chapter; for now, all we need to know is that capitalism developed through practical activity on the part of the bourgeoisie and eventually shifted from being a new social form to the dominant social form. As bourgeois revolutionary action reached its economic/material goals, the system of industrial capitalism was instituted and, in establishing these conditions, had to shift its orientation towards maintaining the new social order under which it had become so powerful (Marx and Engels 2002; de Beauvoir 2012; Berman 1999). Initially, the shift in productive and social relations opened a great deal of new potential for techniques of production and the



reorganisation of society but, once the bourgeoisie became dominant, it had to begin foreclosing on those possibilities to maintain power (Berman 1999). This shift was concomitant with the shift from bourgeois philosophy to bourgeois ideology. The Enlightenment, which acted as a critique and rejection of traditional forms that were based more on religious discourse, has now become an antique form of thought and a foundation for more recent philosophy. Because a philosophy emerges in response to particular material conditions and social relations, and because the praxis that addresses those relations is also historically situated, once a mode of thought has become dominant and practico-inert, it no longer offers a way to bring revolution to the world.

Returning to the bourgeoisie as revolutionary, the class played a key role in the formation of modernity, but now the conditions of modernity have developed further and intensified, and have shifted from being the future of humanity to being its facticity. When a person or a group takes on a particular project, it is connected to their particular interests and goals, not to some universal set of beliefs (de Beauvoir 2004). Therefore, the project cannot be separated from that group, and practico-inertia cannot be blamed on some kind of co-optation or failure – it is simply a question of time. Since practico-inertia does not involve a corruption or co-optation of a movement from outside, but a shift in a movement's meaning after the project has been completed, the response to this kind of movement must not simply try to return to the movement's original principles.

Rather than believing in some overriding metaphysical form as an engine of social change, we must believe in the possibility of alternative praxis. For us contemporaries, there is a dialectic in the bourgeois revolution. Materially, the

processes that establish and maintain the bourgeoisie also establish and immiserate the proletariat (Marx 1959; Marx and Engels 2002). Rather than repeating the mistake of the orthodox Marxists and taking this as making Communism an inevitable form, we have to understand the present conditions as a form of facticity that enables anti-capitalist praxis. Some forms of orthodox Marxism have tended towards taking Marx's critique of the operations of capitalism as the whole of the law, rather than being only a critique of the economic system of the time, and attempted to apply the law of value directly to history (Albritton 1986). Economic-reductionist approaches such as these move away from theories of praxis emerging as a result of material conditions and centred on intelligible human action towards semi-idealist theories of economic relations and class struggle that ignore the subjective and specific elements of this struggle.

As Merleau-Ponty (1969) argues, it is necessary to establish and maintain a theory of the proletariat in order to pursue revolution, and this revolution must connect that class to concrete praxis. Proletarian praxis of this sort is dialectical not because it is determined by a dialectic that rules all historical forms, but because it will totalise and negate the existing conditions of bourgeois society in order to move, actively, towards the accomplishment of an alternative project (Sartre 2004). Practically-oriented thought is meant not just to identify contradictions, but also to direct praxis, and therefore must address the real conditions of human beings in their specific situations (Merleau-Ponty 1969). Activity of this sort can only be conceived of in opposition to something that was already done by human beings and that has become part of the historical fact of the situation at hand – that is, in response to the practico-inert. Theory of this type,

then, is opposed to the universalist and reductionist strands of orthodox Marxism that would posit a revolution as inevitable because of the law of value or that would ignore the subjective and specific conditions of the proletariat. In fact, these approaches ignore praxis and retreat to the utopian sphere of ideals moving towards perfect forms. Therefore, it is necessary to recognise bourgeois revolution as a previous form of praxis, which offers already a break away from the philosophy of absolute idealism towards the critical frameworks of historical materialism and nihilism.

Fundamentally, moving beyond bourgeois society means recognising that bourgeois society has lost its revolutionary aspect and turned against the emancipation it once promised. I have used the concept of practico-inertia here to demonstrate how the bourgeois philosophy has become bourgeois ideology through the enshrining of bourgeois social power, rather than through its infiltration by some perfidious other. This, too, is a necessary point of context for what will follow in later sections of this paper. Taking bourgeois society as an example of practico-inertia in contemporary society is key to the development of future-thinking, with a fuller understanding of the phenomenon being possible through understanding the emergence of postmodernity and nihilism.

#### MOVING BEYOND THE BOURGEOIS SOCIETY

At this point, the essential project of revolution is the rejection and overcoming of bourgeois society, and an important aspect of that is shifting our orientation towards future-thinking. This project is the central aspect that allows a unified understanding of Marxism, nihilism, and postmodernism. Bourgeois society acts as the framework and underpinning of the value system that all of these alternative

ways of thought aim to critique and escape, and capitalism is the material condition that must be addressed in order to develop a more complete human freedom. Even today, the dominant episteme is based on the same principles as the earlier bourgeois ideology, and so our project at this point continues to involve the development of an alternative mode of thought. Operating within the confines of this episteme, given its tendency towards absolutism and emphasis on universal forms, does not provide a way towards a real alternative.

Historicism, the perspective that human meaning and relations are influenced by historical conditions rather than just being expressions of a universal form, provides a first escape from the bourgeois system and its absoluteness. In attaching the bourgeoisie and its dominance to historical processes and forms, we negate the model of its necessity and permanence. This will be developed further in the examination of the conditions of modernity and postmodernity, with their material-economic particularities. However, examining the details of these formations requires first modelling their basic form. Crude and brief as it may be, the history of bourgeois society and bourgeois ideology I have provided here offers a model of that basic form, which is an idealist approach that appeals to the universality of reason and nature and to the use of economic rationality.

What must be maintained from here on is the anchoring aspect of this history, a central point around which the rest of the investigation can move. Centring and contextualising the investigation also makes the goal of the entire project clearer; rather than trying to appeal to a universal form of thought, the project can be recognised as a response to something that already exists in the world, with the end of negating that existence in order to affirm something better.

Understanding history, both in terms of events and causes and as a product of human praxis rather than an unfolding of metaphysics or providence, grounds our work in real conditions and relations. Attaching this history to materiality and action is key to escaping the bourgeois model of history as the movement of ideas and spirits. As we establish a goal for the future in terms of what exists already, we can establish our methods with reference to human action. Idealism falls short in this aspect, as the idealist must believe in the autonomous movement and development of ideas in the world; in this model, the human being and their activity only play a mediating role, instead of a determinant one. Materialism, on the other hand, connects us as human beings directly to changes in the world and in the social formation (Horkheimer 1995; Marx 1978b). Moreover, materialism offers a break from the bourgeois ideology and a way to be vigilant in our thought so as to avoid reification of forms and reproduction of the very system we seek to oppose (Horkheimer 1975). Critique must be oriented, after all, at the creation of something new, rather than just a renovation of what is (Marx 1978b). Radicality is necessary if one seeks to change the world, and against the absolute idealism of the bourgeoisie, proper materialist thought offers a radically different perspective that can guide us going forward.

Comprehending the bourgeoisie and their history as the basis of the contemporary society provides the grossest context of the project of changing that form for one that engenders a greater human freedom. Setting the bourgeoisie as the dominant class and their rise to that status in this particular way is the necessary beginning of our project and sets before us the space to more fully apprehend the solution to our problem.

## INTEGRATION

In this first chapter, I have provided an outline of the bourgeois philosophy and ideology, and its relation to idealism and universalism. To me, these are key aspects for the development of further critique. Because of the dominating position and actions of the bourgeoisie, their worldview provides the context and grounding for opposing positions. Therefore, it is only by understanding bourgeois ideology as a practico-inert form of a previously revolutionary philosophy that we can begin to move outside of their theory and the circumscriptions it puts on action to properly understand what else is possible and to begin to move towards a new world.

Central to my understanding and critique of the social order is the model of the bourgeoisie as a class that has become dominant through their praxis and the conversion of revolutionary bourgeois philosophy to practico-inert bourgeois ideology. This is related to the changing role of capitalism in society and how its relation to the state and the larger body politic has shifted over time. In the next chapter, I will connect the bourgeois philosophy I described here to the concrete historical shifts of capitalism and how those shifts gave rise to the condition of modernity and, eventually, postmodernity. This, too, is necessary to understanding the role and potential of critique. Proper materialism and historicism demand that attention be paid to the relation of the ideology to the material conditions, and that can only be accomplished by moving now from what the ideology is to its relation to those material conditions.

Linking the bourgeois ideology to universalism and idealism is also central to this essay. These twin concepts provide a serious ideological tool for the

bourgeoisie, allowing their ideology to be presented as value-free and non-historical. I will revisit this later in dealing with nihilism, which presents alternative epistemological and ontological claims and allows us to move back towards the concrete and this-worldly aspects of existence. All of what I am presenting here can be understood as a response to, and a rejection of, bourgeois thought, and from the starting point of this chapter, the proper importance and explanation of those concepts can be developed.

The domination of society by the bourgeoisie is the fundamental driver of contemporary social relations and the need for the development of an alternative theory. Starting from the logic of bourgeois thought and deconstructing it to show the praxis and history underlying this system allows the construction of an alternative theory. However, before I move to outlining the principles of that alternative, I will first examine the concrete history of capitalism's relation to the state in order to explain how the social order has been transformed to more thoroughly ensure bourgeois domination.

## II. (POST)MODERNITY

Here, I turn to examining the relation between capitalism and the state. In order to maintain a materialist perspective, I must trace the shifts in how material conditions and relations have been organised over time. The bourgeoisie established their dominance over time through changing this relation, and bourgeois praxis was aimed towards getting those changes made in order to shore up power. My first contention here, then, is that the relationship between capitalism and the state has changed over time and that this change served to enshrine the bourgeoisie as the dominant class. Further, as the influence of capitalism and the power of the bourgeoisie grew, their goal gradually shifted away from making changes to defending the new power order. By explaining how and why this shift occurred, I aim to deepen the model of capitalism as an object of practico-inertia and the bourgeoisie as a class that shifted from revolutionary to conservative. Finally, I will offer an account of how, because of the challenges that capitalism faced once it had become dominant – particularly in the twentieth century – the main style of economic organisation continued to be renovated and why it is important to address this particular form when examining contemporary society and theory.

Modernity is a key concept in the historical and political development of capitalism and the development of bourgeois dominance. For the purposes of this essay, modernity is to be considered the period in which capitalism was first established as dominant. During modernity, capitalism shifts in character from being on the sidelines to being the central method of economic organisation.



Moreover, the relationship between capitalism and the state is inverted: initially, under feudalism, capitalism was opposed by the government; by the latest stages of modernity, the state had become fully a tool of capitalism and a necessary instrument for the maintenance of the capitalist system as a whole. More than anything, the period of modernity is the period in which the bourgeoisie fully enshrined their domination. Because of the fundamental change in the relation of capitalism to the state, as well as the shift in the role of the bourgeoisie from revolutionary to conservative, and because of the major systematic changes in how capitalism operates and maintains itself, I contend that we can consider the contemporary period to be one of postmodernity, one in which the project of modernity has been completed.

Over time, capitalism has changed from a system that was highly dynamic and innovative to one that has become metastable and conservative. While there are still some aspects of innovation in contemporary capitalism, they have become superficial. Initially, capitalism was replacing the dominant system of guild production, which entailed massive social change; today, however, innovation is more in the form of incremental improvements on the fundamental techniques employed for production. This process mirrors the shift in the historical role of the bourgeoisie from revolutionary to reactionary class. Processes of internal conflict within capitalism, as well as encounters of the system with forces outside of its control, led to this shift. By understanding the events and effects of modernity, we can more fully understand contemporary capitalism's origins and begin to move towards a critique and overcoming of the system.

Modelling modernity as a period of change and eventual sclerosis also allows us to begin to understand the process of moving beyond the system, beginning with the recognition of postmodernity. Postmodernity has emerged, dialectically, through the changes in capitalism's internal dynamics and relations to the larger social structure. Rather than an entirely new period, radically divorced from modernity, however, we must understand postmodernity as something that is attached to modernity dialectically. Grasping the relation of the two in this way represents for us the beginning of a theory that can move us beyond this relation.

#### THE CHARACTER OF MODERNITY

Modernity is the period of human history in which capitalism becomes the dominant mode of economic organisation and, at the same time, the bourgeoisie becomes the hegemonic social class. In other words, modernity is the period in which the material bases of capitalism become firmly established; the condition of modernity, by extension, is the existence of these material and social conditions. This period begins in the 19th century with the emergence and ascendance of industrial capitalism as well as the changes in lifestyle and labour practices that are associated with this economic form. Everyday life and the political order have both been restructured as a result of the processes of early industrialisation and modernisation, and this type of social dynamism in the pursuit of ensuring the metastability of the system is a central feature of modernity. Just as the bourgeoisie has changed its historical role from being a revolutionary to a reactionary class, and as bourgeois philosophy has become ossified in the form of ideology, so has modernity changed over time from being a radically new socioeconomic relation to being one that has been institutionally codified and calcified.

Key to modernity is the establishment of capitalism as the dominant form of economic activity and its concomitant enshrining in law. No economy develops separate from polity, and legality is a key mechanism in ensuring the stability of a system. Particularly important to the development of modern capitalism was the process of enclosure, the legal transformation of land that had been held collectively into private property (Kocka 2016; Marx 1976). Private property is a fundamental aspect of both political economy and its bastard offspring, economic physics, but it is not guaranteed through natural law, only through the juridico-legal system (Marx 1976). As much as it is the period in which the capitalist economy fully developed, modernity is the period in which the capitalist state emerged.

Early modernity was a period of particular dynamism within capitalism, as both the industrial system and the living arrangements of workers had to be overhauled to establish the new order as hegemonic. Industrial capitalism at this time was characterised by rapid innovation in technology and the structure of enterprise, as well as the centralisation of production in urban factories (Kocka 2016). Urbanisation and technological innovation were key to the shoring up of bourgeois control of the means of production, as it represented a break from the prior, more rural, relations of feudalism and control of production by guilds (Marx 1976). In this nascent form, modernity was characterised by a rapid change in the social formation, and previously-established values and traditions lost their reliability (Marx and Engels 2002). Innovation and dynamism were not, however, pursued as their own end or as part of a program for the betterment of humanity, but only as a result of the failure of older forms of technology to match the growth

that the principles of the capitalist economy demanded (Albritton 1986). With this in mind, we can understand the dynamic character of industrial capitalism and the society of early modernity as being ultimately directed towards the establishment of a stable economy and society.

However, though modernity was directed towards stability, this stability must be understood as the stability *of the system*, not the stability of the individual's way of life or even the economic and stability of the individual's status. For workers, the transition to capitalism brought increasing precarity, especially in terms of the necessities of life (Marx 1959). For capitalists, the drive to increase profit and grow capital necessitated competition between firms, and this competition could only become fiercer as the number of firms shrank (Marx 1959; Marx 1976). Capitalism, unlike feudalism before it, does not rely on the logic of an absolute social hierarchy derived from divine right. Instead, the principles and behaviours of markets are meant to be the driving force behind social stratification, and there is no market force present that guarantees one class (im)mobility. In fact, the ability to move between social classes can be understood as part of the alienation of labour under capitalism, and the metastability of the capitalist system can be understood as an effect of the abstraction that causes this alienation. Workers become alienated as they must subordinate themselves and their subjectivity to the logic of capital in order to secure the necessities of life, while capitalists become alienated as they must subordinate *themselves* and *their* subjectivity to the logic of pursuit of profit (Marx 1959). Both worker and owner are reduced to an abstract form and only exist as objects of market logic, cogs in the machine of profit production. Each individual cog, however, is a replaceable

part, and the class hierarchy that follows from unequal control of the means of production is one that is derived practically and extemporaneously, not through the movement of a metaphysical principle in the way that royalty supposedly was.

Metastability, the condition of a system that remains in place even as its internal parts and techniques are renovated over time, is key to understanding the model of capitalism I am advancing, both in terms of its economic base and its ideological superstructure; moreover, it is key to understanding the trajectory of modernity and the eventual emergence of postmodernity. Due to its internal logical, capitalism can only be maintained over time as a metastable system. In a stable system, competing forces and conflicting elements are balanced and managed to keep any one aspect from overbalancing the rest, which would cause collapse. These aspects of balance and maintenance are here built in to the system, so stability is an aspect that emerges from the particularities of the system's design. For example, a computer could be considered a stable system, using heatsinks and fans to manage the waste heat produced by operation that could eventually threaten the integrity of the components. Naturally, this is not to say that a stable system is an immortal one – the removal of the computer's power or the failure of a component can prevent operation – but that the system is not self-destructive by design. On the other hand, metastability is a stability that is *enforced from without*. Here, conflicts and dynamics are not properly balanced and managed as a part of the system's design, and there is a threat – even a likelihood – of collapse. Because of the fundamental imbalances in the system, management must come from outside intervention. One instance of this might be a bonfire: this is a system that, by its fundamental operation, destroys itself: as the logs burn, they can no longer

offer fuel to the fire, and somebody has to add more wood. In the case of capitalism, this means state intervention in the economy to ensure that it continues to exist and operate even when conditions are not amenable. Understanding metastability as part of contemporary capitalism also helps us to move away from an idealist perspective and towards a materialist one by incorporating the idea of the bourgeoisie as a class that is still responding to threats to their power, still using praxis to maintain their social dominance, rather than reducing them to the simple object of a universal process.

Capitalism demands metastability as a result of class conflict. Over time, competition logically leads to the concentration of wealth in fewer hands and, therefore, leads to the immiseration of a growing segment of society (Marx 1959). Allowed to develop unchecked and without response from the dominant bourgeoisie, this immiserated class, the proletariat, could come to develop a consciousness of their conditions and could take on a revolutionary character (Marx and Engels 2002). As such, part of the maintenance of capitalist society is always to keep this class conflict from boiling over. In modernity, this is a central problem for the bourgeoisie and is addressed historically through material, legal, and ideological techniques. Production of an immiserated class is, however, unavoidable under capitalism, and has never been of particular importance to the bourgeois power elite. Instead, it is management of class tension and the prevention of the formation of revolutionary class consciousness that has been prioritised. Class conflict, then, is part of the metastability of the system, which is particularly clear in its treatment by capitalist ideology, which I will examine in a later section of this paper.

We can best understand modernity as the period of capitalist hegemony's emergence and solidification. Capitalism develops more fully and becomes dominant during modernity. However, modernity still comprises several forms of capital and a long period of development and reformation in response to historical events. In order to more completely understand modernity, and in order to properly conceptualise postmodernity, then, we must now turn our attention to some of the key events of the twentieth century and their effects on the social formation.

#### TURNING POINTS IN MODERNITY

Broadly speaking, there are five major historical events in the twentieth century that affected the development of modern capitalism and demanded systemic rearrangement. These events are: the two World Wars, the Great Depression, and the emergence and fall of the Soviet Union. While I recognise that this grouping does not strictly reflect the timeline of these events, it does reflect their logical connections and makes it easier to manage the discussion. Each of these events brought the modern capitalist system into an unavoidable conflict that entailed a rearrangement of elements of the system that, while maintaining the larger metastable framework, changed the conditions of life and political-economic development. In the grand scheme of things, these turning points also laid the groundwork for postmodernity, the period in which the organisation of the state has become fully subordinated to the maintenance of the capitalist system.

Unprecedented in scale and death toll, the two World Wars necessitated a change in the organisation of European states to avoid repetition. Broadly, this meant a de-purification of capitalism, a move away from allowing market logic to

operate as freely as it had, as state intervention became a necessary aspect of the economy (Albritton 1986). States moving away from more *laissez-faire* approaches to capitalism is an important point of context for understanding the development of later stages of modernity, where attempts at a type of re-purification through turning to neoliberal policy emerged. During the interwar years, attempts were made to stabilise the European economy and to return to the organisation that had been present before the First World War, but these attempts failed; consequently, the world economy entered the Great Depression, which led in turn to the emergence of fascism and the Second World War (Albritton 1986).

The Great Depression stood, and still stands today, as the most powerful demonstration of capitalist economic crisis. It was a time of widespread poverty and economic uncertainty, upending the arrangements that were becoming more and more stable in the capitalist world. Effects of this crisis, however, were not limited just to the economic, but spread out into the larger situation of social life, and the upheaval and precarity that existed at this time would eventually lead to the emergence of fascism in Europe, which led directly to the Second World War. Moreover, preventing another depression of this scale became a priority for world leaders, necessitating a shift in the dominant economic policy. In this way, responding to the Great Depression and managing the systemic aspects that initially caused it became part of capitalist metastability.

Efforts following the First World War, with the creation of the League of Nations and measures in the Treaty of Versailles, failed to prevent the Second World War, which was even more deadly and ended with the introduction of the atomic bomb, which acted as the crux of the Cold War arms race between the



United States and the Soviet Union. To avoid the possibility of a Third World War or a second Great Depression, leaders in western Europe worked to establish a new world order, through the institution of the Bretton Woods system of monetary management and the establishment of supranational organisations like the World Bank and IMF (Harvey 2005). International organisations such as these represent a shift towards a more global order of capitalism, one of the key features of the later stages of modernity and the contemporary period of postmodernity. Because these systems were attached directly to the use of the United States dollar as a reserve currency and the protection of the United States military, they also represent the establishment of the United States as the key superpower of the modern capitalist world system (Harvey 2005; Albritton 1986). Accompanying this development, there was a shift in economic policy from the earlier form of liberalism to Keynesianism, which embedded the liberal aspects of the economy in a framework of political regulations in an attempt to avoid the worst of capitalism's tendency towards crisis (Harvey 2005). Keynesianism becoming dominant was key to the de-purification of capitalism, as it shifted the liberal state into a more interventionist mode, which was seen as necessary to maintaining the metastability of markets. Even today, this type of state necessity is maintained in capitalist economics, and it is another key feature of modernity in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

Outside of western Europe, concomitant with the end of the First World War, was the Russian Revolution of 1917, which established the Soviet Union. Just as the World Wars and Great Depression had, the creation of this new state demanded an economic response from the capitalist world. Soviet Russia and the

other nations within its sphere of influence represented a direct economic threat to the hegemony of capitalism and the power order of the West, and the relation of East and West was characterised by the tensions of the Cold War. It was in this context that the final seeds of postmodernity would be sown, as specific elements of the contemporary capitalist ideology developed in response to the suddenly-realistic threat of Communism in the world. Most importantly, though, while the Soviet Union existed, it showed that a non-capitalist state was possible, moving the concept outside of the realm of pure theory. Revolutionary praxis, embodied in the Eastern bloc, was more at hand than ever before, and capitalism faced its greatest threat from outside.

1991, though, brought with it the final collapse of the Soviet Union and capitalism's greatest victory. The collapse of the Soviet Union was the last major event in the development of modernity and cemented the status of capitalism as world hegemon (Fukuyama 1989). However, it should be noted that the collapse of the Soviet Union did not happen simply as a result of capitalism's superior ideology or organisation, but in the context of a protracted economic and political Cold War. Communism's collapse was also a result of bourgeois praxis and the conflict between different, incompatible, projects. It is this shoring up of capitalist power that represents the fullest development of modernity and the transition to postmodernity, as it brings with it the final ideological development of capitalist thought. Revolution, with the demise of the Soviet Union, was dealt a serious blow. Having an actual Communist superpower in the world was an animating force for anti-capitalism, and offered a central point for the organisation of anti-capitalist movements. Lacking such a lodestar in the contemporary period, revolution is put

into question and, because of its association with the *démodé* politics of the Soviet Union, communist thought faced a serious threat in the twentieth century. Post-Soviet capitalism takes as a fundamental assumption that there is no viable alternative model (Fisher 2009). Part of postmodernity, then, is the fact of existence in the post-Communist world and how revolutionary thought can be rehabilitated after such a crippling defeat.

Modernity is the period in which capitalism has most fully developed, and a central part of understanding that development is situating it with regards to the most important world-historical events of the times. In the twentieth century, the capitalist world system faced major existential crises, and the reorganisations that resulted were central in the establishment of the contemporary economic order. Understanding the transformations of modernity and the shift from innovation to preservation of the system, and tying these shifts to specific turning points in history, allows us to contextualise and comprehend the emergence of the particular form of capitalism that exists in the contemporary period of postmodernity. This brings us to the next topic, neoliberalism, as it represents the form of capitalism that was developed through these responses.

## NEOLIBERALISM

Neoliberalism is a form of capitalism that emerged in the last quarter of the twentieth century and today stands as the dominant form, playing a central role in the order of postmodernity. Historically, neoliberalism was formulated as a response to the crises of capitalism and to the existence of Soviet Communism, and represents the end of the project of the modern bourgeoisie as the state is converted fully from obstacle to ensurer of capitalism. Ideologically, it is meant to

be a return to *laissez-faire* capitalism, but it must be understood that neoliberalism is only quasi-capitalistic, as it relies on a particular state formation that is necessary to ensure the existence of markets and the participation of the population in the market economy. Materially, neoliberalism brings with it a particular organisation of society and labour that departs from the industrial capitalism of early modernity and further destabilises the worker's lifestyle. Ultimately, it is the introduction and codification of neoliberal principles in the economic organisation of social life that heralds the fullest transition from modernity to postmodernity.

Following the Second World War, there was a turn towards Keynesian economics and the restriction of markets by state intervention to limit crisis. However, in the middle of the twentieth century, economic growth was slowing down and the distribution of wealth was beginning to shift away from the top of society; neoliberalism was developed as a response to these conditions, aimed at a return to the accumulation and concentration of capital (Harvey 2005). To this end, neoliberal policy is a conscious attempt to return to the *laissez-faire* style of governance that characterised pre-Second World War Europe and America. At the same time, though, neoliberal theory and policy understands that the state is necessary to preserve the existence of the market and to coerce people into market participation, and the economy is built on a foundation of legal codification of property rights and state intervention to prop up flagging markets (Harvey 2005). In early modernity, feudal governments were antagonistic to capitalism and prevented its infiltration into the relations of production. In high modernity, social-democratic governments used a Keynesian approach to mitigate the worst

crisis tendencies of capitalism, strictly regulating markets. In postmodernity, the neoliberal state is transformed into an instrument of capitalism, acting to guarantee the stability of the market form, even while competition and concentration of wealth immiserate an ever-growing segment of the population. That is to say, the state now acts to guarantee the existence of capitalism and the metastability of the system. Assurance of this type was most clearly visible in the government response to the financial crisis of 2008, when governments stepped in to save institutions that had been deemed “too big to fail” (Kocka 2016). This designation did not mean that those institutions held too much capital or power to be prone to failure, but that they were so integral to the system that the government could not *allow* them to fail, as the disruption would be too great to recover from. Metastability of this sort is a serious impediment for revolutionary action, and is both baked into the political structure of neoliberal capitalism as well as into the ideological superstructure.

How labour is structured has also shifted since the institution of the neoliberal order. Before the 1960s, labour was mostly organised according to the principles of Fordism within the Keynesian framework, and this created a fairly stable configuration under which material conditions were improving (Harvey 1989). In the 60s and 70s, though, growth had slowed and the rigidity of this economic form began to act as an impediment to capitalist accumulation (Harvey 1989; Harvey 2005). Neoliberalism was brought in as a response, a return to the (nominal) self-regulation of markets as the Keynesian approach failed to produce a viable response to the economic crisis (Harvey 1989; Kocka 2016). While Fordism-Keynesianism was very rigid and tended towards a system of more total

management of life, the new order of neoliberalism is characterised by an emphasis on flexibility in the economy (Harvey 1989). Flexibility of this sort – limited flexibility on the part of the worker, always constrained by the politically-ensured limits of the market – characterises labour in postmodernity. Capitalism's tendency towards accumulation, stratification, and immiseration is revitalised by the neoliberal shift away from Keynesianism's class compromise but, particularly when combined with the ideological elements of the culture, revolutionary praxis is made to seem impossible due to the structural intervention of the state to maintain the overall structure. In this way, metastability of the system also affects labour: for the worker, precarity and loss of wealth are normal, but the crisis tendency is mitigated for the shrinking number of capitalists.

In addition to the increasing flexibility demanded of labourers, neoliberal capitalism is characterised by a shift in focus from production to finance. Just as industrial capital was the primary form in the liberal period, financial capital is the dominant form in the neoliberal period (Albritton 1986; Kocka 2016). Expansion of financial capitalism into more segments of the economy has been accompanied by a change in the measure of value; today, rather than production being the main indicator of an economy's strength, it is the value of the stock market (Harvey 2005). Growth in value has also been facilitated by the divorce of currency from the gold standard and the Bretton Woods system, which allows more play in currency markets and an expansion of the financial sector (Kocka 2016). Separating value and production is a key innovation in the neoliberal system and its metastability. When value is tied to production directly, even small changes in production can have pronounced effects, and the workers who actually do the

producing gain a great deal of direct power over the economy. Neither of these conditions is favourable to the capitalist, who wants to ensure growth and avoid threats to their power and status. Divorcing value from production and moving it to financial performance, combined with the move of currency production under the aegis of the state, sidesteps these aspects, further concentrating the power of the bourgeoisie and, by extension, mitigating the potential for revolutionary action by helping to strengthen the metastability of the overall system.

Today, the logic of neoliberalism has become hegemonic globally, and social life has taken on a deeply neoliberal character. The system is maintained by both material intervention by the state, through practices of qualitative easing and the rigorous protection of property in law, as well as through the ideological superstructure. Overall, neoliberalism is key to the establishing of capitalism as a metastable and totalising system, and this deeply curtails the revolutionary possibility. With the history of modernity and the character of neoliberalism in mind, we can turn our attention to understanding the condition of postmodernity, how it relates to modernity, and what it means for revolution.

#### POSTMODERNITY

Throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the form of capitalism and its relation to the state have changed. This process was part of the development of bourgeois hegemony and the subsumption of the state by capitalist logic. As these changes went on, the organisation of social life and the potential for revolutionary praxis have changed, and understanding these changes is crucial for having a proper sociology of contemporary life. The totality of these changes is the shift from modernity, a period characterised by the growth of capitalism and its

assumption of ever-greater power, to postmodernity, a period in which capitalism has become much more fully integrated into the social fabric and has shifted into a mode of metastability. In postmodernity, the capitalist system is much more complete and dominant, and changes in the structure of power have made revolution a more complicated prospect, but one that also has a far more radical character.

There is some dispute about whether postmodernity is a useful concept in understanding capitalism and, if it is useful, when exactly the period of postmodernity begins. I will say here that postmodernity, as a period that follows the completion of modernity's developing and entrenching of capitalism, is useful in understanding the development of capitalism because it allows us to fully model the change in capitalism from the early period of modernity, when it was dynamic and opposed to the traditional and entrenched social and political order, to the contemporary, when capitalism has become hegemonic in the organisation of economic activity. In itself, this shift in relations between the body politic and the economic is of great sociological importance, as it demonstrates an increasing integration of the two spheres, which cannot be ignored if we want to understand the position of people as social subjects or the construction of the self through social means. From a theoretical perspective, it also leads to shifts in epistemology and ontology as the capitalist ideology becomes more and more dominant and naturalised as common sense over time. Modernity, broadly, is the period in which these changes are going on; postmodernity is the period in which they have happened and in which we can begin to understand those changes. Accepting this transition is especially important if we are to pursue a *dialectical* analysis of history.



Dialectical understanding, after all, can only be fully developed in terms of a form that has been completely developed and, therefore, can only be used to analyse a historical formation; formations of the present and of the future are outside of dialectical reason (Sartre 2004; Kierkegaard 1996). Taking on the perspective of postmodernity allows us to formulate something that breaks, at least partially, from modernity, in order to understand the dialectic of modernity and use that standpoint to begin to develop a way forward, a theory of future-thinking and revolutionary praxis.

At the same time, we have to understand the limit of the perspective of postmodernity. Namely, that postmodernity is not entirely separate from modernity. Giddens (1990) argues that, rather than postmodernity proper, what has emerged is a particularly intense and mature configuration of modernity, which we better understand. However, this intensification and maturation is the exact condition by which modernity passes into postmodernity. The dialectics at play in capitalism's development during modernity – between the capitalist and the worker, between capitalism and the state, between the West and the East – have led to the peculiar formation of neoliberalism, with its tendency towards metastability, and towards the apparent demise of Communism. Sticking to modernity prevents us from seeing this dialectical development, as it keeps us from being able to recognise the completion of the dialectical *process*. Just as the bourgeoisie passes from revolutionary to reactionary through its praxis becoming practico-inert, so does modernity pass towards postmodernity as the capitalist system passes from minority formation to hegemon.

That being said, modernity and postmodernity are not entirely separate. Instead, we can recognise postmodernity as something of a transitional stage in the overall development of capitalism. This transition is characterised as a move away from pure capitalism and the absolute dominance of the law of value to a system in which the state is subordinated to markets and in which intervention is recognised as necessary to maintain the system; capitalism is impure, but there is not yet a movement towards communism in the Marxist sense (Albritton 1986). Dialectically, the relation of modernity and postmodernity is transitional; Merleau-Ponty (1962) describes a transitional dialectic in terms of the past, present, and future, as one in which the synthesis of the different terms does not allow identification, but differentiation and a living-through of a change. The dialectic of modernity is not absolutely complete, but we can recognise postmodernity as the second term in the triad – the negation – and we can take this as our grounding in a search for the third, the negation of the negation. Examining the political-economic formation of postmodernity, however, highlights the necessity of understanding a shift in revolutionary praxis that mirrors the shift in the character of the overall system. Old forms of consciousness and praxis, being attached to old forms of political economy, cannot simply be substituted into the new condition. Instead, we must now develop a new style of revolution. To do this, however, we must turn our attention to the ideological superstructure of postmodernity and to the critique that allows the breakdown of its fundamental values.

## INTEGRATION

This chapter has continued on from the previous, but with a more direct eye towards how the bourgeoisie entrenched their dominance through shifting the place of capitalism in the social order. I have laid out the way that capitalism has moved from an alternative to feudalism and become not only the central mode of economic organisation but also made superordinate to the other functions of the state. All of this is meant to develop the material aspect of what was presented in the first chapter, the transformation of Enlightenment philosophy to bourgeois ideology. In the concrete sphere, this has meant the creation of the metastable order of neoliberal capitalism.

While the first chapter offered an explanation of the fundamental aspects of bourgeois ideology, the historical and material approach I took in this chapter is meant to pinpoint specific instances and goals of bourgeois praxis since the emergence of capitalism. In so doing, I have shown how the ideological superstructure is linked to, and develops out of, the material base. By explaining how capitalism has developed and ossified over time, I have outlined the specific events and goals involved in the transformation of the bourgeoisie from revolutionary to counter-revolutionary class.

More than anything, these first two chapters have been meant to provide context for what will follow. Now, we have a model of the bourgeoisie and of capitalism that will give ground as I turn my attention to the development of critique. This ground is found in the fundamental assumptions of the bourgeois ideology and their connection to practical goals in the development of capitalism through the period of modernity. My critique is also grounded in the period of

postmodernity and the neoliberal style of capitalism, since those are the time and the condition in which I live. Because of this, I cannot offer a critique of the system from any other standpoint, and so the context is inseparable from my theoretical project.

In the next chapter, I will turn my attention to nihilism as a tool of critique that is meant to break down and break through the fundamental aspects of the dominant mode of thought. Nihilism, like all other aspects of this essay, develops as a specific response to bourgeois ideology and praxis. It also provides a grounding for the concept of postmodernism, a specific response to the specific bourgeois concept of modernism. To this end, I will be using nihilism as the launching point of my critique.

### III. ON NIHILISM

As an economic arrangement related to and defended by the political form, capitalism is justified and explained by the bourgeois philosophy that follows from Enlightenment thought. Because of this, to work towards a revolution that would change our social form, we must understand that another philosophy is possible. Nihilism, a philosophy that shows the values of the dominant form of thought to be hollow, baseless, and human, is extremely useful to this end. I contend that the development of a proper, active nihilism can lead us towards a philosophy and theory that engenders revolutionary action against a dominant system. However, because the rejection of the value of universalism is so central to the nihilist approach, the accusation will be made that nihilism cannot lead to any kind of substitute system being created. To respond to this accusation, we must understand that both passive and active forms of nihilism exist. The passive form does, indeed, stop at rejection; but the active form is an affirmational approach that takes on the project of creating a new set of values that is not based on those rejected principles, but on real human activity (Nietzsche 1968). I find that active nihilism exists in a dialectical relationship with the passive form, and with the dominant philosophy: one must pass through the dominant style to reach passive nihilism as its negation, then through passive nihilism to active nihilism as a negation of that negation. Understanding this allows us to more fully develop a set of principles that escapes bourgeois thought. In this chapter, I will explain how nihilism emerges as a critique of the assumptions of the Enlightenment philosophy that underpins bourgeois thought and how, through the development of that

critique, we can move from simple rejection towards a revolutionary form of thought that is radically different and focusses on the potential for change in the future.

In keeping with the other principles of this essay, I will show that nihilism can be understood as a form of immanent critique of bourgeois thought. Pursuing the principles of this worldview to their logical conclusion, nihilism shows how these ideas undercut themselves and remove their own grounding (Nishitani 1990). From the standpoint of nihilism, the assumptions of positivist and universalist approaches rely on the acceptance of articles of faith, rather than an understanding of human works and projects. Active nihilism goes further than this, encouraging people to engage with their role in the (re)production and maintenance of knowledge and to own the fact that their own power and projects are implied in the knowledge they possess. Because of this, I see active nihilism as a bridge towards a mode of thought that more deeply acknowledges praxis and, therefore, one that *encourages* further praxis.

Nihilism is also attached to the later critique of postmodernism. As such, understanding nihilism will also help us to understand postmodernism more fully. Just as postmodernity emerged from the conditions and trends of modernity, we will see that postmodernism emerged as a response to modernism. Postmodernism also emerged as a result of specific changes in the organisation of capitalism, and so reconfigures nihilism for the contemporary situation. Full comprehension of nihilism prevents us, however, from taking that emergence as the endpoint, allowing us to recognise postmodernism as only a dialectical stage, just like postmodernity. Comprehending the nihilist dialectic, however, also

highlights why we cannot believe in dialectic as some kind of metaphysical principle that moves history forward in the abstract, but rather only as a form of understanding. Praxis is the complement of this dialectic, allowing a move from understanding to concrete worldly change. Setting praxis as the follow-up to dialectic returns us to a model that is more in line with the demand that the workers unite in revolutionary action (Marx and Engels 2002). That is, taking up nihilism allows us to better model the role of praxis in dialectically-understood history and to understand its role in empowering us through the return of active human subjectivity to the historical stage.

#### THE NIHILIST PROJECT

As a philosophical approach, nihilism rejects the fundamental values of the dominant mode of thought in order to posit a new, alternative set of values (Nishitani 1990; Nietzsche 1968). This critical approach is deeply tied to the dominance of idealist philosophy in Europe during and after the Enlightenment, arising as a direct response to the universalising style of Hegel (Nishitani 1990). Active nihilism responds to the idea of a system of universal and eternal values, seeking to examine the actual historical relations and benefits of that system (Nietzsche 2003b); to this end, the nihilists chase the principles of the system through to reveal their self-defeating aspect. However, proper nihilism does not stop here, instead moving towards the affirmation of a new set of values more in accord with actual reality and human experience and meant to promote human activity and the creation of a new world. This affirmation of the new is a crucial aspect in distinguishing active from passive nihilism, with the latter being a form that simply rejects what is dominant and leaves it at that. Active nihilism, with its

affirmative aspect, is amenable to revolutionary praxis and the revolutionary project in a way that passive nihilism and simple logical analysis are not. This is the type of nihilism being pursued by thinkers such as Nietzsche and Nishitani, as well as by later existentialist philosophers. Therefore, by fully modelling the nihilist project, we can develop a better model of the revolutionary project.

Emerging as a response to the philosophy of 19th-century Europe, nihilism is inherently linked to that idealist approach – the same approach that also underpins the bourgeois ideology that is dominant today. Primarily, Nietzsche (1968) argues that, under the Enlightenment episteme, the dominant system of values suggested its own groundlessness and overall untenability. Despite the Enlightenment philosophers' pressing to break with tradition and use pure reason to ground understanding of the world, European philosophers continued to use Christian theology and ideas to ground their moral philosophy, and European society was justified by appeal to these principles (Nietzsche 2003a; 2003b). Cartesian reason and the *cogito* are directly attached to the idea that there exists a perfect god who bestowed upon human beings the ability to move towards that perfection (Descartes 2000). Similarly, the Hegelian dialectic and the movement towards absolute knowing is attached to the pre-existence of knowledge, and history becomes the movement of Spirit towards its perfection (Hegel 1977). Both of these approaches turn on the idea of perfectibility, and that perfectibility is justified by the existence of some perfect thing that transcends humanity. Even with the movement away from Descartes's open Catholicism, positivist approaches keep the belief in some perfect being. Part of nihilism, then, is a turn away from a



belief in transcendent perfection and an acceptance of the element of human projects and the power relations that those projects imply (Nishitani 1990).

The Enlightenment is taken as an ahistorical approach that, in attempting to be objective and detached, ignores the human relations that led to the development of the system of values it promotes and their connection to the times and to the advantages that the system offers one group over another (Nietzsche 2003b). It is on this ground that Nietzsche puts forward his critique of the aspects European thought that made nihilism immanent in it, examining it as a system that has become dogmatic and ossified, using the language of universality and detachment to defend a system that is fundamentally human and historical. Values are developed initially through practical action oriented towards the development of some kind of power or domination of the world, but over time, this activity is obliterated and the values become entrenched in social relations (Nietzsche 2003b). There is a parallel here to the universalism that is so central to bourgeois thought, and to the approach of economic rationality that subsumes all interactions under the logic of profit, which elevates the economic above the human and ignores the way that the bourgeoisie established the dominance of capitalism through their own praxis. However, just because the activity that initially forms values is forgotten or hidden away does not mean that it does not exist; here, I find a return to the logic of praxis. *From* here, we can begin to understand the value of nihilism as a critique that aims to bring back the element of subjectivity and human activity to the model of society, history, and morality.

Responding to the self-defeating aspect of Enlightenment-derived European thought, nihilism is also a response to a type of crisis of thought. For

Nietzsche, this crisis is represented through the allegory of the death of God, which acts as a destructive force for the metaphysical model of the universe but has also not been broadly recognised (Nietzsche 1974; 2003c). Scientific method and the formalised conclusions of natural philosophy become codified as knowledge and reproduced through tradition, but there is insufficient examination of the human/practice aspect of these things. This prevents people from recognising the full importance of breaking away from the traditional power of the church. Within Nietzsche's work, the death of God represents the collapse of the assumptions of the traditional power order as well as the value system built upon it, and is meant to problematise all of the fruits of that tree. However, just as the Cartesian *cogito* still maintains the assumption of God, thinkers who stay within the dogma of positivism cannot take scientific scepticism to its fullest extent. While Nietzsche's allegory here makes the Christian theology most explicitly problematic, it also offers a more complete break from the dominant mode of Western thought and the entire metaphysical base (Davis 2011). Chasing scepticism all the way through means rejecting the belief in a pre-human perfection that produced absolute knowledge and, therefore, means rejecting the belief in knowledge as being *revealed* through investigation. Instead, we must acknowledge that knowledge is itself produced through human praxis and that, because of this, knowing and scientific pursuits are deeply connected to power relations.

The breadth of this crisis cannot be overstated: fundamentally, what is at stake for the nihilists is the entire system of human thought and belief. In nihilism, the examination of the limits of the system also serves to negate its self-evidence, which is the great triumph of the universalist model (Nishitani 2011). By extension,

the project of active nihilism extends to the creation of an *entirely* new set of values. Realistically, while some phenomenal aspects of the previous system may be maintained in the new, pursuing such a deep critique of the origins of these principles and forms means they will be based on something that is not entirely compatible with the old. A break of this sort is a serious problem for the universally-oriented systems of Enlightenment idealism, which leads to the popular rejection of nihilism as a viable philosophical project. However, for those of us who are not attached to the bourgeois system of values, it is no problem at all. Instead, we can recognise nihilism and its dialectical character as a tool for allowing us to move beyond the bourgeois episteme and into something new. A rejection of the universal model that quashes the subjective to elevate the objective is a necessary condition for a proper and complete theory of revolutionary praxis.

Equally necessary, however, is a move towards a new affirmation, which is what separates active nihilism from passive. This type of affirmation requires the construction of a new type of subject, one who can accept their responsibility for their values, one that understands their subjectivity as a fundamental part of the world they live in (Nietzsche 2003c). To properly respond to the “death of God” and the devaluation of all values that follows on from it, human beings must reach a higher stage of historical consciousness and embrace their responsibility for their world (Nietzsche 1974). Here, we begin to see shades of the subject as a figure that is responsible, at least in part, for the structure of the world in which they live, rather than being only an epiphenomenon of supra-historical processes. For the universalist or the bourgeois, nihilism is to be rejected as passive because it denies the metaphysical element of the dominant system and draws attention to the

relations of history and power that maintain that dominance. For the anti-bourgeois, nihilism becomes a *project* – a movement through the stage of negation towards an affirmation of something new. The mechanism of this affirmation is *praxis*.

#### THE DIALECTIC OF NIHILISM

Nihilism can be understood dialectically (Nishitani 1990). A dominant form of thought – in our case, the bourgeois universalist/idealist form – acts as the initial affirmation. Close examination of the principles of this model reveals that they are not as universal as the dogmatist would like – the negation. And from here, the human subject of history enters the scene, taking on the role of acting and willing in the world, affirming a new, humanistic set of values – the negation of negation. I find that a dialectical understanding nihilism allows both a better understanding of active nihilism as a complete project (as examined above) and an importation of nihilism to a sociological theory of praxis and change. That is to say, through dialectical reason, it is possible to move nihilism from the sphere of *philosophy* into the sphere of *theory*. Understanding nihilism dialectically also allows a rapprochement between social theories that are nihilistic in origin and those that are more traditionally critical; it allows us to connect Marxism and nihilism, and to more completely model the project of postmodernism.

Nietzsche's dialectical critique of European values is very similar in form to how Marx critiques the principles of political economy. Marx's view of capitalism as crisis-prone and tending towards a breakdown is also similar to how Nietzsche discusses the death of God as the central crisis of Western thought. Both approaches suggest that a crisis of order is inevitable in some form, implied by the

internal logic of the system. There is a difference in objects, with Marx being more interested in the capitalist-nationalist political economy while Nietzsche is attending to the objectivist-moralist anthropological ontology, but this suggests only that these two approaches may be complementary rather than overlapping. Conceptually, there is a similarity in how the two approaches aim to historicise systems that aim at being supra-historical and to return subjectivity to systems that seek to overrule it with abstract objective forms. While the exact details of this synthesis are outside the scope of this essay, it seems that there is a real “nihilist spirit” in Marx’s critique of capitalism and historical-materialist analytical framework. For example, Marx’s (1978b) push to focus on human activity in this world rather than the movement of abstract forms above the firmament mirrors Nietzsche’s (2003b) rejection of the detached approach. Another similarity is found in the idea that it is the ideas of the dominant class that become the dominant ideas of the time (Marx and Engels 1998), which directly parallels the idea that values and morality develop to defend the acts of the aristocracy (Nietzsche 2003b). Marx and Nietzsche share a focus on the element of human praxis in the (re)production of the conditions of human life and, by extension, how human work, not divine intervention, can change those conditions.

Another important aspect of the dialectic of nihilism is that it does not support a deterministic view of human existence, in opposition to the idealist approach that pins the perfectibility of the world to the revelations of Reason. This avoids the error of taking the dialectic as a metaphysical principle or a natural process, rather than a tool for understanding the world and the internal logic of institutions and processes. A belief in some superhuman power that would come

to reverse the fortunes of oppressor and oppressed and bring good into the world is the underpinning of the “slave morality” that Nietzsche rejects (Nietzsche 2003b). People who believe in this form of otherworldly justice ignore the possibility of action in this world and construct a set of moral principles that defer their salvation to the next world (Nietzsche 2003b). This is, fundamentally, a rejection of praxis and of human freedom. In contemporary society, this is attached to a faith in democratic processes and models that take socialism as inevitable, or which preach an abstract form of charity for all (Nietzsche 2003b; Nishitani 1990). All of these forms are predicated on the belief in an otherworldly form that takes precedence over our actual, lived reality and the projects we take up therein – history is allowed to be determined in accordance with some set of principles, purportedly derived from reason, that exist above the human. This is the way that the Enlightenment repackages Christian cosmology rather than breaking with it, and it is the way that absolute worldviews derived from Enlightenment foreclose the possibility of praxis.

Nihilism, then, aims at breaking away from this style of thought; the return of subjectivity to the world is incompatible with the belief in a model of progress that is based on a supernatural principle. The dialectic of nihilism, with its rejection of the divine and the universally reasonable, leads us to a style of thought that allows for change through human action, as a response to the historical and material conditions in the world and in line with human desires and goals, rather than leaving humanity as the objects of heavenly creatures. Active nihilism is separated from passive by this movement beyond the simple negation and into the affirmation of human action; in this way, the dialectical character is *indispensable*

to nihilism. While the universalist will seek to rebuke the nihilist as being quietly negative, we can see that playing out the dialectic here to its fullest extent allows for something far more open.

Losing determination is still something that we have to reckon with, and this is also part of the nihilist project. Facing the epistemological and ontological crises of emptiness (the death of God) means that human beings now have to accept a more active role in the creation of history and, therefore, in the creation of human existence (Nietzsche 1974). In contrast to universalising systems that seek to connect all eras to some set of abstract and unified principles, and therefore to elevate those principles above history – looking at all of time as if it were compressed into a single, dimensionless point – the nihilistic approach, in its attempt to *return* to human history, takes the negation of value as a starting point to post the establishing of new values (Nishitani 1990). As I mentioned earlier, examining the emergence of values and ideologies in terms of human activity and projects attaches to them the possibility of mutation through further activity. In fact, it is expected that other groups will eventually appropriate a set of values and turn them against the group that initially established them (Nietzsche 2003b). Within this framework, our attention is not to be turned back towards the origin of a set of values as an endpoint, but forwards towards the ways that we might change the world to meet our own ends. Moreover, because nihilism rejects the idea of a creator having made a perfect world that is simply playing itself out, even a full understanding of the past can never deliver salvation.

Proper nihilism is, therefore, fundamentally future-oriented. The maintenance of present conditions, endlessly, is unacceptable. People who would

avoid risk and act simply to maintain their comfortable conditions over all else, to maintain an endless state of present free of any kind of strife and disagreement, are to be rejected. Nietzsche (2003c) describes this type of person as the “ultimate man”, who has reduced the world to its simplest and smallest form, and who is contrasted to the “superman” that is more affirmative, more this-worldly, and who seeks to be overcome in the future, endlessly. What emerges, then, is a need for a new type of subjectivity, a new understanding of humanity’s place in the world, that can affirm this future-orientation rather than simply appealing back to unmoving human essence, be it religious or psychological. Understanding history, human existence, and praxis as dialectically-related elements of the existential whole, rather than as things determined by God’s plan, allows for a theory of praxis and of social change that is simply not compatible with the universalist model and that, therefore, the universalist and their students can never arrive at. Reckoning with the loss of determination and the abandonment that follows the death of God is the only way that we can fully and properly arrive at such an understanding.

Overall, the dialectical aspect and approach is indispensable to nihilist thought, allowing the critique of the dominant episteme to move beyond a simple negativity and towards an affirmation of new values. Both in form and in content, this shows a similarity to Marx’s philosophy, which drew out the dialectic latent in bourgeois thought to point the way towards an alternative social arrangement. Central to this dialectic is the separation of active from passive nihilism and the understanding that passive nihilism is only a stage to pass through as a transition towards the active. Stopping at passive nihilism strands us in quietism, a rejection of traditional values without a new set to substitute for them. Existentialism can



help us at this point by offering a body of thought that is more affirmative of human existence and relation, emphasising these aspects as primary in the world, which lends itself more directly to a sociological approach and, overall, to a theory of praxis. Praxis, in turn, is necessary to this understanding because it allows for a movement away from inert and abstract philosophy and towards theory and action in the world. Following this turn, we can begin to understand the relation of nihilism to the future, which is also key to fully comprehending what is offered by nihilism and exactly what is limited by universal thought.

#### NIHILISM, EXISTENTIALISM, AND THE SOCIAL

While I am promoting a critique that uses nihilism as a tool, I find that the approach of the existentialist philosophers is more amenable to sociology than Nietzsche's. Existentialism is still a nihilistic approach, rejecting the idea of a creator as well as the belief in perfection and determinism, but this body of work offers more of a focus on human relations, connections, and projection. In addition, because the existentialists were involved with Marxist politics in their lives and later turned their attention to how these politics connected to their philosophy, existentialism offers a very direct connection between nihilism and Marxism – and, by extension, nihilism and revolutionary praxis.

Existentialism refigures nihilism for humanity. While Nietzsche is often quite individualist in his thinking, existentialists such as Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty placed more emphasis on the relations between people, the intersubjectivity of life, and the content of human projects. Being is taken as fundamental and comes before any kind of action, understanding, or meaning in the world (Sartre 1992). This means that what humans are and how they relate to

each other is not a result of divine creation or some innate human nature, but how people relate to each other and to the actions of those who came before them. Not only does this distinguish existentialism from earlier forms of nihilism, it allows for the philosophy to be more completely connected to social theory. Again, we can see the connection to the examination of human activity and the meeting of human needs. Human beings are distinguished from simple objects in the world, which are defined simply by the reason for their creation; instead, through their subjectivity and their choice of action, human beings define not only themselves but also what humanity as a whole ought to be (Sartre 2007). Still reckoning with the death of God and the loss of ontological security, existentialism here highlights the importance of purposive human activity (i.e., praxis) in the creation of social forms and meaning. De Beauvoir (2004) extends Sartre's model by examining the relationships between people further, pointing out that these relations are themselves not given in advance but only determined through action and the connections and encounters between different projects. For both thinkers, it is necessary to take up projects that may never be completed, relying only on one's own capacity for action but always in relation to others (de Beauvoir 2004; Sartre 2004; 2007) Moving past earlier forms of nihilism, existentialism is more affirmative regarding human projects in the world as regards both their meaning-making and social aspects. Therefore, we can take existentialism as a model of active nihilism, a philosophy that spurs us towards "sensuous human activity" without appealing to universalist principles.

As someone whose object is the connection of social relations to thought and action, I find existentialism useful primarily because of its attachment of those

relations to the problems raised by nihilism. Sartre (2007) discusses existentialism as a standpoint that is meant to open the possibility of human activity and to recognise the necessity of subjectivity in action and truth. This approach provides a road towards the formulation of active nihilism; while Nietzsche's critique of Enlightenment reason and exploration of European nihilism are useful, he spends more time on the poetics of affirmation than on what, specifically, is to be affirmed, so there is a gap in terms of positive content for active nihilism to move towards. In existentialism, the ideas of nihilism are further developed in terms of human projects and how, in order to act in the world, it is necessary to constantly choose and to negate other possibilities (Sartre 2004). Implied here is a rejection of universal conclusions reached by reason, which is necessary in order to move beyond bourgeois thought and to ground a theory of praxis. On this same theme, de Beauvoir (2004) goes even further, rejecting the idea of a final and completed world as anti-human, connecting humanity to the pursuit of projects and changing the world. Ultimately, in terms of both values and mechanisms, existentialism centres the human in a way that goes beyond Nietzsche's allusions. For this reason, I take existentialism as an approach that furnishes us with a more complete form of active nihilism.

Without returning to idealist unification and perfectibility, and without moving the social to a second order separate from the individual, existentialism explores human existence in a godless and indeterminate world. By valuing the human in this context, and by connecting one's existence and projects to the existence of all others and their projects, existentialism moves beyond the simple rejections of passive nihilism and shows the possibility of a type of nihilistic

sociology. Moreover, I find within existentialism a genuinely active nihilism, a nihilism that emphasises the role of projected activity in the shaping of the world. After this, it is only a short jump towards the possibility of revolutionary praxis on the same grounds.

#### NIHILISM AND THE FUTURE

As discussed above, central to both the nihilist critique of bourgeois thought and the active form of nihilism is the relation of the philosophy to the future. Nihilism is not meant just to reject what is dominant, but to affirm something new. Rejecting the determinist worldview that is based on metaphysics and the eventual benevolence of God means also rejecting the model of progress that is so dear to the Enlightenment and that is used to justify bourgeois hegemony. Contrary to what we might think initially, progress of this sort is not something to be defended against nihilist critique and rejection, but a tool of dominance that forecloses on our possible futures rather than opening them. On the other hand, an active nihilist approach *reopens* these futures when the present is reconnected to human activity, human subjectivity, and human history. Moreover, the future becomes even more fertile ground when we embrace the approach of existence as being part of an overall flux and system of self-overcoming through action that is projected into the future (i.e., future-oriented) rather than something that is guided by a teleological approach grounded in a model of a perfect and timeless society. Breaking away from bourgeois philosophy to reclaim our future means that we must accept and pass through nihilism, not shy away from it to protect the prejudices of the Enlightenment and modernism.

The Enlightenment paradigm offers a very rosy picture of the future, one in which society improves over time as it moves inexorably towards being identical with the rational model of the world. Fundamentally, this approach is based on Hegelian and Kantian philosophy, which emphasise the use of reason in developing a model of the world and the creation of systems that match that reasonable model as closely as possible. Of course, this is the underpinning and the justification of bourgeois hegemony – under capitalism, as systems become ever more rationally designed and optimised, the value of the economy and the nominal wealth of the people grow, indicating that society is better off. And, if these models are allowed to rule over and shape the development of society, society will necessarily come to conform to them. All of this is based on a fundamentally idealist and universalist approach to philosophy, one that moves strictly in the most abstract forms possible, derived from economic models of human behaviour and interaction. History is only to be taken as the accumulation of data that reflects this supernatural process, not as an accretion of human works and crystallised projects. To the idealist of this type, there is no space for praxis, for practico-inertia, or for human subjectivity. Everything is reduced to the interplay of the ghosts of principles. Fundamentally, this is a system that maintains the theological/cosmological approach of pre-modern societies, but repackaged under the guise of reasoned understanding of the world. There can be no space outside of the system and there can be no threat to the model of social progress, as they are united and predicated upon each other. This is a world of tautology, a closed system that refers only to itself. Breaking away from such a system requires, then, not an analysis on its own terms – because the logic is totalising, the only thing such an

analysis can reveal is the soundness of the tautology – but a rejection of its fundamental values. We cannot bring idealism against idealism; the day will not be won with debate.

Idealist thought connects the past to the present and to the future not only in terms of causal relations or the growth of entropy in a closed system over time, but in terms of reducing everything that exists to its most abstract form. Doing so compresses time; rather than a transitional dialectic that allows for the three aspects to be united as a larger whole, the idealist puts forth a model of time as only one dimensionless point. Determinism of the type that the Enlightenment and positivism drive towards implies an unbroken and absolute chain of causality, one in which all events can be predicted or modelled with perfect accuracy given enough data about any single other event. Undergirding this model is the belief in a set of universal physical laws that govern all phenomena and that can be comprehended and applied by human beings. In this application, the human being would be removed from any subjective role in the unfolding of history – they would be the same as any other object, absolutely governed by these inviolable laws.

There are, however, two problems with this type of deterministic approach: first, the amount of data required to actually *do* this kind of modelling is far beyond the scope of human management; second, the viewpoint required to understand the universe in this way is far more complicated than it initially seems. As a consequence of the universalist-idealist approach outlined here, humanity is not guaranteed a future, but only loses its capability to *create* one. This is the great cheat of universalism. First of all, the number of events and variables in universal history is incomprehensibly massive. Statistical analysis of all the factors involved

in the prediction of even a single event is difficult; to do so for the entire universe is, practically speaking, impossible, and it will remain impossible for the foreseeable future. The model of physical determinism makes a certain type of logical sense, of course – if physics exists and can be modelled, then it can be used to predict outcomes or to model the conditions that preceded an event, and so on. But this is, strictly speaking, an *ideal* model, not one that exists in the world. To treat history as if it was such a determined process, based only on the logical derivation of the possibility of potentially being able, at some point in the future, of complete prediction and modelling, is the height of reification. For the bourgeois, however, this approach brings a serious practical advantage: using this “scientific” method to describe history and the present, what is becomes what *must be*; what was becomes what *must have been*; and what will be becomes what *must come to be*. Injustice, suffering, and inequality all become excusable – in fact, beyond excuse – because they are reduced simply to statistical inevitabilities. Under all of this is nothing but the assumption of the existence of absolute knowledge and its comprehensibility to human minds. The bourgeois does nothing but construct a religious cosmology to justify their existence and to reinforce their ideological dominance. But the great chain of being cannot be contradicted from within – it is unassailable to the logic of idealism because it *is* the logic of idealism. Something outside of the system is required, an approach that breaks away at the base and accepts *nothing* of this model. And this approach cannot be defended only in ideas – it must be *realised in action*.

Second, the standpoint required for this idealist model is not the standpoint of the living human being or of the scientist, but the standpoint of God. The

observer, if they are not to interfere with the object of observation, must be outside of that object. The historian, then, must be separated from history if they are to observe it in this way. Idealism, in this way, separates the human from their being. One would only exist, in this paradigm, as the object of history, not as someone who acts and creates it through their action. And so, the future is lost – an object cannot act, only *be acted upon*. For the idealist, there is no human being, there is only the human, stripped of all its content and contingency. Observation, therefore, occurs at a superhuman level – an object cannot know any more than it can act, but observation *demand*s a capacity for knowledge. To the idealist, at some point, there is a demand for a style of knowledge that transcends the empty abstraction of the human, but this role cannot be filled by scientists who are, after all, only human. Faith is the only solution. God returns to the scene of the idealist, now in some other metaphysical guise, to give this universe ground.

What the universalist, the idealist, and the bourgeois promise is a future of uninterrupted progress, a rising tide that will lift all boats. What they actually *offer* is nothingness, the execution of all things by their reduction to empty abstractions. Idealism is, fundamentally speaking, nothing more than a simple religion, backed by faith. This is what is revealed by the nihilist dialectic: dominant thought is nothing but the religion of the dominant. Idealism offers us no science, no history, and no future – it offers us only emptiness. In the end, the universalist is guilty of exactly what they accuse the nihilist of doing, putting forth a quietist system that negates the possibility of all action or understanding. This will not do!

We only accept that nihilism means nothing is possible when we accept the idealist's position. Allowing a negation of this absolute worldview instead allows



us to return to historical understanding and to the world of human subjectivity and intersubjectivity. Active nihilism gives us the ground to *reopen* our future by rejecting its determination by the system of bourgeois values. From here, praxis returns as a possibility because we can recognise human beings not as abstract objects, but as the subjects of history. Revolution is returned to us, not as an inevitability, and not as an abstraction of economy, but as the real potential for action in the world to realise what we can be.

#### INTEGRATION

At this point, I have begun to move away from bourgeois thought and economic relations. The previous two chapters existed to give this one its necessary context: nihilism could not have been developed without the Enlightenment's detachment and anti-humanism. Immanent critique must always keep in mind its relation to the object of that critique and the inseparability of the elements of dialectical progression. Nihilism presents the antithesis or the negation of idealist universalism, a turning point that is necessary to move away from the current system of domination. Incorporating praxis and an understanding of projected human being, looking towards the future, develops active nihilism, and it is at this point that we can begin to truly understand revolutionary praxis. Revolution, after all, is an activity meant to bring a radical shift in how our social world is organised. In order to fully develop this idea, I first had to situate what was to be rejected and then ground that rejection.

Just as bourgeois thought conditions and orients the idea of proletarian revolution, so does idealist universalism engender nihilism. Both revolution and nihilism are conscious responses to the conditions and constraints of an order that

makes one group dominant over another. Additionally, both require a rejection of the most fundamental elements of that order, which makes the two compatible. What nihilism brings to the model of revolution is an escape from the Enlightenment value of perfectibility and the positivist concept of determinism. Instead, through nihilism, I believe we can ground revolution truly on the goal of liberation. Existentialism, as a philosophy that is meant to affirm human possibility and which further develops nihilism, was introduced as a tool for connecting the social to the nihilistic. In this chapter, I have presented the fundamental tools of my critique and my reasoning for the revolutionary project.

In the next chapter, I will be examining modernism and postmodernism. As a parallel to the second chapter, modernism is the ideological component of contemporary capitalism, with postmodernism emerging as a conscious response. I contend that nihilism offers a framework for understanding the emergence of postmodernism as well as its project. Just as I did here for nihilism, I aim to sketch how postmodernism, though it seems overwhelmingly negative at first, actually offers a space to develop an active break away from the current order. As such, postmodernism mirrors the structure of nihilism and the problematic of passive-versus-active forms.

#### IV. (POST)MODERNISM

Within philosophy, nihilism emerged as a critique of the dominant style of idealism and universalism that itself emerged from the Enlightenment. In contemporary society, a similar critique has emerged in the form of postmodernism. Postmodernism brings the ideas of nihilism – challenging the system by revealing its fundamental groundlessness – against modernism, a form of bourgeois ideology. In particular, postmodernism addresses the system of social epistemology and ontology that has been constructed on the belief in the ontic reality of capitalism. That is, postmodernism responds to the style of truth claims made by academics working in institutions under the conditions of capitalist economics. This also involves a critique of how knowledge and truth claims have been transformed by recent technological advances and changes in the structure of media. By examining the critique postmodernism offers, it is possible for us to better understand what this nihilism really means for the future of society and the possibility of social change.

My contention is that postmodernism is a form of nihilism that is specifically adapted to the ideology of contemporary capitalism and neoliberalism, and to the condition of postmodernity in which capitalism has become deeply entrenched in the social structure and the state has been made to support the structure of the economy. Due to this adaptation, I find that postmodernist thought raises interesting and useful objections specific to the contemporary condition and that it is a useful approach for that reason. Additionally, taken as a particular form of nihilism, I find that postmodernism is useful in returning the focus of

sociological investigation to the model of human praxis and the interactions and conflicts between different, competing projects. This allows a breaking away from the positivist and universalist style of sociology that is more amenable to bourgeois ideology.

Often, postmodernism has been set in contrast to Marxism, another critical theory, but one more closely associated with modernism and modernity. Orthodox Marxists tend to consider these two positions incompatible, as postmodernism expresses a scepticism regarding the determination of the future and, supposedly, the possibility of an economic and social revolution (Callinicos 1990). Within orthodox Marxism and Marxism-Leninism, the dialectic is elevated from a mode of understanding to a determining historical process that makes revolution inevitable, rather than revolutionary action being taken up by the proletariat in their capacity as human beings acting in the world (Sartre 2004; de Beauvoir 1976). However, this is a fallacious position, as it mistakes the ontological claim of Marx's historical materialist framework and divorces history from human action and projected being. This mode of thought also elevates the dialectic from a model of understanding to a model of the progression of history; in a way, the approach returns to the Hegelian idealist dialectic, rather than maintaining Marx's materialist approach. Instead, there is a possibility of a praxis that goes outside and against the idealist system of modernism, and this possibility is affirmed by the negation of the system's universality. In connecting postmodernism to nihilism, I also aim to develop the potential within postmodernism to propose a model that does not have to appeal back to the principles and projects of modernism, which derive from bourgeois thought. With this project in mind, I find postmodernism to

be amenable to the spirit of Marx's own philosophy and theory, even though it rejects some of the assumptions that comes out of later *Marxist* thought.

Postmodernism also opens questions of social epistemology and ontology that must be addressed at some point. As a position that challenges the dominant school of bourgeois thought and the truth claims of positivism, postmodernism offers a model that is incompatible with much of that body of knowledge. I believe that, in rejecting the idea of universal truth, postmodernism offers space to formulate a different model of the subjectivity and intersubjectivity of knowledge. As such, questions of what subjects are, how they relate to each other, and what knowledge means emerge. Understanding at least the broadest strokes of these questions and their implications is another necessary point in developing the relation of postmodernism and nihilism to the possibility of revolutionary praxis and social change in the future.

#### MODERNISM AND SOCIETY

In the traditional Marxist framework, society involves both the material conditions and working relations of the economic base and the epistemological and ontological conditions of the ideological superstructure. While the praxis of those living in a society occurs at the material level, organised structurally by economic relations, those relations and the power structures they engender are maintained and reproduced by the ruling class ideology that dominates in society. In bourgeois society, the economic base is that of modernity and postmodernity as outlined in the second chapter; the ideological superstructure, in turn, is modernism. Derived from the principles of bourgeois thought, this style of thought aims to naturalise

the view of capitalist modernity as the peak of society in order to maintain the metastability of capitalism.

One of the central principles of modernism is the quest to organise all of existence under a universal guiding category, generally taking the rational economic actor as its prototype for human existence. Modernism's narrative holds that the use of categories developed by the use of Reason could bring a structure to the world by making things intelligible and revealing the forms that undergird the existence of all things (Bauman 1992). This project is, of course, an extension of the Enlightenment philosophy and idealist universalism that birthed the bourgeois ideology overall, and it is the ideological connective tissue between bourgeois rule and the continuation of liberal-capitalist society. Sociologically speaking, modernism is also deeply connected to the positivist paradigm advanced by Auguste Comte and to the empiricist-scientific approach that continues to dominate sociological knowledge production processes (Bauman 1992). Here, we can see that modernism is attached not only to the political organisation of society, but to the deeper philosophical issues of epistemology and ontology; through modernism and its press for order, all human knowledge becomes subsumed into the bourgeois order and shot through with the power relation that implies. That is to say, the knowledge produced by human investigation is not separable from the organisation of human lives through society. As Marx and Engels (1998) note, the material dominance of the ruling class makes their ideas the dominant ideas of society, hence the connection between the bourgeois ideology and modernism, and hence the naturalisation and ontologisation of the liberal-capitalist social order. Understanding this element as central to modernism is vital to understanding the

later critique mounted in postmodernism, and so it must be kept in mind. Fundamentally, we can understand modernism as the particular form of bourgeois ideology connected to modernity, meant to universalise the system of bourgeois thought and values.

Over time, however, modernism – just as modernity – transformed and intensified to further cement bourgeois control and to respond to challenges to its system of thought. With these changes came the emergence of the principle of capitalist realism, the belief that capitalism is the only possible system of social organisation or that capitalism is coterminous with reality (Fisher 2009). In accordance with the idealism and universalism underpinning bourgeois thought, capitalism is transformed into the organising principle of human interaction and exchange. Ideas and models such as *Homo economicus* and rational choice are connected to this type of realism, allowing it to be embedded at all points in our sociological understanding. More importantly, however, is the supposed teleology of capitalism within the entirety of history – under capitalist realism, all of history builds towards neoliberal capitalism and it becomes impossible to imagine its ending without the simultaneous end of the world (Fisher 2009). The same principle was expressed in Francis Fukuyama’s 1989 piece “The End of History?”, which attempts to argue that the collapse of the Soviet Union and the ascendance of American liberal capitalism to the status of sole world system was the realisation of Hegel’s subject/object identity. This belief in the ontological reality of capitalism is also key to modernism as an ideology and, in turn, key to understanding postmodernism as a critique of that ideology. Ultimately, what Fukuyama presents and Fisher is critical of is a naturalisation of capitalism and bourgeois society, its

conversion from a social order to an ontological principle. Idealist thought, however, has been aimed all along at such a conversion, as the universalist ontology and the positivist episteme that it has been connected to in science both operate in the pursuit of a single principle to give structure to all things. Within sociology, we can see the intersection of these two projects as giving rise to modernist ideology as a result of the praxis and practico-inertia of the bourgeois revolutions of the 18th century.

Recognising modernism, the principle of capitalist realism, and the idea of the end of history as the dominant ideology in contemporary society sets the stage for the critique of that ideology. What we are faced with is a style of thought that is derived from the Enlightenment paradigm and, concomitantly with the political-economic transformations of modernity and postmodernity, makes the bourgeois social order and the capitalist economic system of ontic importance. Within this model, bourgeois society is transformed from being historically derived (and therefore historically contingent) to being historically teleological. Positivist approaches and the tools of technocratic sociology have proven indispensable in this pursuit of identifying capitalist history with human history, and we can begin now to see the entire system of ideas and belief that can stem from here. As such, it is from this point, the revelation of the fullness of the system, that we can begin to critique it.

#### THE POSTMODERNIST CRITIQUE

Postmodernism is a critique of modernism. While it can be difficult to identify particular content, especially *positive* content, within the multitude of approaches, styles, and fields that come into play in postmodernism, the relation to modernism



is inescapable. This is because postmodernism is dialectically connected to modernism – just as postmodernity is to modernity. For the current chapter, this is my lodestar when discussing postmodernism. Going forward, postmodernism will be taken as a system, dialectically derived, that comes self-consciously into contact with modernism as a dominant ideology and system of social belief without appealing to the principles and goals of modernism and with the aim of examining and rejecting the latent assumptions of that system. In understanding the broad contours of this critique, its most general grounding, we can begin to see what it offers us – as both sociologists and as human beings – in terms of future-orientation and the affirmation of possible praxis.

With that said, let us examine the relation of postmodernism to modernism. Part of the principle of capitalist realism, that form of modernism particular to neoliberal society, is that it *does not* confront the modern (Fisher 2009). Such a confrontation would be outside of the epistemological horizon of the idealism undergirding the system: to confront its bases would mean acknowledging the existence of a reason to confront its bases. Instead, by consciously *not* confronting those bases, it is possible for those bases to be reified (in discourse, in scientific approaches, and in models such as *Homo economicus*) and to be ontologised. Postmodernism, on the other hand, consciously comes into contact with modernism and turns its attention to the historical and philosophical bases of the system, aiming to break through it and examine the assumptions underlying the structure of systematic truths (Bauman 1992). Self-consciousness and reflexive critique are vital to this approach, as they allow a direct response to the ontological claims that the system of modernism both makes and masks (Hutcheon 1989).

Presenting modernity as the highest stage of human development, when connected to the metaphysics of universalism and the reification of the future through scientific determinism, modernism makes history teleological. According to the modernists – again, this is most apparent in Fukuyama’s invocation of Hegelian identity – there must be a kind of purpose to history, one accessible to human reason, and the general dominance of capitalism has revealed it to be capitalism’s development. Believing in this system requires the assumption of its ontology, that the socio-economic and political-economic systems can exist in a way that transcends human being and activity, and it is exactly this ontological assumption that postmodernism aims to confront. Genealogy of ideas is one of the techniques that comes onto the scene at this point, opposing the linear development of ideas and values with a model examining the complex situations and relations of politics and existence, emphasising disparity, disagreement, and development instead of origin (Foucault 1977). Starting here is meant to highlight just how important the connection of modernism to postmodernism is: in dialectical terms, we can see postmodernism as nothing more than the *negation* of modernism.

Examining postmodernism as a negation, it behooves us to understand exactly *what* is being negated. I provided a broad outline of modernism earlier, as the ideological superstructure of contemporary society, and this holds – broadly. As such, we can – broadly – take postmodernism as a response to this ideological superstructure. More specifically, though, we can situate postmodernism as a response to the epistemology, the *way of knowing*, that exists in this system.

Here, both Baudrillard and Lyotard provide useful descriptions of condition of postmodern knowledge, thought, and response. Both thinkers recognise that

there has been a shift in the model of knowledge and the presentation of truth in postmodernity, and each provides aspects of what this model looks like. Lyotard (1984) rejects the idea that scientific knowledge is cumulative over time, instead emphasising its existence among, and competition with, other forms of knowledge. As such, he puts the position of scientific knowledge and the claim of universal truth derived from reason into question. Rather than simply revealing truth, scientific knowledge has a relation to power and to ethics, and its legitimacy above other forms allows scientific knowledge to become truth in an ontological way that is denied to other approaches (Lyotard 1984). Lyotard's argument connects scientific knowledge, which is presented as universal and strictly rational, back to the political and power systems of bourgeois society. Negating modernism's ontic claims begins with negating the epistemological claim of neutrality; instead of knowledge floating above these social systems, it is *produced by them*. Rejecting the model of revelatory knowledge production allows us, instead, to conceive of a this-worldly knowledge: knowledge as connected to human praxis and power relations and the creation of knowledge becomes a human project, with all that entails. Access to knowledge, the form of communication, and the ability of messages to act agonistically to the system that produces them all become important in postmodern knowledge production (Lyotard 1984). Knowledge, for critics, becomes a tool for rejecting and changing the system, rather than a revelation of its ultimate truth. At the same time, however, there is a rejection of "grand narratives" that are associated with the traditional model of knowledge production – a rejection that is necessary to break away from the teleological model of history (Lyotard 1984). Grand narratives offer a type of history in which

things get better (i.e., are perfected) over time and move towards a specific final stage with no real possibility of alternative or human intervention. Just as genealogy opens up an area of dispute in the history of concepts, this rejection of grand narrative and teleology opens up an area of dispute in their future; both are aspects of deconstructing the totalising and universalising systems of modernism. No longer must we accept the reified model of determinism that the idealists built. The only question, then, is that of what comes to fill the void (praxis, projected being, future-orientation).

While Lyotard examines and rejects the system of knowledge production, Baudrillard gives more attention to the system of reproduction and the postmodern style of truth. While modernism and capitalist realism identify the knowledge produced by the system with reality, Baudrillard (1994) argues that the system of knowledge makes, in fact, no reference to reality whatsoever. Just as capitalist realism does not confront modernity in order to escape the epistemological problem of alternative systems, modernism does not confront anything outside of itself to allow the elevation of its truth. Truth claims made in this system are bolstered by two approaches: making events conform to statistical and philosophical models, which elevates those models to a state of “hyperreality”; and a disavowal, through political and discursive methods, of elements that do not conform to the values of the system – but crucially, not through any material or practical response, and without actually identifying those systematic values positively (Baudrillard 1994). Knowledge produced by the system becomes self-referential and closed off to the outside, and the question of alternative ontologies or epistemologies is largely eluded by ignoring it while paying lip service to having

already addressed it. Anything can be facilitated in this system by rejection of its opposite, because there is no material change or worldly action associated with it. What emerges is an idealist system that is capable of constant adaptation to social pressure because it has no positive content at all, only rejected negative content, and which relies on the proof of its truth through that rejection of its untruth to ground itself, a system of self-reference and closure to worldly reality. This is a system in which scientific models, through their taking on of hyperreality, become more real than real – metaphysically ontic.

Postmodernism is a critique of modernism, a response to the truth claim of modernism and a connection of that truth claim to historical processes and praxis. Modernism uses the principles of idealism and universalism to construct an episteme that is self-referential and self-ontologising, detached from reality and history, and postmodernism takes aim at the fundamental assumptions and claims of that system. That is, postmodernism examines the highest values of modernism and rejects them in order to lay the ground for us to posit a new, alternative system of values.

#### POSTMODERN NIHILISM

Nihilism finds a particular expression in postmodernism, just as positivism finds a particular expression in capitalist realism. Examining the values of modernism, the truth claims and the ontology of the bourgeois ideology, postmodern thought reveals that it is ultimately hollow. Rather than scientific method revealing to us an otherworldly and universal set of principles, we find ourselves confronted with a system that will not refer to anything outside of itself other than as a way to implicitly reaffirm its own perfection. Working towards a situation outside of and

against this system, postmodernism exists also as a response to, and rejection of, the positivist style of sociology. Now, we can turn our attention to what the nihilism of postmodernism means for sociology and for the society of human beings as a whole.

First of all, we should properly examine and explain the nihilism of postmodernism. Like with nihilism as a whole, this nihilism is not meant to be a surrender to despair or an ontologisation of meaninglessness. Instead, we are faced with the same kind of ontology of Nothing that Nietzschean and existentialist philosophy come to face. And, just as with those forms of thought, there is some history to understand in postmodern nihilism. To wit, postmodernism first emerged after the protests of 1968 failed to deliver systemic change and the end of capitalism, and the disenchantment with grand narratives and belief in future salvation is a reflection of postmodernist academics' observation of this failure (Callinicos 1990). Later on, the collapse of the Soviet Union also brought with it the image of the failure of Marxism and, in particular, the failure of a communist revolution. These events, combined with the pessimism that had emerged in Continental philosophy following the World Wars, produce the scepticism and nihilism present in postmodernism. The mindset that emerged in this context is linked to a destructive attitude towards, apparently, all structures, turned against the structures of meaning to address the ontology of truth (Bauman 1992). That is, the whole system of meaning and knowing becomes the object of postmodernist critique, with the goal being to dismantle the structures that allow the linkages of claims and ideas that is necessary to produce an apparently-universal system of thought. What Callinicos and other thinkers who reject postmodernism because of

its nihilism get wrong is where nihilism stops; just as Nietzsche did earlier, postmodern nihilism is meant to move *beyond* negation towards the affirmation of a new set of values, one more in accordance with the principle of reality in terms of this-worldliness and human involvement. Rather than remaining in the space of reification and idealism, the new style of truth claims and social organisation should be connected to real human praxis and how human beings produce their knowledge. Again, Baudrillard (1994) provides a clear example of this: in the last chapter of *Simulacra and Simulation*, he affirms his own nihilism, but as a call to action, associating political radicalism with active nihilism and imagination with the reversal of ideas. Thus, we can see postmodernism as nihilism in the stage of negation, oriented towards active nihilism but not yet completely separated from the passive nihilism engendered by the system which it critiques.

Connection of the type of the negation to the initial affirmation is characteristic of the middle stage of the dialectic, and here postmodernism mirrors postmodernity in being an incomplete breakage from its predecessor and, instead, being part of a transitional dialectic. Within the general discourse, this position has posed a problem for postmodernist thought – of course, mediated by the fact that the dominant and default style is still that of positivism and the dominant ideology that of modernism. For example, Callinicos (1990) partially bases his critique on the idea that postmodernism lacks faith in revolution, does not make a complete break with the past, and shies away from politics. Critiques such as these, though, only make sense if one takes postmodernism not as the negation but as the negation-of-negation, the third stage of the dialectic, and they also imply a belief in a positivist style of dialectic that tends almost to the metaphysical – this is

especially important in the light of “faith in the revolution.” Part of the problem here is that postmodernism intentionally makes use of self-consciousness and self-contradiction, both things that are problematic to those who maintain the positivist and detached view of science that follows from the Enlightenment (Hutcheon 1989). As I discussed earlier, however, these approaches are a purposive response to modernism’s lack of self-consciousness and intentional ignorance of self-contradiction. Moreover, techniques such as these are in line with Nietzsche’s (2003b) belief that critical philosophy has no right or need to attempt to be detached from history, real conditions, and individuals’ values. Self-contradiction and the use of irony are, in fact, central parts of the approach of dialectical reason, used to reveal, highlight, and problematise the contradictions of the system being examined. A complete break of the type Callinicos seems to demand is not possible, frankly, within a dialectical framework at all, but is doubly impossible at the middle stage. Instead of rejecting postmodernism because it is incomplete, I contend that we should understand it as nihilism and as a rejection of modernism that acts as the start of completing something outside of the dominant order.

Claiming that postmodernism is strictly apolitical is also a mistake, but one that is more complicated and understandable. As a negation, postmodernism confronts modernism with its own fundamental nihilism and brings nihility into focus. Negative in style, this is still meant as a political act, as it directly confronts the political *system*, addressing its hypocrisy, the complicity of inaction, and the systems of naturalisation and ontologisation that act as ideological supports to the political-economic order (Hutcheon 1989). Admittedly, postmodernism does show



a lack of positive content, but this is not endemic to the position as nihilistic unless one stops at the stage of negation rather than following on to the affirmation of something new. Moving towards something new means first rejecting what is – the negation precedes the negation-of-negation. A politics, then, is the territory of either the passive nihilist or the positivist that refuses to grapple with nihility, not of the postmodern nihilist who aims towards self-overcoming. Moreover, the problem only holds when one commits to a dogmatic postmodernism. If we accept that postmodernism is incomplete – which it is – then there is still a space to draw political inspiration from other systems. West (1991) finds in this space a possibility for rapprochement between Marxism and postmodernism, using Marxist ideas to fill in some of the political vacuum that emerges from the rejection of modernism while also using postmodernist nihilism to build on the historicism of Marxism while avoiding teleological models. Overall, what we have to acknowledge is that postmodernism is *incomplete*, not that it is apolitical; but this brings us back only to its position as negation. If we, as radicals and social critics, want to move forward, active nihilism and creative destruction are still available – *if we are willing to seize them*.

Lost also to the postmodernist is faith in the revolution. From the perspective of orthodox Marxism, scepticism of grand narratives means rejecting socialist revolution *tout court* (Callinicos 1990). *From the perspective of orthodox Marxism*. Scepticism about grand narratives does not mean that the contradiction within the system's logic disappears, only that we can no longer rely on it to produce for us an inevitable salvation (Lyotard 1984). This is nothing new to historical materialism: changes in historical conditions, the construction of society

itself, are to be seen as the result of human subjectivity and action, the results of *praxis*, not as the simple playing out of a divine dialectic of history (Marx 1978b). Yet again, in losing our determined future, we do not lose the possibility of acting to *create* a future, only the reification of statistics. Nihilism is no funeral for action.

Recognising postmodernism as nihilism in the mode of dialectical negation, a movement that confronts the system with its own lack of foundation, opens up questions of alternative ontology in the same way that Nietzsche's model of European nihilism opened questions of opposing the Enlightenment. In rejecting positivism, postmodernism should not be critiqued along positivist lines, but should be recognised for the potential it brings into the world. This is an approach that continues the project of critical philosophy by directly confronting a dominant system of ideology – modernism – in order to move beyond it. With the dialectical model of nihilism that I offered earlier, we can also see a connection between nihilism and immanent critique, that nihilism is teasing out elements latent in bourgeois thought and pursuing them until they reveal an internal failing. Stopping too early with postmodernism is a mistake, but recognising it as nihilistic is not – as long as one is willing to move through the negation to the affirmation of the new.

#### POSTMODERNISM AND SOCIOLOGY

Sociologically, the nihilism of postmodernism opens up important questions regarding social ontology and epistemology. Comte aimed to found sociology as the highest of the positivist sciences, and practitioners in the field grapple with that legacy to this day. As a form of nihilism, postmodernism is incompatible with this position, and brings into question the relation of sociology to modernism. Since

sociology is concerned with crisis and with questions of change and revolution, it does us some good to explore, however briefly, these questions.

Positivism is deeply connected to the existing system of ideology. Traditionally, positivist knowledge bolstered the system and critical knowledge opposed it, but this becomes problematic in postmodernism (Lyotard 1984). Since it is dealing with a system that is so all-encompassing and so self-referential, postmodern thought must be aware of its position in this system and the way that complicity is enforced in a way that is not totally escapable through reason alone (Hutcheon 1989). Knowledge no longer emerges through divine revelations or through a type of reason that is ahistorical and universal, instead being socially produced and situated, always carrying some relation to the diffusion of power in society. Facing us now is a situation where, as knowers and as producers of knowledge, we have to acknowledge the aspect of human creation, appropriation, and use of knowledge. That is to say, we must acknowledge knowing as a type of praxis in itself and, therefore, as something that can and has become practico-inert. No longer can we trace social facts through their antecedent social facts in the Durkheimian style, as we have revealed the Nothing at the base of the system. This does allow, however, a new return to historical materialism, which allows a starting point of human existence, projected against and over that ontic Nothing, in the analysis of the establishment of society and the social order. In this way, embracing postmodernism allows us to break from traditional sociology and move towards critical thought.

As a body of knowledge, the importance and position of sociology changes as a result of postmodernist critique, and we must confront these changes.

However, at the moment and within the confines of this chapter, this is all I can do. A fuller exploration of postmodern social epistemology and ontology is a task for another day.

## INTEGRATION

In this chapter, I presented my understanding of postmodernism as a response to, and rejection of, modernism. Modernism, as an ideology, is linked to the emergence of bourgeois domination in the period of modernity and to the shift of bourgeois ideology from revolutionary to conservative. Since bourgeois thought and bourgeois dominance make extensive use of universalist truth claims, idealist epistemology, and rationalising models, postmodernism rejects these things. Taking postmodernism as a form of nihilism and taking nihilism in turn as an immanent critique of the fundamental assumptions of a dominant style of thought, we can understand the postmodernist project as being aimed at showing the inconsistency and emptiness of the foundations of modernism. Since modernism is connected to the domination of the present and bourgeois ideology is connected to the maintenance of bourgeois power, postmodernism also offers the ground to propose an alternative to the systems that maintain this dominance and power.

Returning to the dialectical model and the principles of immanent critique, it is necessary for something to be fully developed before its internal contradictions can be apprehended and an alternative developed. As such, postmodernism is connected to the most recent form of capitalism (neoliberalism) and to the condition of postmodernity that emerges as a result of material transformations. To my mind, this makes postmodernism useful when trying to address the style of epistemology and ontology that are emerge in those conditions, especially in terms

of breaking away from teleological and trans-historical models. In line with the content of the previous chapter and the idea of nihilism as a tool of critique, I find postmodernism to be a useful tool in addressing the specifics of contemporary capitalism. Moreover, *because* it is nihilistic, postmodernism does not have to bend to the principles of modernism, which allows us to avoid the problem of trying to escape a system of practico-inertia by appealing to its own internal principles, an issue I discussed in the second chapter. For me, this is another part of what makes postmodernism useful and necessary in contemporary thought.

In the next chapter – the last substantive chapter of this essay – I will turn my attention towards the concept of “negation of negation” in terms of what the future might look like, taking up postmodernism as a nihilist critique of modernism. That project is the development of a future that is not teleological or universal in the style of modernism’s models and reification. Instead, our potential future should be attached directly to human praxis and should return the human subjectivity that was lost in bourgeois thought’s reification of the economic. This includes a belief in the possibility of revolutionary action and transformation of the system that is foreclosed under bourgeois domination. What I will offer, then, is a prelude to a new future.

## V. THE WORK OF THE FUTURE

Having set our stage, we now come to the central question of this essay, the form of the future and the relation of that form to the possibility of revolutionary praxis. Here, I am responding to a style of future that is constructed and defended by the bourgeois philosophy and the ideology of modernism. This is a future that reifies statistical models and ontologises capitalist models to make that future a simple extension of what already exists. In this way, the bourgeoisie forecloses on the possibility of change in the future and justifies their own continued existence. By refuting the fundamental claims of this system and showing the nothingness at its base – that is, through the encounter of nihilism – I will show that there is, in fact, a different possibility altogether, one that appeals to the worldly existence of human beings and opens the possibility of changing the world through praxis. The introduction of this space for difference and the possibility of change return to us the possibility of revolution that the bourgeoisie have tried to foreclose on in contemporary society.

In order to develop the two opposing conceptions of the future, present-orientation and future-orientation, I will examine the consequences of the bourgeois ideology for the model of the future and the break that historical context and postmodernist critique offer. Present-orientation takes the future as mainly a continuation of present circumstances, or as only a logical consequence of those circumstances; future-orientation takes the future as an open space, in which freely-chosen projects can be realised. In promoting the perspective of future-orientation, I am offering a model of the future that can be tied directly to praxis

and human projects. This shift in understanding, which moves away from bourgeois thought, serves to re-open the possibility of revolution. Afterwards, I will describe the shift that future-orientation entails and the possibility of a new future that it affords us.

Taking up the standpoint of nihilism and the goal of developing a form of active nihilism, I want to move beyond the teleological style of modernism and determinism. My desire is to unite the model of the future with an understanding of society and knowledge as the products of human praxis. The future, then, becomes the site of our projects, even when they might come into conflict. Nihilism and postmodernism move us away from a belief in some universal process or principle by which all goals might be reconciled and humanity might be delivered from its imperfections, but this also serves to reopen the future that has been closed off from us by the bourgeoisie. Because I believe that it is praxis that makes history and that will shape the future, I believe also that taking up the project of active nihilism and the affirmation of new values allows the return of a revolutionary possibility that modernism and capitalist realism must reject.

A shift in our orientation to the future is a serious shift in commitment, comportment, and relation. Shifting views here has implications for how we understand both what is and what could be. One of these implications is that we must face the loss of change and the inevitability of revolution and instead come to see it as a possibility that can only be realised by worldly praxis. What I am pushing for at this point is a fundamental reordering and re-relating of human activity to the existence of the world.

## THE FORECLOSURE OF THE FUTURE BY THE COWARD BOURGEOISIE

The logic of the bourgeois ideology, and of modernism in particular, has serious implications for the form of the future and its relation to human activity. In short, the idealist ontology, the reification of statistical models, and the use of state power to maintain the metastable system of neoliberal capital divorces the future from human praxis and converts human beings into absolute objects. Instead of active subjects that choose their projects and whose praxis develops the socio-historical conditions in which they live, the bourgeois model would have us believe that it is the playing out of superhuman economic forces and the development of rational knowledge that direct the course of history. However, the development of this belief is itself a form of praxis and a project aimed at the continuation of bourgeois domination. The bourgeoisie still exists as a class of human beings, and this class still wants to keep its power. Converting the future into the simple product of a hyperreal and reified model both transforms that model into an ontological necessity and forecloses the possibility of transformation. Therefore, it must be understood that this foreclosure is a necessary and inevitable component of the existence and maintenance of the bourgeois social order, which means that addressing it becomes a matter of negating that order – of stepping out of the epistemic and ontological sphere that it sets.

First, we must understand that there are two possible orientations towards the future. The first position can be considered as present-oriented, as it is focussed on the reproduction of the present. The second, then, can be considered as future-oriented, as it is focussed on the possibility and creation of the future. Bourgeois



ideology and modernism belong firmly in the camp of present-orientation, married to the relations that exist here and now. Hyperreality and capitalist realism both serve to bolster this position, as they present models derived from bourgeois relations as ontic and positively present. This is accomplished through the discourses of knowledge and the practices of academia, as well as through the way that information is presented and disseminated through documentary and fictional media. Present-orientation is ideologically useful to the bourgeoisie because its focus on keeping things the same tomorrow as they are today serves, logically, to keep the powerful in power (in a metastable sense). Praxis and projected being do not enter onto the scene under this approach, as the positivist epistemology that the model attaches itself to avoids the encounter with nihilism that praxis and projection face to. Knowledge, being here attached to the same ontological underpinnings as the social system, can only serve to support that system – the two are continuous.

Present-orientation is deeply connected to the ideology and principles of modernism and the style of bourgeois thought that it supports, arising as a consequence of the modernist push for universal totalisation. In the quest to dominate and systematise all things, modernism *must* aim to bring knowledge into this system. Ontology and epistemology are connected, and the use of a certain approach or the development of a scientific field is related to a specific type of knowledge and knowing (Merleau-Ponty 1964). In order for something to be known, its existence (or the possibility of its existence) must be posited, an object must be constructed for the investigator-knower to examine. Epistemological claims, then, also make ontological claims. Positivism claims a style of absolute

knowing and, in doing so, also claims a type of absolute existence. Moreover, knowledge must be considered in its relation to power structures and how it allows or disallows the legitimation of the state form (Lyotard 1984). So, if knowledge is both attached to a system of ontology and shaped by the forms and relations of the dominant style of political power, then knowledge must be equally connected to the ideological superstructure that allows the propagation of power, and the modernist cannot help but seek to bring all knowledge into the sphere of modernism. Knowledge now becomes an ideological tool like any other, used to support the realisation of the state (Lyotard 1984). Implied, then, is a type of knowledge, and a type of epistemological approach to the world, that serves to maintain the current neoliberal capitalist order over all else – present-oriented knowledge.

Knowledge of the future is a type of knowledge. More importantly, it is an *extremely useful* type of knowledge for the ruling class, possibly the *most* useful in the construction of the statistical models and their reality that is so ideologically indispensable to the maintenance of power. Now, we live in a condition where the statistical model is always being taken as a near-divine, something that is indisputable and that has come to precede and overrule any experience that might be outside of it (Baudrillard 1991). Especially important for the neoliberal economy is the existence of statistical projections, which allow the manipulation of data to present an image of the future that comes to rule our present by guiding the behaviour of economic analysts, purchasers for businesses, city planners, &c. The meaning of statistical projections, however, depends on the meaning of statistics, the meaning of the fields and systems of knowledge from which those statistics are

derived. Again, in the making of an epistemological claim, an ontological claim is necessarily being made. Statistical projections of this style, by making a claim to have some predictive capacity for the future, imply the claim that the conditions of tomorrow will be similar to the conditions of today, and that nothing serious will change. This is married to bourgeois praxis that ensures that the current order is maintained through political and economic means, though these efforts are hidden in the language of prediction and the presentation of data. Even when something does change, these models tend to be concerned with things like “recovery” and the “return to normalcy.” Fundamentally, using statistics to model the future claims that the future is the ontic continuation of the past. Related to this, of course, are the thoughts of the end of history and of capitalist realism: today’s condition is capitalism, so if nothing is to change tomorrow, then capitalism must continue to exist – it is made coterminous with reality – and, while there are still events, there is no history left to be made. Projection of this style, which is central to neoliberalism and postmodernity, converts the future into nothing more than the playing out of trends in a system that is both hyperreal and metastable, an endless extension of the present.

Our future also becomes detached from our material conditions under the current ideological regime, which is derived from the principles of idealism. And again, we can look at the role of knowledge and data in how this happens. Reification, the treating of abstracts as concretes, becomes central at this point. Hyperreality is engendered by the treatment of images as truer, more realistic, than real experiences, allowing models and managed information to supersede what one actually encounters in the world (Baudrillard 1991). More or less,

hyperreality is a particular form of reification. In a system where we are guided by models of the future that reproduce the present, our actions no longer need to refer to the concrete world in which we live – at least, speaking at the level of society. But this level is itself a reification. Technocratic sociology, which aims to guide what ought to be done through the use of modelled knowledge, tends towards a focus on method over meaning and a preference for stasis over change (Adorno 2000). To this end, the knowledge of models is applied as if it already existed, converting the abstract of the statistical/probabilistic future into the concrete of the material present. Some convergence of the material and the ideal occurs through mechanisms such as debt, but the basic ontological claim being made privileges “pure” knowledge and information over lived reality and experiences. In this way, also, human beings are converted from ambiguous subject/objects into pure objects, and real individuality is lost, though the dominant discourses of the system still put forth a kind of ironic individualism: “you’re unique, the same as everyone else.”

Foreclosure of the future follows on from these ontological/epistemological positions and practices. Because we come to understand the world as continuous and take the reified ideology as actual reality, the future loses its possibility. To the modernist and the idealist, everything must be subsumed into the model, and the future is no exception. Accepting this leads to the belief that there is no future, that everything will be the same, endlessly. However, this does not need to be our endpoint. By negating the central claims and presumptions of modernism and idealism, we can move through nihilism towards a position of future-orientation and a reclamation of the future as a space for projection and praxis.

## NEGATION OF THE FUTURE

Properly conceptualising a future-orientation means first negating the model of present-orientation. Responding to the entrenched and hidden epistemological and ontological claims underlying present-orientation, nihilism becomes a useful tool for us in the quest of returning to humanity. Postmodernism also become useful in its capacity as a nihilation of modernism. Finally, connecting our present circumstances back to the historical descent of modernity and postmodernity gives us a reason to look beyond the objective and supposedly-neutral statistical models of the future and towards a foundation in praxis. Combining these things allows us to understand the possibility and importance of the negation of the future so that we can move beyond the starting point of present-orientation.

I have already exposed the fundamental claims of present-orientation and how those claims lead to a reification of the statistical future and the detachment of this system from real conditions and existence. Now, I can start to negate these claims. To do so, we must return to what underlies these claims. Positivism is founded on the belief that all knowledge develops through stages, moving from theology towards positivism (Comte 2000a). Within this approach, sociology is presented as a field standing above all others, and its derivation was part of the goal of positivism; in turn, part of the goal of sociology was to develop a rational political approach that could be used to guide social development (Comte 2000b). Comte is claiming that there is an absolute law at the base of both positivism as an approach and sociology as a specific field and that the history of all hitherto

existing human knowledge is the history of positivism's development. This is a serious ontological claim, and strongly evidenced: it was written by Comte in Comte's book (Comte 2000a). There is some lip service here to the history of philosophy, but Comte largely takes the existence of his three stages and the linear development of knowledge as self-evident. Negation of something taken as self-evident is trivial: we do not accept this law, this progressive development of knowledge towards a fixed and absolute point, as self-evident.

Idealism is a somewhat more complicated beast than positivism, but equally indispensable to the structure of bourgeois thought and modernist ideology. The main principle to be examined here is the capacity for Reason as a driver of the development of knowledge. For the idealists, it is possible for humanity to reach absolute knowledge and truth through the proper application of thought alone (Kant 1996; Hegel 1977). From this position, it makes sense that the project of society – indeed, of all reality – is a shared one, based on the idea that human nature is also contained within Reason. The problem of idealism is that it assumes consciousness and places consciousness above all else, a pure form floating in a vacuum. Consciousness of this type, however, is inconsistent with experience and is tautological to boot, relying on the acceptance of the implication that consciousness is identical with itself. This is derived, in turn, from Descartes (2000), who argues that things observed can be doubted and examined, but that existence itself cannot, and that this indubitable existence is predicated on the existence of god. The problem here is the existence of god: to accept the Cartesian *cogito*, we must take the existence of god as an article of faith. If, however, I question that fact, I am left with only my existence as a grounding. At this point,

however, I encounter another problem: my consciousness *does not* float in a vacuum and is, instead, revealed to me through my rejection of outside objects and people as Other – my consciousness is not pure, but consciousness *of something* (Sartre 1992). Consciousness in the world is always a consciousness of relation and negation, not a consciousness of the wholeness of all things. Pure Reason is a unifier that sits above specific systems, but human consciousness is always confronted with a given situation and relates to the world through confronting and defining that situation (Sartre 1992; Sartre 2004). Reason must deny this confrontation and relation in order to be pure and free-floating, but this also means that it loses its grounding in what actually exists, in what a human being can experience and act upon. In the end, idealism comes up against the same problem that Comtean positivism does: *if we refuse to accept its self-evidence, it has no other ground.*

Materialism is the competing position and, as an investigation into society and human interactions, materialism is based on examining *action* in the world, rather than the movement of abstracts above it (Marx 1978b). Here, the first principle is not god, essence, or reason, but the existence of the human being, and this principle is much more amenable to experience. We still begin from the ground of human existence, but now that existence is based on its identity with itself, rather than its identity with Reason or the identity of consciousness to consciousness. Materialism, then, does not rely on the same kind of mediation or faith that idealism does, and is actually much more in line with any kind of belief in observation as the ground of knowledge. Since the model of historical materialism is meant to be pinned to actual human behaviour and goals, there is

no need to appeal to otherworldly power or divinity. Instead, we can understand the production of knowledge and the investigation of the world as part of that human activity, guided by a desire both to understand and to make use of the world.

What is lost, however, is the unity of purpose that was granted to us in the pursuit of Reason and idealism. We are no longer bound by a single guiding light, and instead we start to see different human activities interacting and conflicting. Different people and groups may want different things, or may want to achieve the same ends through different means, and so conflict becomes possible and even likely. If we do not accept a deterministic model, then we have to face that our projects, once completed, become separated from ourselves and that others may turn them to their own ends; however, our projects and the projection of our being is also the ground of our relation to others (de Beauvoir 2004). More importantly, though, we start to see the possibility of something different, as our conditions are revealed to us not as the unfolding of a universal narrative but as the result of other human activity. In this way, we negate the positivist and idealist claims at the heart of the bourgeois ideology. The positivist claim is negated because we come to understand the pursuit of knowledge as a human activity motivated by human desires. The idealist claim is negated because we recognise the development of history and society as the result of those human actions, rather than as the result of the movement of ideas.

Postmodernism and postmodernity return here as consequences of this negation and the substitution of the material for the ideal. As explained earlier, postmodernity is a particular form of political-economic structure that has emerged as a result of the gradual shoring up of capitalism as the dominant



economic form and the project of guaranteeing bourgeois wealth and power. This is connected to the bourgeoisie having human existence and emerging through praxis in the world, rather than having a deeper ontological status. Praxis acts as a relation to the given world through human action that first negates that given and then reaffirms some new form (Sartre 2004). Human activity of this sort always begins with a negation of the state of things that already exists and, through goal-oriented activity, the creation of a more amenable condition. The basis of praxis is that a person or group finds they have some need or desire to fulfill, one that has not already been met, and then they take action to meet it (Sartre 2004; Marx and Engels 1998). As such, praxis always emerges as a response to some lack in the world, whether it be something as basic as hunger or as complicated as political dissent. This also includes the activity of those who want to maintain the status quo, as they must endeavour to prevent both the completion of competing projects and to manage the tendency towards practico-inertia. In terms of political economy, this would include the establishment and defence of a specific type of flow of money and the codification of particular principles in law. Such activity is not, however, following the plan of some divine being or metaphysical force, but is guided by human will and desire. Organised according to their ownership of the means of production, the bourgeoisie acted historically to enshrine capitalism within liberal democracy and, eventually, to convert the nation-state into an entity that would ensure the continued existence of markets even through times of crisis. Apprehending the emergence of postmodernity in this way, as the result of human praxis rather than the inevitable consequence of history, negates the principle of capitalist realism and separates the existence of the bourgeois from the absolute

course of history. Of course, the history of the bourgeoisie is the history of our current conditions, but that is not all that history is and it is not coterminous with the future. Here, we begin to regain some measure of our future by returning it to the playing out of material conflicts and interactions.

Postmodernism similarly separates modernism from its ontic reality. Highlighting the fact that the principles of the modernist system are not articulated positively, but through the rejection of what is supposedly outside of them, reveals the lack of actual meaning in the system, the lack of anything for it to correspond to except for itself. In so doing, the system is shown to be tautological and self-referential, which negates part of its ontic claim. Examining knowledge in terms of its historical descent and in its relation to the political-economic system breaks the epistemological frame of neutrality and separation from humanity. In this way, postmodernism also serves to connect the present conditions to the history and praxis of the bourgeoisie as a class of human beings, rather than as the revelation of some otherworldly essence. And again, we encounter the emptiness of this system and, by extension, the possibility of something else. Just as modernity emerged from bourgeois praxis, so has modernism, and neither of these things exist as the sum of all possibility in the world.

What this leads us to, then, is a profound encounter with nihilism. The dominant systems and conditions are surrounded by nothingness and appeal to hollow principles that are inconsistent with actual existence, making no reference to material reality and seeking only to perpetuate current power relations and the objectification of human beings. For the bourgeoisie, negating this style of present-orientation would mean a complete negation of the future. However, since we can

also understand nihilism as a fundamentally *dialectical* movement, what this negation truly brings us to is the possibility of the negation-of-negation, the affirmation of something new. This allows us to refute the positivist critique that nihilism only leads to rejection and simple relativism and instead see it as a grounding for a radically different set of principles. It is in this sense that postmodernist critique, in its capacity as a form of nihilism specifically derived to address modernism, can give us a path forward. What is left to us is to develop a more complete theory of future-orientation and its relation to human emancipation.

#### A NEW FUTURE

At this point, our task becomes moving beyond the system offered by the bourgeois ideology and towards a theory of a new future. Future-orientation is a fundamental aspect of this approach, meant to reconceptualise how we think about possibility and social change. This is a part of the overall project of moving away from metaphysical sociology and towards a theory that is rooted in human existence and action, one that acknowledges the agency and creativity of human beings and that allows a return of subjectivity and individuality in the place of the emptying objectivity offered by positivism. Moreover, future-orientation is an attempt to move through and overcome nihilism by affirming the human through real action to change the world. I believe that this affirmation is necessary if we aim to take up the project of revolution.

Breaking away from present-orientation confronts us immediately with a negative model of the future, something that is not filled up with statistical models and probabilistic predictions. This should not be taken, though, as a denial of

history or as some rejection of the model of causality, only a rejection of the reification and ontological claims that were outlined earlier in this chapter. In this early stage, we find ourselves again at the midpoint of the dialectic and, again, seeking to move towards the negation of negation. A new model of this sort also helps us to better understand and ground a theory of revolutionary action and change without having to appeal to the same principles of justice, morality, &c. that are used to protect and project the existing bourgeois order.

The major loss in accepting nothingness is the loss of the necessity of revolution and change. Just as when we previously encountered it as part of nihilism more broadly, rejecting deterministic models of the future breaks down the equally deterministic model of revolution or change as inevitable. In reality, this is not actually a problem, as the *possibility* of change is not being foreclosed. We are faced instead with the charge of realising any change ourselves through our own praxis. In this way, the immediate negation is actually more affirmative than the positivist model that it is replacing. Nihilism of this sort also leads us, again, to a model that is more in line with certain principles of Marxist thought. The dialectical model of capitalism that Marxist thought provides us is a critique of capitalism's internal logic, but revolution has always been left as a question of human action (Albritton 1986). Additionally, Marx's oeuvre is based on the attempt to develop a type of philosophy that was aimed at changing the world, not simply explaining it (Marx 1978b). Our nihilism is responding to the bourgeois style of thought that goes exactly against these goals, aiming to describe a metaphysical world amenable to capitalism and bourgeois democracy and to make that description the whole of reality. Describing something in the future, be it stasis

or change, always involves an element of reification and an attempt to simply describe the world. However, we must acknowledge that it is much more difficult – and entails a much greater type of responsibility – to construct a model of change based on human freedom and praxis. Idealism, possibly because of its roots in Christian theology, offers a rosy image of salvation to those who accept it, and bourgeois propaganda often appeals to the idea that what is good for the rich is good for all members of society (e.g., in the doctrine of trickle-down economics). Historical materialism, however, points out that this is not the truth and that, in fact, the structural logic of capitalism is the source of alienation and immiseration for the members of the proletariat (Marx 1959). Conflict of this type cannot be easily resolved in a universalist framework, or under the epistemological compatibilism that positivism suggests. If the goals of the bourgeoisie were ultimately to be the same as the goals of the proletariat – as appeals to Reason would suggest they are – then class conflict would not need to appear on the scene at all. Taking instead the position that there is some incompatibility between the projects of the bourgeoisie and those of the proletariat suggests that there is no greater universal form that reconciles the two. In this sense, the incompatibilist position of nihilism aligns with the rejection of bourgeois and petty bourgeois socialism. These are forms of socialism, rejected by Marx and Engels (2002), that aimed to resolve the conditions of capitalism without also destroying the material conditions underlying the class structure of society; that is, these were undialectical forms of socialism that did not move towards the affirmation of something new. In nihilism, we do lose the principles that would allow this type of reconciliation, but we gain instead the possibility of real and worldly praxis that

would move us forward. Ultimately, the loss we face is again only a loss of the appeal to universal principles – which is exactly the loss we seek.

Rather than looking to metaphysical principles and the realisation in this world, future-orientation is based in projected human being and the realisation of projects through praxis. The model of projected being emerges from the encounter with nothingness: in existing, a person is constantly having to face the limits of their current being and take on tasks that are oriented to, and justified by, the desire to create a particular new form of being in the future (Sartre 2004). Whereas present-orientation aimed to reproduce the present in the future, future-orientation aims at producing the future by moving away from the present. A desire for change is implicit in this model, though these changes may be great or small in scale, and there is no mechanism for change available to us but our own action (our own praxis). Conflict is likely to emerge here, rather than agreement through the rigorous use of Reason, but conflict is also nothing new for us, as our situation within capitalism puts us always already in conflict with others. Under the regime of capitalist realism, however, we now find a chance to oppose ourselves to the “reality” of the world in both project and in action, and create something new by negating the old. Future-orientation, in this way, returns to humanity a level of agency and creativity that is lost in the appeal to Reason, as we no longer have to agree with powerful or argue with them in arenas that they have created to give them advantage over us.

In fact, we can begin to envision an entirely new form of subjectivity and a new understanding of the social relation that emerges to us as we move through nihilism towards future-orientation. In simplest terms, nihilism brings us into

confrontation with the objectification of people that follows as a consequence of the appeal to Reason and to universality. If all knowledge and action is guided by absolute principles or universal laws, then all knowledge and action can be reduced to the objects of Reason (objectified in Reason). Nothing outside of Reason becomes possible. And *if*, as the bourgeois ideology and science would have it, those principles are amenable to the existence of the bourgeoisie as a class and capitalism as an economic system at the end of history, then the existence of this system is absolutely right. Simple materialism that accepts the reified determination of the future has the same problem, even if it predicts a communist revolution, as it commits a type of elision. For thinkers of this type, the future revolution is inevitable – but inevitability of this type is always reification, the taking of something that may exist in the future as if it exists in the present. In so doing, declaring revolution inevitable is the same as declaring action unnecessary. This is a problem of determinism, rather than materialism or idealism, which is the elision to which I alluded to earlier: reification has been left out of the discussion in the pursuit of “good materialism.” But this reification is, in fact, indispensable to the position of inevitability, and it entails the *exact same objectification that justifies bourgeois rule*. Human beings are reduced again to mere objects, this time of a superhuman “material dialectic” and, therefore, God is returned to His heaven and the system is again made absolutely right. This problem of reification can only be escaped if we break away from the positivist style to which it is married and return a degree of subjectivity and agency to human beings (though, following the existentialists, we still take this freedom as situated).

In a *theory of praxis*, we cannot be led to appeal to anything other than praxis as the driver of history, even though this might make revolution more difficult.

Ultimately, we only come to proper future-orientation through the encounter with nihilism. Postmodernism, because it critiques and begins to break with modernism, offers us a more useful path forward to this end than the positivists would allow. Change and revolution are revealed here to be possible, though not guaranteed, if human beings take these things seriously and commit, through praxis, to their realisation in the world. By losing the appeal to grand narrative and universal Reason, we gain instead the possibility to make real change in the world *as soon as we seize the opportunity for ourselves*.

#### INTEGRATION

Everything I have presented to this point must be understood in the context of responding to bourgeois ideology and bourgeois domination of society and the attempt to change social conditions. If there is to be a revolution in the future, it must be undertaken by human beings, not left to a belief in something (or someone) else, and it must be much more comprehensive than a simple reorganisation of economic distribution. Such a complete breaking away requires, however, a system of values and thought that escapes the one which currently dominates life. This is a major undertaking, and one that simply *cannot* be pursued while remaining married to the principles of the Enlightenment that are baked into bourgeois thought.

Through the critique of nihilism, which is fundamentally an immanent critique of universalist thought, the potential to reject the basic assumptions of bourgeois ideology is revealed to us. However, we also see that it is key to pursue



*active* nihilism. A true alternative theory does not just reject what it opposes, but pursues the development of something else. Change goes further than destruction. This going-further, however, ought to be pursued in terms of *self-overcoming*. Pursuit of active nihilism means accepting the self-destruction of the dominant system's values but, more importantly, the accepting of that self-destruction as the ground for accepting something new. Postmodernism is an approach that, as a form of nihilism, offers a bridge towards this acceptance of the new.

Capitalism and bourgeois ideology are inextricably linked, both parts of the bourgeois domination of society. As such, they are the context of the entire revolutionary project in contemporary society. There is no question in my mind as to the rehabilitation of the Enlightenment or the repair of capitalism. These things are impossible. Moreover, they are not worth pursuing, since their establishment and continuation incorporate the principles of the bourgeoisie from the very beginning. If there is, after all, conflict between the classes, then the goals of the proletariat cannot be subordinated to the beliefs of the bourgeoisie.

The possibility of revolution hinges upon the possibility of escaping the present and creating something new in the future. From a materialist perspective, this creating has to be understood as a human act, motivated by human will and desire. With this in mind, I find that it is impossible to properly conceive of revolution while accepting that there is some universal force or principle hanging over humanity. As such, I contend that it is only *truly* possible to have revolution by following through the nihilist project towards active nihilism. If we accept the worldly necessity of human activity and power, revolutionary possibility is

returned to us. If we remain, however, in the thrall of Reason, we will accomplish nothing and die.

## CONCLUSION

The question of whether or not there will be a revolution in the future, and what exactly that revolution might look like, is still open. However, any possibility of revolution must be linked back to human praxis and human existence. Revolution is, necessarily, revolution *against* a dominant condition and, in contemporary society, that means a revolution against the capitalist social order and bourgeois domination. Because this order and this domination are derived from Enlightenment thought and are maintained through the ideology of modernism, there is no appeal to be made to the principles of those modes of thought. Instead, we must look outside of and beyond the systems of domination if there is to be any real change in the world. Fundamentally, that change is possible, but it must be human beings that make it happen and it must be oriented to human ends.

Nihilism, rather than being a simple rejection of what exists, acts as a negation of one condition towards the affirmation of a new one. In this sense, it becomes a valuable tool in the construction of a revolutionary model. Positivism and universalism, with their tendency towards abstraction and their principle of perfectibility, do not offer the ground for a revolutionary theory. Following those paths can only ever lead us away from human activity, into faith in the divine and quietism regarding worldly conditions. Proper negation of the system, and a proper move beyond it, require an acceptance of the system's groundlessness and emptiness. If we are to be revolutionary, we cannot make it our goal to find a way of rehabilitating the system; we must set ourselves against it from the ground up. It is only in this way, through the pursuit of active nihilism, that I see any

revolutionary potential in contemporary society. It is not enough to try to restore the origins of the Enlightenment, or the revolutionary aspect of early capitalism, since these projects maintain the element of bourgeois thought that originally gave rise to them. Instead, we have to find a new ground and a new goal for ourselves. Revolution must be both comprehensive and radically different.

Taking up the project of revolution also requires a fundamental shift in how we relate to the future. The bourgeois and the positivist reduce the future to the continuation of the present; as such, the revolutionary must also reject this continuation. Determinism acts as nothing but a principle to maintain the relation of dominance, and it is precisely this relation that revolution is set against. Regarding the future as an open space, one in which we can inscribe our wills and our values through our actions, is a necessary step in changing our world. This is a model that is incompatible with a probabilistic and statistical approach to life, and it is also a model that rejects the safety and security of social perfection. Real praxis is always based on the negation of what is for what *ought to be*, and revolution is no different. We cannot be sure that our ideals will be shared by others, and we cannot be sure that our projects will be completed if we do not actively pursue their completion. Instead, we must take those projects into the future actively.

Postmodernity is not the end of revolutionary possibility, and postmodernism is not the end of revolutionary thought. Even now that the Soviet Union has collapsed and the state has been so fully attached to ensuring the stability of the capitalist economy, human beings have not ceased to exist. Capitalism has not become stable, it has become metastable: the contradictions and alienation still exist, and change is still possible. However, this change will not

come to us through Reason. And even with the loss of absolute truth and universal values in postmodernism, we do not lose the capacity to critique. Instead, we *gain* the capacity to affirm our own values, to integrate the epistemological with the human, and to avoid the transformation of statistics into ontic reality. These are also the goals of revolution: not just a reorganisation of economic spoils, but a radical change in the nature of the system.

### GOING FORWARD

This essay is far from the last word on revolution, its form, and the meaning it has for human beings in the world. As a starting point, I have offered a theoretical reconciliation of my positions, but the exploration of the essay's themes is far from complete. The problem of connecting these different strands of thought, each of which has captured my interest and attention, is one that has long weighed on my mind. Even now, though, I feel my investigation has still only begun. At this point, I see three paths to be pursued in the future. One examines the shape and importance of the new style of subjectivity implied by the revolutionary project and the rejection of bourgeois models and understanding of the world. The second addresses the form of the new sociology that emerges when knowledge and social management are to be extricated from bourgeois dominance. The third looks at the relation between ethics and human existence in a world that is not guided by a belief in perfectibility. I view all of these as indispensable examinations if the theory I have begun to develop here is to be worked through to its fullest intentions. These three issues are also connected to each other, as they issue from the overall project of constructing a new understanding of the world. Since subjectivity,

sociology, and ethics have been discussed and deployed under the current order, shifts in their form under a new order would also be interlinked.

#### THE NEW SUBJECTIVITY

Something that I must leave for another investigation and another time is the theoretical model of the new type of subject that follows on from the principles and the goals described in this essay. Revolutionary praxis of the style I have described is incompatible with essentialist models of human being and with the objectifying style of universalist epistemology. Instead, revolution entails a return to subjectivity, but not just subjectivity in the way that it is understood by bourgeois society. Human will cannot be pursued under a paradigm that denies its very existence, the way bourgeois rationality does, so revolution must establish something that escapes that understanding of humanity.

At the same time, however, because revolution aims at creating something radically new and because the way we understand ourselves and others is tied to the facticity of our lives, it becomes difficult to comprehend exactly what a post-revolutionary subjectivity might look like. Under bourgeois domination, we have lost a great deal of understanding of what it is to be human – possibly all understanding. The history of capitalism has been quite long, when seen from the perspective of human life: multiple generations have been born and have died under the bootheel of the bourgeoisie, and alienation has become integrated into our very understanding of ourselves.

With this in mind, a theory of the new subjectivity – both its form and its meaning in human understanding and the intelligibility of the world overall – is something that warrants further pursuit. Additionally, further developing this

aspect of humanity will allow a further development of the theory of revolution overall. The model of the new subjectivity will also allow an explanation of how people come to develop class consciousness and concretely take up the project of revolution. This is one thing to be pursued in the future.

#### THE NEW SOCIOLOGY

The nature of the social, the mechanisms of its construction, and its ultimate trajectory are also brought into question when taking up the nihilist-revolutionary standpoint outlined in this essay. Sociology has been deeply connected to the bourgeois society in which it first emerged, and has often been formulated and deployed towards the maintenance of the bourgeois order. Turning sociology against this means that it will be necessary to re-examine the assumptions and methods used in the field. Removing the aspect of a second-order society, something that exists above and outside of human behaviour or belief, is also implied in this project. A return to the principles of Marx's earlier works is connected with this new sociological approach, and not all prior work in the discipline needs to be abandoned, but things cannot be allowed to continue without examination.

Dropping positivism and the aim of creating reified statistical models is another shift that will have a major impact on the pursuit of sociology. This is part of a larger change in our attitude toward the pursuit of science, something that is pressed by both nihilists and postmodernists. No longer is the pursuit of science the pursuit of revealing absolute knowledge; instead, we must acknowledge that we are creating knowledge through praxis and that it is inseparable from human will and power. The full impact of this shift remains to be seen.

## THE NEW ETHICS

The ethical realm is another that is problematised by the shift away from a universalist standpoint. Appeals to principles of things like justice and right, if they are to be taken as appeals to something superhuman, have to be left behind in the turn to nihilism. Strictly speaking, this is not a new concern – the shape of ethics in a non-determined and non-essential world is one that has been taken up by many philosophers in the past. In the context of revolution, though, this is still an especially important area for investigation and elaboration. Especially under positivism, revolution has often been defended in terms of ethical appeal to universal principles, and this is something that will be lost if those principles are set aside.

Connecting the shape of the future directly to human activity and projects poses a problem for the universalist model of ethics, since it is deeply connected to a belief in perfectibility and to the idea of different projects as reconcilable. Understanding projects and the future as created by human beings for human purposes means accepting that those projects will sometimes be at cross-purposes and that the resulting conflict will be settled through power relations. Revolution must also be understood in this light, as a reconfiguration of power rather than its annihilation. Losing the aspects of perfectibility and inevitability means dealing with all human activity, including revolution, as something that is contingent and open to critique. Justification of action, then, requires a further examination of the future – without universal grounding, some alternative framework must be laid to defend decisions.



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