Dialectic of Thinking and Talking

by

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엄마 아빠를 위해,
정혜인 올림
**Introduction**—

As graduation nears, I've been looking back on my time here, trying to distill this whole experience into some grand lesson to take with me to the nebulous beyond. What occurs to me over and over in these moments is just how much thinking and talking I've done at this school. Between seminars and lectures, readings and papers, solitary musings and lively conversations—a *lot* thinking and talking. Maybe too much?

There's this urge in me, even as I type this, to throw up my hands and make my last discursive act—"All is vanity!"—and speak nevermore. With that, I'll stop thinking too, proceeding henceforth from that place they call the reptilian brain. I'm tired. But of what?

Of the feeling of powerlessness. There are things I want to do to this world, for this world. Yes, it's that clichéd, over-wrought college-kid dream: I want to change the world. I understand that my effect will be limited, but there are things I would like to see done differently, and I'd like to play a part in bringing about the corresponding change. The frustration comes from the fact that for all I've heard, read, and learned, I don't have a clue about how to go about this.

But surely, a better way does not lie in abandoning listening, reading, and learning. We need to exchange ideas with each other to understand our issues, formulate plans for a solution, and co-ordinate towards its realization. Discursive and conceptual activities are integral parts of any material, practical, political activity.

Specifically, despite my recent weariness, I am unable to get over the incredible potential I see in critical theory to bring about change in our everyday reality. By critical theory, I don't mean just the work of the Frankfurt School, but those of Althusser, Debord,
Arendt, Deleuze, Butler etc. I mean any explanation made about our life form with the fundamental assumption that there is something that could be done better.

But where does the potential of critical theory lie? Have I not already encountered many, many that I've grown suspicious of, in my continuing lack of concrete direction and knowhow? To investigate, I started reading three very influential critical theorists—Hegel, Marx, and Marcuse. If there is indeed light in critical theory, I figured it would be shining brightly in the writings of these giants.

In the following pages, I wanted to share some of my findings. How can critical theory inspire and guide actions that change our material, political condition? The answers turned out to be more than descriptive analyses of critical theory. They were instead a cluster of norms, arrived at through the dialectic of talking and thinking. By dialectic, I mean the Hegelian one, in which one thing, in order to truly be what it aims to be, transforms itself into something else. By the talking and thinking that underwent this, I do not mean all conceptual and discursive activity, but only those that hope to effect real change in our political, material conditions. What you’re about to read is the reconstruction of the dialectic of thinking and talking so defined. Below is roughly how it proceeds, each step corresponding to a chapter.

1. Critical theory is a conceptual and discursive entity that can inspire and guide actions that aim to change our political, material condition (henceforth abbreviated as praxis). To successfully do so, it must reconfigure our ethical space. It reconfigures the ethical space by a) opening up a new action space b) recreating us as a different ethical agent.

2. Reconfiguring an ethical space is no simple task. To open up a new action space, the critical theory must resonate with the material reality, which changes as time passes. To
recreate us as ethical agents, it must be taken up and lived out by real, flesh-and-blood human beings like you and me and the people we know.

3. How can I produce critical theories that deal with this temporal and social contingency successfully enough to grip people to act and guide their actions? In a strict sense, I cannot. A better approach is to shift my focus from theories per se and to turn instead to theorizing—the complex, decentered discursive and conceptual movement of which theories are ephemeral snapshots.

4. So how do we theorize in a way that is most likely to support effective praxis? To answer this question, I first examine some characteristics of theorizing that come up when I turn to how it is done today as an embedded activity.

5. In light of the characteristics considered, we should theorize in this and that way, if we want our words and ideas to be a moment of conscious change to our material reality.

My exploration was one and the same with thinking through Hegel, Marx, and Marcuse. I looked to them for metatheoretical arguments to appropriate and looked at them as historical objects, examining their successes and failures in constituting effective praxis. In incorporating them in the following discussion, I do not do justice to the integrity of the distinct systems that each philosopher sets up. Their notions are fragmented and scattered to flow within my own.

After graduation, why and how should I think and talk if I want to (with only a half tongue in cheek) change the world? With critical theorizing oriented towards praxis as the paradigm talking and thinking that aims to transform, I set out to make some sense of what I’ve been doing the last four years and make some suggestions to myself for the ones coming.
Chapter 1—

Sometimes, reading a theory is a mystical experience. I look up from the pages to find a new world. It looks very much like the one from before, but it’s somehow got this buzz and sparkle. I myself feel like I’m giving off some kind of soft glow. I am expanding, spilling out to be one with the things that surround me. The theory has shown how we all hang together, and in my new awareness, I feel like I can comport towards myself, people, and situations in a more beautiful way. The possibilities are intoxicating.

A new way of seeing, and with that, the potential and impetus to act differently—this is what a theory can give us. This general power is the very same behind the critical theories that motivate and guide transformative actions. What’s interesting to me is that not all critical theories that aim to become a moment of praxis successfully become one. Some are doomed to obscurity, some are pondered and circulated widely, but apparently remain just thought and talk. So, as someone interested in discerning, sharing, and even trying to produce a critical theory that can inspire people to seek change and orient them in practical reality, I start out by examining the anatomy and physiology of the most ‘practiced’ critical theory I’ve heard of—that of Marx. The conclusion reached is that such theories reconfigure ethical space. If critical theory is to constitute praxis, it does so by creating an original ethical space, which can be analytically divided and explained as the combination of a) a new action space and b) a new ethical agent.¹

While certainly not reducible to our current understanding, the world is, in important ways, our conceptualization of it. This means that a new theory—a new conceptualization our situation—is not simply a novel representation of reality but its
reconfiguration. Fire is one phenomenon when it is believed to be the liquid breath of god and quite another when it is held to be a useful, reproducible chemical reaction. The thing itself, as much as our thoughts about it, changes. Depending on what we believe about it, fire is a spiritual relic or a common household item.

But how could this statement be more than idealism? Although our thoughts about it changes, does fire, as a physical object, really change? It does—its identity and position in our action space changes. By action space, I mean the situation, woven out of material, social, political, and other dimensions, in which we act. The emergence of a new action space is both a consequence and the meaning of the world's reconfiguration through its reconceptualization. It is a consequence in that an action space is made up of pathways for our actions with and towards specific objects, and we comport towards an object according to what we think about it. When fire is a spiritual relic, we include it in worship services and subject it to controlled distribution, whereas when it is a household item, we casually produce and interact with the likes of lighters and stoves. In each case, we exist in the corresponding action space. The reconfiguration of action space is also the meaning of the change in reality through change in our conceptualization in that it is the process through which the reimagined objects truly become different objects. It is because it is worshipped and controlled that the fire is a sacred artifact. It is in being casually used and abused that fire is a commonplace.

A theory, in giving us a new way of seeing, invites us to a new world and a new action space, the two being looped in feedback and being ultimately interchangeable. Whether we are rallying or sitting very still, we are always acting. We are, in other words,
always in an action space, so our world is a fundamentally practical one. Marx seemed to know this identity well.

Against the ideology of his day, Marx summons his audience to a new reality. Political economy links free market with freedom, division of labor with growth, and competition with rationality. Framing his project as one merely completing its sentence, Marx creates a matrix in which all the inverse apply—free market is slavery, division of labor is loss, and competition is absurd, not only for the worker, but for everyone in a system driven by the logic of private property. He does this by reconstituting the meaning of familiar phenomena, or what he calls actual economic facts. Take, for instance, how he creates a world of necessary and multifarious alienation. First, he takes the poverty of the workers, an observable fact if any, and puts it in terms of the capitalist system. The more commodities the worker produces, the more wretched she becomes. That their circulation adds to the power of her oppressors, the capitalists, and that their influx can drive down wages, are just two ways this happens. The worker’s products confront her as an independent and hostile—alien—power. In Marx’s hands, the worker’s starvation, hovels, and distress—phenomena undermined as coincidental by political economy and as justly sufferable by Christianity—become the manifestations of capitalism’s alienating mechanisms. The other dimensions of alienation he expounds—loss of productive activity, species-being, other people—are crafted through a similar reconstitution of meaning. The worker’s degradation, boredom, and struggle for bare existence come to mean coerced, unfree, mutilated wage labor, and vice versa. In effect, Marx recreates the world. His readers are sure to have recognized the worker’s unhappiness as described by Marx to be a familiar component of their world. If they then accept the new meanings that he assigns to
the phenomenon, they emerge into a corresponding realm. The unhappy world becomes the alienated world.

The new reality is a new practical reality—an action space. Marx makes this clear by following his discussion on alienation with a brief outline on how it “sheds light on various hitherto unsolved conflicts”.\(^5\) When a productive activity is estranged, it is not an end for itself. There is a motivation external and antithetical to this *species life*, and in the current setup, it appears as wage. Therefore, raising wages or demanding equal pay solves nothing. The world is such that wage is not the appropriate focus of reform-minded actions. Fixing a symptom of the problem would amount to slapping a Band-Aid on the gaping wound, one fed by the reciprocal reinforcement of private property and alienated labor. Because wages mean different things than before, we should act towards it differently. And in our changed action towards it, it exists as a changed thing.

Of course, meanings that we take up are not the sole makeup of our action space. Marx would be the first one to point out that our material environment shapes our practices. And indeed, as pointed out by Brian Fay in his critique of critical social sciences, the arrangement of our bodies in this physical realm and of our lives in a pre-established tradition codes paths and patterns for our actions without the mediation of linguistically articulable understanding.\(^6\) Such observations will be more carefully considered in the coming chapters, but all in all, while certainly qualifying the importance of theories, they do not preclude it. As much as many are unconsciously done, many of our actions are carefully thought out, especially when they concern reflexive problem-solving, such as the one having to do with our societal well-being. And it is precisely people engaged in or ripe for this kind of deliberate activity that Marx addresses. In assigning new meanings, he changes
our action space by filling it with new forces, mechanisms, problems and possibilities to reckon with. Capital is introduced as a power sinisterly independent of the workers supposedly creating it, an object whose free circulation amounts to the slavery of man. Capital is introduced as a power sinisterly independent of the workers supposedly creating it, an object whose free circulation amounts to the slavery of man. Its laws and forms are shown to be embedded in networks of familiar institutions, such as the market and the factory. The ultimate problem is set up to be the succumbing of human beings to their objects, and the possibility of its solution—in consideration of all the variables in Marx’s matrix—is unveiled as communism.

The point, of course, is that it is a possibility not to be entertained in abstraction, but to be grasped and realized. We must negate capitalism and assert its positive overcoming through the establishment of a communist society. Marx’s recreation of action space turns out to have been the opening up of a new ethical space—the nexus on which we not only do, but should do such and such things. And with this introduction of normative-boundedness, I can no longer procrastinate on asking, “Who?” Who is acting, so that our world can justly be called an action space? Who, now, should do this and not that? The ethical agent. This is not the person plopped down in the middle of a preformed action space to walk paved paths. The ethical agent is who, as the necessary actor, allows action space to exist as such in the first place and creates it in its particularity. The action space, in turn, gives the ethical agent a specific identity. This is the mechanism through which critical theory creates a new ethical agent.

An ethical agent, to derive directly from the two comprising words, is an entity that acts in a normatively-directed way, and according to Charles Taylor, it is every single one of us. Against the Cartesian tendency to frame the self as “bare self-awareness,” Taylor says that our identity is defined through the issues, standards, goods, and demands that are
truly important to us as well as our sense of where we stand in relation to these. A quick turn inwards can confirm this. When answering the question, “Who am I?” we invariably and quickly find ourselves asking, “What matters to us?” We put ourselves in terms of the norms that have a hold on us; our self is an ethical self. Our self is also an agent. Taylor can be seen citing Heidegger to burst the “subject of representations” to yield a being always caught mid-action. Our conscious self extends beyond the representing faculty, existing through an unspoken practical grasp on daily affairs, an understanding primary to conceptual articulations. The I, as much as it is the ‘inner world,’ is also already ‘out there’ carrying out intelligent and intelligible actions.

To continue with Taylor’s thought, the fact that the self is an ethical agent also means that it is dialogical. In existing not prior to or behind practices and norms but through them, the agent-self is determined by the variables that determine their normatively-guided actions. The body and other people are two such factors. Much of our actions are like “two people sawing a log with a two-handed saw, or a couple dancing”—the possibility, appropriateness, and effectiveness of our actions arise in conversation with other people and involve the interaction of physical things, such as our bodies. The monological, ghostly subject of representations thus rendered inadequate, Taylor introduces the dialogical self as a replacement that better integrates the importance of the social and physical nexus in and through which our actions take place.

That nexus is nothing other than action space. So it turns out that changes in action space, in changing the factors that determine actions, change our dialogical being. The dialogical being, in turn, is our fundamental self, and the fundamental self is always an ethical agent. In short, when action space is reconfigured, so is the ethical agent. Critical
theory that successfully inspires and guides praxis, in accomplishing the former as discussed above, also does the latter. Approaching Marx again from a slightly different angle does much to illuminate this process. As discussed above, Marx sets up a grid in which poverty, enfeeblement, and other sources of discontent are but expressions of a bankrupt economic system. In the process, wage labor is redefined from free association to slavery. This practice essentially constituting the identity of the dialogical worker, the factory employee comes to understand her self as a victim of exploitation who stands in definite and hostile relation to private property, her boss, and placating reforms. This awakening is seamless with the creation of a new ethical agent. Whereas before, the worker might have tried to cope with her suffering through strikes for raises, religion, or brute perseverance, these paths gain a different significance as she orients herself towards the overhaul of capitalism. For instance, attending church becomes a distraction and striking becomes a means to consolidate class identity and build momentum for the ultimate conflict. The hunger and misery of the worker is transformed into a destructive, creative anger through the recognition that there is a systematic injustice underlying her grievances. The problem’s essence is revealed as the arrangement of sociopolitical objects, and not the psychological vulnerability of the subject to unfortunate coincidences.

The action space in which—and through which—such an ethical agent exists is an ethical space comporting towards its own demolition in a revolution. It is a space comprised of objects on which certain actions should be done—of factories to be appropriated, resources to be reapportioned. It also contains phenomena, such as the possibility of universal intercourse, the abundance of productive forces, and the existence
of a class whose freedom will amount to the freedom of all, that are at once the means and
the justification for the new normative pathways for action.\textsuperscript{12}

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A critical theory can urge us to tackle a problem and direct us in our efforts by
yielding a new ethical space before our eyes and under our feet. It fills the world with
promises begging to be kept and possibilities demanding to be realized, projects, tools, and
desires. Although it certainly cannot be pinned down as their only impetus—and its role
must be complicated beyond mere impetus—a cluster of Marxist theories played
undeniable and significant roles in the communist revolutions that swept through the globe
in the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{13} Such political actions, in turn, create a different world. As
Feenberg phrases Marx's fundamental assumption, “reality is historical.”\textsuperscript{14} Our self-
understanding and our corresponding practices underlie the production and renewal of
even the most fundamental forces and structures of our existence. When it successfully
impacts our conceptions and in turn, our actions, critical theory can change our material,
political condition.
Chapter 2—

But some theories give us moments of doubt. We've all read articles or books that we've fallen asleep on. Our eyes glaze over as the author goes on and on about stuff we don't care about. “How in the world is this relevant to anything?” we wonder, as amazed as we are frustrated that somebody could be so earnest about saying things that has absolutely no import in real life, that can't possibly strike anyone else as important.

If a critical theory that aims to move us to praxis induces such an experience, it has soundly failed. If a work does not grip its readers and speak to their world, it is extremely unlikely to be translated into meaningful action. This is something, I think, that we can immediately, intuitively agree to, but to still ask why and how, I need only to look at the theory’s relation to ethical space, the connection so privileged in the last chapter. To reconstitute ethical space, a critical theory must recreate a) the action space and b) the ethical agent. To do so, it must a) resonate with the concrete political, material conditions of the day, and b) be taken up by human beings. The writing that strikes us as pointless and arduous do not meet precisely these requirements, so it cannot open up a new ethical space, and in turn, cannot get us to act differently. So how do I avoid these pitfalls in producing or promoting critical theory? What does it take for a theory to be socio-politically relevant and have a grip on people? I approach these questions, and find them not quite answered but refined, by exploring the two demands.

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A theory is a thing, just like a shoe, a body, a staircase—it is an entity that exists in relation to other entities that make up the fabric of our existence. But unlike a shoe, a body, a staircase—material, physical things—theory is a talk and a thought. This distinction is
ultimately unsustainable. The shoe is material, but also discursive and conceptual in that it is configured by our ideas about it, ideas that are perpetuated through our talking and writing. The intersubjective conception yields a comportment towards the shoe that gives it its identity and position in our practical world. Conversely, the theory is a talk and a thought, but it is also material—it is vibrations in the air, firing of neurons, ink on paper. Hence the importance of keeping in mind the fundamental unity of materiality, conceptuality, sociality, etc. Yet, although they are not stable, actual differentiations, the categories, even just as heuristic device, help explain our everyday experience. A shoe, body, staircase—things I’m calling ‘material’ here—are different in important ways from a theory, a story, a dialogue, an idea—things I’m calling ‘discursive’ and ‘conceptual’ here. Specifically, their apparent origin can be invoked as the distinguishing element. A theory emerges when it is thought and said or written. Material things, on the other hand, may involve those doings, but other activities besides, for their emergence. ‘Natural’ objects fall under this category. If we were to make a storm, it would require manipulating metal, setting up equipment, turning on the machine, and other interventions that fall outside of imagining, analyzing, and discussing.

So in our world as I want to provisionally articulate here, there are material things and conceptual, discursive things. There are conceptual, discursive activities and extra-conceptual, extra-discursive ones. The formation of conceptual, discursive things directly requires the former, while that of material things directly requires the latter. Both things probably involve both kinds of actions—the difference lies in necessities.

What I want are theories—talk and thought—that can inspire and guide praxis, which is talk, thought, and necessarily, other activities, in that it works on our political,
material reality. In the last chapter, I said that such theories contribute by opening up a new ethical space, which involves creating a new action space. What I want to spotlight now is how action space is composed completely of neither conceptual nor material units, but is instead a matrix that their interrelations form, one in which paths for specific acts are embedded.

This means that a theory can't just come along and say "Let there be such and such action space!" and have its wish granted. Consider the following scenario: my roommate leaves a note on the fridge saying that there is a zipcar parked outside that I can drive down to the city. Only, I walk out to find no car. To say that the note created an action space, but a 'wrong' and 'misguiding' one, does not do justice to the vacuum that I plunge into at the sight of the empty driveway. The note is better described as having totally failed at configuring one.

What can be said of such a failure? The lack of correspondence between the conceptual, discursive thing and the material condition seems immediately to blame; the statement on the note did not correspond to the status of the car. But I think correspondence isn't the relation here. After all, I am looking for talk and ideas that do not just faithfully mirror material reality as we know it, but rather, in giving us a new way to look at it, changes our experience of it. So a critical description must have some distance from the pre-existing material space to pull a new one out of it, but not too much, lest it have no traction. For instance, I may successfully pave a new reality for a pessimistic friend who is undergoing financial difficulties when I tell her that she is not doomed, but that life is a rollercoaster. But I may only be laughed at when I insist that life is the story of
unstoppable, inevitable personal growth and victory, because the material presence of the financial difficulty makes the narrative sound absurd.

If not corresponding, what is the rollercoaster metaphor doing with the material reality that the unstoppable-victory story fails to? I think it’s best to say that they harmonize. Like the pitches in a beautiful chord or ingredients in a delicious dish, the conceptual, discursive entity harmonizes with the material condition to bear forth a new action space.

Two characteristics of harmony make it an especially apt description of the interaction between the critical theory and material reality that successfully reconfigures action space. First is the importance of difference between the factors harmonizing. In his book on Neo-Confucian philosophy, *Sagehood*, Stephen Angle points out that early classical sources of Chinese thought contrast harmony with uniformity. He quotes, “If water were added to [enhance] water, who could make a meal of it? If the qin and se zithers struck the same [notes], who could [bear] listening to them?” Accordingly, if the critical theory’s take on reality corresponds strictly with the material conditions of the day in its common interpretation, it has no sting, no force, no transformative effect on our perspectives and actions. The potential for new understanding, and thus, new comportment, is maintained in the difference between the theory’s descriptions and the way material reality shows up in our usual, superficial, instrumental encounter with it. The second characteristic of harmony relevant here is that it is creative—it yields something new. It is not uncommon to think of harmony as ‘maintaining the peace,’ making compromises to avoid ‘making waves.’ But according to Shi Bo, an early Chinese commentator, harmony “gives birth (sheng 生) to things, rather than completing or perfecting (cheng) them.” A successfully praxis-brewing
critical theory, in harmonizing with the material condition, does not fit into and support the status quo, but gives life to a novelty—namely, a new action space. An action space, as mentioned, is not completely conceptual and discursive, but now we see how, in their harmonious interaction with materiality, our theoretical talk and thought can reconfigure it radically.

So how can I work to write and share words and ideas that achieve subversive harmony with the existing material realm? The answer is as simple and as loaded as that I must be attuned to the world. Marx did not make up alienation, capital, exploitation, and all the other concepts that serve as components of his original action space out of thin air. He got them from looking out at his environment—he read the newspapers, studied reports, conducted historical research, talked to people. The empirical dimension of Marx's project is not an addendum to his philosophy, but its necessary basis.

But here, a third characteristic of harmony comes in to delimit the critical, practical value of works based even on the most thorough research. It is that achieving harmony means constantly learning, renovating, and experimenting. This is because our material reality is constantly in flux. That a theory resonates with the conditions at time A does not mean it will do so again at time B. To stretch Angle’s point about differences in situations across the temporal dimension, it is not enough to “discover a few principles and then follow them,” but we must instead “respond to our [changing] context in a way that resonates with...all the patterns that define any given unique, particular” ephemeral moment.\textsuperscript{17}. A work that does not do this cannot maintain the harmony necessary to yield a novel action space.
Such a breakdown is both the subject and context of Marcuse’s seminal work, *One-Dimensional Man*. Discussing at once the need for radical political reorganization and its apparent infeasibility, the book ponders the alleged gorge between theory and praxis in the early 1960’s. I can trace the underlying problematic partly to the “crisis of Marxism” that his generation faced. The disappointing course of anti-capitalist attempts, such as the brutally crushed Council Republics (1918-1919) and the authoritarian Leninism that followed the Bolshevik Revolution (1917) drained the Left of their faith in Marx’s ideas as a viable guideline for truly emancipatory social movements. If praxis is the trial by fire of ideas, Marxism did not face the 1960’s unscathed. What Marcuse himself gives as the source of his reservations is the discord between Marxist theory and the political, material reality of his day. The overhaul was to be led by a revolutionary class; the placation allowed by mature capitalism had de-radicalized the working class and had rendered ‘proletariat’ a politically meaningless category. The transformation was necessitated and justified by real need; such need had been stifled or killed altogether by the repressive, static satisfaction of consumerist culture. With the building blocks of the Marxist action space—or of any action space with a pathway for a large-scale political movement—nowhere to be found in his milieu, Marcuse ends his book by denying the possibility of theory as a moment of praxis—“The critical theory of society possesses no concepts which could bridge the gap between the present and its future; holding no promise and showing no success, it remains negative”—and paying homage to the people who, parallel to the theoretical projects, perish in their Great Refusal.

Marcus’s theory, simply put, was outdated by Marcuse’s times. Surely, there were elements, such as the mechanisms of alienation and the fundamental historicity of society,
that still resonated, but their relevance was indirect, having to undergo appropriation by mediating theories, such as that of Marcuse. The reason is the importance of concreteness in the making of an action space. If I told you that something is slowly destroying our house, I am probably causing more fearful confusion than carving out action paths. It is when I am *concrete* in my description—that the ‘something’ is termites—that I configure an action space, in this case, by providing an object of confrontation for preventing further house damage. The world is constantly changing, and more importantly, presupposed as having great potentiality for change by critical theory oriented towards praxis. Consequently, the specific meaning of even the most lasting categories and concepts must be regenerated with the changing times, if it is to continuously speak to focused political acts. Exploitation, for instance, by Marcuse’s time, could no longer mean depressed wages and poor working conditions, but needed to encompass the capitalist efforts to better manage human resources, such as through placating reforms. The action space articulated had to be different from that of Marx, since the historical situation had changed since the time he wrote.

The practical potentiality of critical theory is temporally determined in this manner. The viability of theoretical knowledge as a part of political action is conditioned by its position in history. The theory’s ability to inspire and guide actions that change our material reality is determined by its relation to that reality, which morphs with time through changes both coincidental and possibly closely tied to the theory’s past uptake. But if the paradigm critical theory is a book or an article—a set of circulating words that remains essentially the same over time—how can I produce one that responds to the fluctuating situation?
Letting this question hang for now, let’s approach the creation of ethical space from another angle—the emergence of a new ethical agent. How does this happen? For surely, mere words and ideas do not literally birth new human beings. What happens instead is that the theories, in being encountered and taken up by pre-existing people, change their self-understanding and orientation towards the world in ways that gets them to act, or at least feel like they should act, in new ways. If critical theory wants to have an impact on our material reality by getting us to do something about it, it must grip us, move us—people who are prior and external to the theory. This fact may seem trivial in its obviousness, but exploring it further reveals more fundamental ways that people matter to the kind of talk and thought that I am interested in here.

The material reality at issue in the opening up of a new action space is nothing other than the experienced reality of a pre-existing person. When I say that the critical talk must harmonize with the material condition, I mean that it must harmonize in the experience of the person who is to consider the talk and act on the world, a person who is already out there, understanding and acting in some way. The absence of the zipcar and the message on the fridge are two disparate, unrelated events, until I come along and experience both and experience their dissonance. Furthermore, it is only through the pre-existing person's normative-directedness that the importance of theory's complaints, prescriptions, and suggestions make sense. The person is the 'to whom' that these matter, in that they are the one who must commit, in thought, discourse, and eventually, action, to one practical trajectory or another.
Such is the centrality of pre-existing people to critical theory’s life as a force that shapes our practices. Perhaps it is most clear when it confronts us in the form of an issue. Marcuse grapples with one in a dilemma closely related to one he faced concerning action space. Namely, he sees a lack of appropriate agents that would take up a critical theory oriented towards deep structural transformation and inhabit its action space, changing into new ethical agents in the process. The achievements of developed capitalism, such as the abundance of consumable goods and the superficial rise in the standard of living, creates in the modern agent an ambivalent but ultimately appreciative attitude towards the system, one which Marcuse finds fundamentally objectionable. In a striking example he provides, we are seen disappointed at the billboards, hot dog stands, motels, and freeways that greet us at the edge of a National Park, shattering our illusion that we were in unadulterated Nature. Our disappointment turns quickly into gratitude for the government and commerce embodied in the artificial structures, because although these institutions have a lot to do with the reason that our forests are now just islands, they sponsor the preservation of the bits left.22 Such rationalizations, combined with the uprooting of absolute need by leisure and comfort, breeds a population unmotivated to animate critical talk and thought into praxis—that is, in the unlikely case that it seriously engages with social critique in the first place at all.23 The transformation of such a people into “new historical Subjects” who would grasp the existing potentials of society and move towards its actualization is as necessary as it is unlikely.24 For one, the liberation of consciousness that must precede revolutionary praxis requires a liberation of energy from everyday tasks and distractions, and this is an achievement that apparently lies outside the scope of theory per se.25
What Marcuse’s concern makes painfully clear is the identity of the actor to be motivated and the real, flesh-and-blood human being. In light of this, even the briefest reflection on myself and my loved ones sheds light on the various and many causes of the rift between theory and praxis (no time, no money, other commitments, etc.). Yet, it is such people that a critical explanation must grip to be alive in practice.

For knowledge, to be alive in practice is not just the happy event of ‘being applied,’ but it is to be alive at all, to be valid, to be true. Truth, as Marcuse points out, does not just describe a cognitive fragment but signifies a whole orientation of existence.26 A theory exists as truth in having a thinker-actor live in and live out its meaning through their meaningful practices. For although it is not in the scope of this project to prescribe norms for the legitimacy of theoretical claims, I can take from Joseph Rouse’s essay, *Power/Knowledge* to speak descriptively to how critical theories become legitimatized. As embodied, embedded sociopolitical subjects, we cannot transcend our context to decree what the eternally true statements are. That we can, through logic or the most careful investigation for example, is the narrative of sovereignty that is itself a product of a certain cultural and intellectual context. The actual legitimization of knowledge lies in social practices. Its maintenance and perpetuation through discursive sites, such as conferences and journals, its expansion through both corroboration and critique in conversations and related research—these are just some ways knowledge exists through, within, and as a social network. We can imagine a tome technically existing in a dusty room, but it cannot be called knowledge, in that it does not yet have the social life that underlies legitimization. Besides, such talk is not what interests me here. How can a work hope to make a political
difference, if it is not integrated into the sphere of political happenings? At best, it is a message in a bottle.  

The necessity of the appropriate human beings to critical theory, not only to translate it into action, but to have it *exist* in any significant sense, implies the sociality of all discursive and conceptual projects that hope to change the world. How can I take this into consideration as I strive to share transformative words and ideas? For one, a critical theorist with an ambition to impact can keep contemporary values, morals, conventions and goals in mind, even in criticizing them. It is no accident (or a very fortuitous one) that Marx appeals to freedom, happiness, and rationality in addressing his post-Enlightenment, mid-Romantic European audience. But can I really determine my theory’s social uptake just by writing attractive content? What else can I do?
Chapter 3—

I’m starting to suspect that the critical theory’s temporality and sociality, rather than being considerations to help me write and share more effective theory, act more like insurmountable limitations to these efforts. Marcuse could incorporate lessons from the progress of Marxist societies in writing his own theories, but there was no way Marx could. An attempt to address economic conditions both present and future to him would have resulted in a vagueness incapable of speaking grippingly to either. In respect to sociality, I see a theory persuade people to take it up through various rhetorical means, but it can never make them, no less determine for itself its exact social life, such as its route of proliferation and context of interpretation.

But here comes the break—critical theory is neither the only form nor the most important aspect of critically thinking and talking. It is but one specific part—an entity that asserts an explanation of the problematic world—among many. Other parts include but are not limited to wondering, wandering, arguing, asking, debunking, re-examining, supporting, exchanging, amending, refuting, developing, appropriating. The activity that these various parts constitute is theorizing. Critical theorizing is the discursive, conceptual activity aimed at better understanding our situation, including possibilities for its transformation. It is this whole, ongoing, pluralistic phenomenon, not any of its parts, that I should focus on when I am inquiring into the best way to critically think and talk. It cannot be any one idea or book, no matter how brilliant, that best inspires and sustains world-changing actions. Rather, our hope lies in the uncentered, complex movement of which it is a small constituent.
The individual theories are like frozen instants of theorizing, like snapshots of a dance. Just as the photos are not the telos of a dance, theories should not be prioritized as a fruit of an otherwise forgettable production process. Just as the snapshots do not communicate the fluidity, musicality, and full beauty of the dance, the theory does not embody some of the most important aspects of theorizing. For one, it is by expanding my horizon from producing and curating theories to theorizing that I can finally deal satisfyingly with the concerns raised by the last chapter.

As time passes, our world changes. A theory, to be effective, must harmonize with this fluctuating material reality if it is to have any practical relevance. But if it is exemplified by an entity like a book or a system of concepts, how is it to respond to the changing tides? The concern is misguided, in that there is no need to produce an explanation that will inspire and guide us for all eternity. As new situations come along, we can reconsider and change our talk and thought accordingly. What matters then, is a sustained activity of attunement to the morphing material reality. Theorizing is just such a flow. To start, it is a temporally-extended affair. Thinking, justifying, defending, calling into question, contesting, considering, writing, publishing, and all the other ways of discursive and conceptual engagement with explanations happens in and through time. Marcuse’s long career, for instance, can be considered as theorizing manifested, and it shows how its temporal-extendedness allows its participants to responds to the changing political, material situation. In 1964, responding to what he perceived as advanced capitalism's “containment of social change” embodied in phenomena such as labor-corporate negotiations and the bipartisan agreements on Cold War paranoiac policies, Marcuse
argued for the unlikelihood of meaningful social change, as its possibility could not grip the increasingly one-dimensional modern subject. Only five years later, he published *An Essay on Liberation*, in which he responds to pockets of disruptive events across the globe—socialist struggles in Vietnam, Cuba, and China as well as the New Left’s uprising in and against established ‘democracies’—by proclaiming the tiny but definite possibility of a great, liberating transformation on our horizon. Without calling them revolutionary agents or downplaying their weakness against the bloated reactionary system, Marcuse still deems the rebellions “embodiments of hope,” and pursues the need for critical theory to outline rational ends aligned with the newly emergent utopic imagination. Then, after the frustration of the New Left in the early 70’s, Marcuse explored feminism and environmentalism, among other social movements, as potential sites of revolutionary subjectivity, while also reaffirming his earlier pessimism expressed in *One-Dimensional Man*, mentioning backlashes such as cuts on welfare, decrease in government regulation, and the resulting fortification of major transnational corporations.

Simply put, Marcuse moved with the times. He constantly re-examined and reformulated his descriptions, predictions, and recommendations in light of the sociopolitical reality contemporaneous with his writings. Such is the dynamic indefiniteness that characterizes theorizing by the virtue of its extension in time, and it is this quality that allows theorizing to constitute praxis across changing material conditions. For instance, the optimistic interpretation of student uprisings in *An Essay* could not be unqualifiedly taken up and used to describe, prescribe, or justify activism by the time the conservative reaction took its toll in the 70’s. But whereas ideas and words become dated, the *constant activities* of thinking and talking could claim unqualified relevance, as they can
remain attuned to the fluctuating reality. It is not theories but what happens *between* them that can better or worse accommodate the changing times. If a critical theory works by yielding one new ethical space, critical theorizing has the potential to yield an infinite number, each time one of the ideas flowing and negotiated within it grip people and harmonize with their material situation.

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For the sake of simple presentation, the Marcuse example may have so far made the theoretical movement through time seem like a one-man show. In fact, it is an irreducibly social phenomenon. In many ways, Marcuse was participating in and sustaining the conversation of Marx, Lukács, and others—other *people* before him—who were engaged with related questions and concerns.\(^{33}\) It was also ultimately other people, whose changing organization and practices amounted to the changes in political, material conditions, that prompted shifts in his views. Theorizing is a social activity. Its locus is a social network as much as it is someone’s head (if the idea of an a-social ‘inner space’ even makes sense). Certainly, we see Descartes thinking alone in his armchair. Yet, all around him are his late and contemporary peers of the philosophical and religious traditions that inform and justify his assumptions and standards of rational inquiry. And clearly, his train of thought has survived his death through our continuation of it. Theorizing is more like a Platonic dialogue than a Cartesian meditation, a conversation with a plurality of interlocutors from the past, present and future. Theorizing happens through and *as* sharing, arguing, learning among people.

In the last chapter, I worried whether a theory, which must get taken up and lived out to exist in any significant sense and influence our material reality, can ever really
reckon with its own sociality. Consider, for instance, the life of *One-Dimensional Man*. Despite the deep hopelessness it expresses, it was widely read and cited by the New Left. 34

The notion of repressive desublimation gave form to the radicals’ malaise and the Great Refusal was a noble name for the outburst. In this way, the theory on the impossibility of praxis became a moment of praxis. The irony highlights the fact that a piece of knowledge cannot determine its social uptake, and in turn, its relation to practical actions.

So I can’t ever produce or find theories that are guaranteed to have a grip on people, and perhaps there’s no way I can ever make sure that any of my discursive or conceptual acts—raising a question, taking an issue, calling attention—gets interpreted or engaged in the way I want. But there are some ways I can communicate that are more effective in engaging people than others. For instance, consider the difference between just reading *Das Kapital* and reading it as well as talking to Marx. If it is Marx’s intention to get me to be gripped by his ideas and act on them, he will probably be more successful in the latter case. In the first case, if I am puzzled or disappointed by his assertions, there’s no real deterrence for me to dismiss them. In the second, by contrast, Marx can answer my questions, clarify any confusion, and address my objections, giving me a chance to deeply consider and be persuaded by his points. Moreover, if I were someone knowledgeable in his subject, Marx may be able to learn from the conversation, too, expanding, complicating, and amending his ideas based on my challenges. The difference between the two encounters is analogous with the distinction between theory as an artifact and theorizing as an activity. To appropriate what Plato’s Socrates says about a text vis-à-vis a conversation, a theory cannot say anything new or consider its audience. 35 Theorizing, on the other hand, as a discursive and conceptual *interaction among people*, is a space in which its interlocutors
can creatively defend or change their ideas and be fully responsive to each other. So I am better off diving into the living conversation than sitting atop a hill and floating messages downstream, if I want to think and talk in a way that can grip people and get them to act differently. Listeners and readers who can get their questions and challenges satisfactorily addressed is more likely to consider my notions seriously than those who are left to sort confusions and dissatisfaction among themselves. The things I say in the first place, too, will be more attuned to the needs, inclinations, and norms of the people I am addressing, because I will get to learn about them through conversation, not just distant observation and hearsay.

Marcuse’s efforts illustrate. Although somewhat embarrassed by being dubbed, ‘the father of the New Left,’ Marcuse used his renown to give advice and lectures to student radicals all over the world. He was not giving one-sided addresses but taking part in the ongoing exchange of ideas, responding to notions reflected in the practices and talk of the radicals as well as receiving his share of critique. In other words, Marcuse was a participating in theorizing that aimed to understand and change our reality. When the faction by the name of Weatherman wanted to destroy the universities, Marcuse told them that our educational institutions were the best sites of subversive political activity. When the Leninists wanted to form a political party, he advised them to opt for looser affinity groups that focus on direct actions. He talked and thought—thorized—with people engaged in transformative political practices, and in turn, was a part of those practices himself.

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What Marcuse’s back and forth with activists suggests is nothing new, at least since Marx’s time—they theorizing and praxis are fundamentally entwined. Our efforts to improve our political, material reality always involve conceptual, discursive activity. This unity takes center stage in Hegel’s model of human existence in the *Phenomenology*.

For Hegel, our rationality is a historical, social practice that forms a part of our becoming as a society. Life and cognition are one in being spirit. History is the story of its trying one formation after another in its quest for completeness in itself. While I hope to briefly opine later on the misguidedness of such a quest, its driving logic, the dialectic, is of great interest to my investigation, as it proceeds through the interplay of theory and praxis.

A life form organizes around a certain self-explanation and a corresponding normative direction, operating around certain assumptions and mechanisms. Then, because of some internal contradiction, discovery of facts not accounted for by the system, or other shortcoming of the formation, the life form fails in its own terms—it realizes that it cannot embody its own norms, cannot achieve its own goals. It then takes up this realization and changes itself as a life form, giving new content to its end or modifying the means to it. It is a puzzle in which the potential solutions cannot just be speculated but must be lived out, one in which a wrong answer means pressing into a self-destructive life form. We do not possess ideas and ideals so much as we are possessed by them.

A society is a rational organism. This means the puzzle-solving is not confined to conceptual, linguistic activity, but can be found embodied in all realms of human existence. The ‘illogic’ of having a partial representation of the whole parade as the general will manifest itself in the bloodbaths of historical regimes that pressed into that possibility. Consider, for instance, the Russian, Chinese, and French leftist revolutions. Social conflicts
are forms of contradictions; political alienation is an appearance of the subject’s antinormal parochialism. Hegel explodes rationality from the realm of theoretical discourse to have it pervade our whole becoming.

Then what is the use of theorizing as a conceptual, discursive activity? Although Hegel only spells out its place in the academia, where it is to reconstruct the movement of consciousness as a unified phenomenon and preserve the lessons learned during that heroic journey, I think he would agree that it has had and will continue to have a more ubiquitous role in our development as a life form. The explanatory talk and ideas of a society is an important part of its self-understanding and normative-directedness. They are obvious in sites closely associated with our self-determination as a society—political debates, classrooms, a parent’s lecture to her child—but also in everyday exchanges. Take the democratic U.S., for example. The ‘self-evident; truth of our right to life, liberty, and pursuit of happiness may be spoken or written only in certain discursive spheres such as policymaking (often by both sides of the argument), but it is always working as the linguistically-articulated albeit silent justification and norm behind the general repulsion to murder, willingness for competition, insistence on thin parameters on victimless freedoms, and other comportments that make us a specific and distinct life form.

Explanatory claims, or theoretical understanding, underpin our normative self-conception and the practices arising therefrom. But why have a for-itself at all? If every framework that we have so far tried has been wrong anyways, could we not simply let our in-itself churn along aimlessly until it stumbles upon some kind of stability? What Hegel's narrative shows is that there is no such thing as movement without direction or progress without attempts. It is only in taking up and pressing into one construct of reality or
another that we expand and complicate our understanding of existence by experiencing our current framework’s inadequacy. We move then to accommodating our new vision. The consciousness “alienates itself and then comes round to itself from out of this alienation.”

Our explanatory thought and talk, as both the things that guide our practice and things that eventually get challenged through our practice, is an indispensable part of this process.

What is important to notice here is that theory per se does not deserve center stage. The whole journey of consciousness was structured not so much by theories as by their sublation—the abandonment of a theory was the real place of learning and growing. Of course, Hegel ultimately argues that the formation of consciousness contemporary to him has grasped the final theoretical framework, but I beg, as Marx did, to differ. How can a society achieve complete self-understanding or flawless normative comportment when its components are constantly decaying, renewing, changing with the unstoppable march of time? The way to grapple with the flux is not by straining, with inevitable futility, to create and preserve one big grand answer, but to dive into the flow by participating in one of its strands—theoretical movement. In theorizing, we reckon with our changing reality by constantly trying to understand it and, in case that the engagement is critical, our potential to improve it.

In being extended in time, theorizing allows its participants to respond to new events, findings, and observations of our dynamic material situation, the very same that I am seeking to rethink and better. In happening as a social activity, theorizing is also an opportunity to learn from others and make oneself truly understood through living conversations. Any cross-section of this movement may have ideas that inspire and guide
transformative political practice. As Marcuse’s interaction with the New Left shows, we can fluidly respond to an unfolding praxis, modifying, expanding, and articulating our descriptives and prescriptives to renew their relevance and power.

Theorizing is, in such ways, interwoven with what we do, who we are, what we experience as part of a fluctuating, historical reality. In trying to improve our world, we talk and think in this decentered, dynamic, attuned way. Now, how can we do this well? How should we theorize to really make a difference?
Chapter 4—

To approach this question, I must look at theorizing as it is done today. After all, what a thing can be in the future is best hypothesized by studying how it exists in the present. So where exactly should I look to, to look at this phenomenon? As explanatory thinking and talking aimed at understanding and improving our world, critical theorizing happens in many forms, across many realms of society. Consider journalism, think tanks, various levels of governance, activism, community service, social entrepreneurship, and that one friend you always end up having *that* kind of conversation with. If I were to address the conceptual and discursive activities in these multifarious sites as the singular phenomenon of theorizing, I would have to speak at a very general level, unable to put forth a specific characteristic that applies to the pluralistic forms. So what I’d like to do instead is to zoom into the form that theorizing takes in the modern university. For one, critical explanatory knowledge is thematized and negotiated in significant volume in this institution. It’s also the place I’m writing from and as a part of. Most importantly, this whole wondering has been *about* this place all along, in that it is my reflecting on the things I’ve been doing here as a student and thinking about its value for what I want to do in the coming years. With that said, let’s take a look at some qualities of theorizing as it happens at a university. They are not gathered from any focused research, but I trust that they ring familiar to others engaged with knowledge-production in similar settings.

In discussing two chapters ago how talk and thought need to harmonize with material conditions to open up a new action space, I briefly mentioned the importance of concreteness in this process. If I told you that someone is oppressing us, I reiterate a
common sentiment, but do not carve out any action paths. The vagueness of the oppressor’s identity leaves us in the dark about the people we need to confront and the best way to go about it. It is when I am concrete in my description—that the ‘someone’ are the factory owners—that I configure an action space, in this case, by specifying a social conflict. This example understates the task at hand, however.

Being concrete is not an easy task. The advances that modern institutions have made towards optimizing efficiency subject whole realms of social and personal existences to rational mechanisms that, although artificial, have the interconnected complexity of universal laws. In order to concretely—that is, effectively—speak of and speak to such a reality, I must have more than a generalist’s knowledge. Anybody can say that our world has problems, whereas pinpointing the exact forces involved, assessing alternatives, assigning proper strategies for amendment, and responding to complications that come up during the long struggle are necessary parts of supporting praxis that require more than a casual acquaintance with the complex workings of the modern society.

The required expertise is at once specific and holistic. I must know the specific mechanisms of our political institutions to understand our problems and possible solutions in terms that can recommend particular actions towards particular objects. At the same time, I must transcend narrow specialization. To envision society’s desirable trajectory, I must address it as a whole, unified phenomenon. I might be tempted to focus only on analyzing our economic system in the belief that it is the root of all evil, but this belief can only be justified by examining how our economic system fits into the bigger picture. It could turn out, for instance, that the accused institution’s problems are symptoms of a deeper issue, or that there is no ultimate evil but a various many, arising from different
parts of our sociopolitical landscape. To tear our world asunder into discrete spheres, such as artistic, scientific, economic, political, social activities, and work within the language of one privileged realm or another is to lose sight of the interconnectedness of all activities and their synthesis in constituting the human *Existenz*.

But who can avoid this? Learning, thinking, and talking are activities that, like any other, require time, energy, headspace, and other resources that each individual has in varying but definitely limited quantities. Certainly, people who place the whole of society under critique and also have area-expertise are very much a reality, but they are more an exception than the rule. Their rarity is exacerbated by the academic system that compartmentalizes our growth as thinkers into discipline-specific methodologies and discourses. Moreover, in such a structure, it is imaginable to picture people fluent in the multiple departments being unable to find journals, conferences, departments, and other institutional support to make their insights social—that is, to make them knowledge at all.

Given all this, the critical theorist who can successfully open up a new, truly navigable action space seems to parallel Plato's philosopher-kings—as necessary as their anticipation is idealistic.

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In the last chapter, I said that theorizing is an essential part of our constant efforts towards self-improvement as a life form. It is a movement inseparable from our movement forward. In being extended through time, responsive to new developments in material conditions, and acted out by living people, it is a process more than a stable object.

Yet, this dynamic practice seems to have, built into it, its own freezing. Its components, explanatory thought and talk, lay out a certain articulation of the world. When
they are trying to influence our actions, they must aim to provide a picture of reality that is simple enough to navigate, complex enough to advocate specific comportments, and compelling enough to grip the agent-to-be. The gripping of the people—herein lies the potential problem. As much as it is precisely what needs to happen for the reconfiguration of ethical space, an idea can become reified when people take it up and press into it. We take it out of the de-centered flow and assign it undue epistemic privilege. Two stock models of this phenomenon come to mind. First is Thomas Kuhn’s picture of the scientific community, whose self-conception, questions, and practices are both based on and oriented towards upholding its defining paradigm. The second is Marx’s conception of ideology, in which the mainstream beliefs about reality reflect the interests of the economically dominant, and their continuing edge militates the corresponding ideas against change.

The issue is not the uptake of an understanding per se. It is after all not only within but through their devotion to a paradigm that Kuhn’s scientists can refine methodologies and make new discoveries, the critical accumulation of which may contribute to the overturning of the very conceptions and assumptions that allowed them. This is also the shape of Hegel’s dialectic. The danger lies in the way that the words and ideas that we take up can become stuck. The specific, overlapping reasons behind this—inertia, confirmation bias, institutional framework—will not be hashed out here, but we can see how explanatory knowledge, in its defining function, leans into its own entrenchment. In putting forth a certain articulation of the world, it implicitly, if not explicitly, negates other conceptions past, contemporaneous, and future to it. People who live in and lives out that understanding participate in a parallel exclusion of alternatives, as proceeding from a
conception means taking it for granted. Every way of seeing, no matter how well-intentioned, can privatize our imagination.

The concern can be countered by the faith that the understanding that dominates will also be right. This, however, is a rather indefensible position. The critical thought and talk I am interested in here must harmonize with the material conditions it seeks to change. Since material conditions vary across time, situations, and places, an explanation cannot ‘be right’ in any constant, universal sense. Marcuse points this out when he qualifies the usefulness of Marxist categories to his contemporaries. Since the working class of the modernized West has been deradicalized by advances in administration and consumer culture, it would be futile to prescribe a large-scale movement in which workers play the role of ready agents. In this sense, classical Marxism “belongs to the nineteenth and early twentieth century”. That is unless the theorist is speaking to “large areas of the Third World,” where capitalism is still in its vulnerable adolescence, in which case, the old conceptions are “still valid.” His point is that Marxism, in reaching beyond its due temporal and spatial parameters in becoming the entrenched paradigm for leftist intellectuals everywhere, has survived into becoming wrong.

“Wrong” here, of course, doesn’t signify the lack of thought-object correspondence, but a dissonance between an idea and its material context. Such dissonance determines the utterance’s relevance to action. Perhaps, as mentioned before, the words will fall flat—people will find them absurd and just ignore them, never translating them into praxis. It’s another story, however, in cases where the notion has taken stubborn root. One possibility is that it will encourage consistently ineffective actions. If I try to rally the working class into revolt in the Western sixties of Marcuse’s description, I will find my project frustrated
over and over. A more frightening form of failure lies in the totalitarian, anti-productive praxis that can arise from a group’s insistence on the perpetuation and dominance of a certain conception of reality and the related normative commitments. The instrumental practices of Lenin’s government come to mind, as well as the horrors of Stalin’s regime, which brought the former’s logic into its florid stage. A people disengaged from open political discourse to become an oppressive one-party government, and an idea was isolated from the stream of theorizing to became dogma—and vice versa.

Theorizing is a human activity, a social activity. As such, it cannot be abstracted from the forces, structures, and ways that we do it through. What it is comes down to how it is done.

The choreography of “objects, instruments, practices, research programs, skills, social networks, and institutions” involved in theorizing are not just means to an end, but define the end in important senses. This is one of Foucault’s most memorable theses. He points out how rituals of “surveillance, elicitation, and documentation” allowed for “a more extensive and finer-grained knowledge” of individuals. In the process, the novel techniques also bred new categories to be applied to people, turning them into a different—medical, productive, etc.—targets of knowledge than they were before the panoptical administration.

What makes such interactions profound to this discussion is that the affected qualities are not only the quantity and subject of knowledge but its very form. Eventually, the large amount of data on the population, in being treated through bell-curve analyses, allowed for the emergence of norms—the conventional and desirable—as a new kind of
The kind of knowledge that can inspire and guide praxis is responsive to material conditions, interwoven with ongoing political efforts, and made up of dynamic interactions between living interlocutors. It is, in other words, theorizing, and just like Foucauldian norms, or any other form of knowledge for that matter, its character is determined by the specific activities that constitute it.

Marcuse is at once deeply appreciative and skeptical of the university as a place for such activities. On one hand, he believed that “the educational sites provided the best refuge for radicals in American society to struggle for socialism.” On the other, he points out several junctures at which a practicable, critical movement of consciousness is stunted in the educational system of his day. First, the stress placed on objectivity and political neutrality of knowledge-claims deters students from thinking and talking about the world in terms of its problems. Second, the exclusion of political critique and historical non-conformist movements as topics on the curriculum makes it difficult for the students to grasp feasible alternatives to the system, no less possible methods of actualizing them. Third, in suppressing political activities on campus, the school tears theory and praxis apart, making the students believe that the ideas that they learn are irrelevant to their desires and efforts to affect their environment.

Indeed, the knowledge produced and reproduced this way cannot be critical theorizing that fosters political, material change. Ideas and words that refuse to engage a problem is not critical, and explanations of the world that exclude possibilities for its transformation cannot open up an ethical space that has pathways for praxis. Notions that are impressed as disconnected from the realm of actions are unlikely to get taken up and lived out by any considerate agent.
Things at the university have certainly changed since Marcuse’s time, but his complaint illustrates an enduring phenomenon: theorizing exists as a web of practices. How we think and talk determine the identity and impact of our words and ideas.

All this is not to preclude the influence of conceptual and discursive moments over their own embedded lives. After all, the changes in the university’s structure and curriculum happened partly thanks to the activism of students, who were living out certain ideas that gripped them. In another example, Sarah Mattice, in her exposition on combat metaphors as common and problematic elements of self-reference in Western philosophy, suggests that thinking and talking about philosophical activity in terms of victors and losers has shaped our actual disciplinary practices. It is imaginable that were it not for the metaphilosophy of combat, we would not be writing essays as ‘well-supported arguments’ and engaging in seminar discussions that resemble debates.

In such ways, theorizing and its components mutually inform each other in a feedback loop. That this system is not closed off and isolated, but affected by and effective in other realms of our lives is my hope and central assumption in this inquiry. One way that it is effective is that it brings people together. As a social activity, theorizing involves many people interacting with each other. Their interaction in conversing and exchanging ideas can underlie their conscious interaction in undertaking other activities.

Consider the Communist International, the Occupy movement, and the New Left. Their participants thought about and discussed shared questions and concepts, agreeing on some explanatory notions about the world but also rethinking them constantly through an ongoing dialectic. In other words, they shared a conceptual, discursive flow—they
participated in the same theoretical movement. This in turn lets them act together to influence their political, material reality. They could unite as a social alignment—a network of co-ordination and conversation composed of individuals comporting towards the same cluster of activities, which are, along with their ends, constantly renegotiated by the pluralistic motivations, experiences, and opinions of its participants. While all three examples come from counterculture, such networks also form our everyday matrix, counting corporations, research programs, and the government as few of its diverse manifestations.

For social alignments that aim to not only use, but change the forces and structures of the current reality, shared theoretical activity can be indispensable. For one, although by no means monolithic, their participants need to have their ethical space overlap in some ways. It would be extremely hard, for instance, for individuals who disagree on central goals and methods to achieve some kind of co-ordination. While there is no need for total agreement, theorizing is our best chance at establishing the necessary common ground. By talking and exchanging ideas with each other, we can discover or create agreements, or frame our disagreements in a way that still lets us co-operate towards bringing about certain changes in our shared world.

During the cooperative efforts, we are likely to run into difficulties. In striving to change the structure that support, and is in turn supported by, everyday proceedings, we are likely to become frustrated at some points and live in constant anticipation of frustration. We will ask many times, “Why are we even doing this?” Thankfully, theorizing can be a powerful way to engage with such questions. In being a flow of explanatory concepts and claims, attuned to the unfolding praxis and fluctuating reality, theoretical
activity is an important place for reflection, and thus justification, of our co-ordinated activity. Surely, people can orient themselves and act without self-reflection. We don’t always ask why we are doing the things we’re doing. But we certainly do when we run into risks and failures, which come in plenty in the business of challenging the complex, efficient mechanisms of our social world. We then need a way to understand our practices and justify our actions to each other and ourselves. Thinking and talking critically together seem to be effective ways if any.

The importance of forming social alignments to making a difference in our condition requires no elaboration. That one person, no matter how great, cannot change this world is an empirical claim yet unfalsified. Even Napoleon had his court and his army. That theorizing supports and sustains our co-ordination and co-operation, then, specifies one way our thinking and talking can transform our political, material reality.
Chapter 5—

So now that I know some things about what theorizing is like right now, I can start thinking of ways that it can be done better. Although the characteristics of theorizing that I discussed in the last chapter were derived from how it is done in the university, I think that the shoulds considered below apply to all theoretical activity. Each has the potential to make any and all strains of critical theorizing more valuable to effective praxis.

First, being a mere mortal, how can I analyze the world in its specific mechanisms while keeping the whole picture in view? The break comes from recognizing that theorizing is no solitary task. When I don’t know something, I can ask others for their input. Through conversation, we can refine our notions, challenge our fundamental assumptions, build off of each other’s knowledge, and combine our expertise towards understanding our complex, multi-faceted world. In short, we can collaborate. The process can span across considerable time and space—it may, for instance, take the form of responding to each other’s publications, critiquing and expanding on them. Or it can be collaboration in the more conventional sense, such as when people sit in the same room and converse with the goal of understanding a social problem and solving it. For instance, what if a political scientist, a psychologist, and a philosopher came together to address the problem of alienation? The philosopher may lay out the general framework in terms of our distance from nature, our products, and other people. The psychologist can describe and problematize this distance as social and personal experiences of loneliness, purposelessness, and depression. The political scientist can then unearth institutional forces and mechanisms that cause such experiences. Since they are hypothesized to be manifestations of alienation, their causes
can be entertained as causes of alienation. From there, the team can further collaborate to ponder whether they are ultimate origins, and if so, start formulating ways to confront them.

When I learn and grow with people who come from different places of knowledge and knowhow, I am more likely to approach the world in a way that can help me change it. For one, the ethical space delineated by the explanations developed collaboratively can be at once more specific and comprehensive than ones thought up alone. The proposal of ends will be more gripping in its concreteness and more responsible in the thoroughness of the deliberation behind it. As for the recommendation of means, it will be more practicable in its detailed description of the instruments, obstacles, and actions involved. It will also be more effective, in that it is formulated by taking more factors from more realms of society from more angles into consideration.

Collaboration between theorists and activists are especially important. In a sense, the distinction is unfair, because, as mentioned before, all actors think and talk about their world, and people who engage primarily in studying, thinking, and discussing can also engage in political, material practices. But the reality, again, is that we only have so much time and energy. We can’t do it all, certainly not if we want to be delve into something deeply. It’s hard for someone occupied with the allocating food, structuring meetings, managing communication—the nitty-gritties that ultimately make up praxis and determine its success or failure—to be sharply attuned to the constantly-morphing big picture. Conversely, it’s hard to understand the specific challenges and possibilities of an action when, even as you know and admire its goals and meaning, do not have the resources to participate directly in it.
Their differentiation being thus common, the primarily-thinking and primarily-acting people must communicate. The theorists need to learn from the actors about what the real possibilities of action are as they are determined by the specific, local, material factors that the actors work with. What we discover can encourage us to rethink and refine our descriptives and prescriptives to better harmonize with the situation. We will thereby be more likely to speak to the transformative project more grippingly and helpfully. The actors, in turn, can hear out and take up insights and suggestions from the theorists, who take into account not only what's going on at the specific site of action, but shifts in the broader sociopolitical reality and the practice's implications for the whole, interconnected world.

What's also really important for this kind of collaboration is for people from different disciplines and actors of different specialties to work together. Such communication and co-operation founds not only the cohesion, but the success of a praxis. Though it is not about critical theorizing, Feenberg’s commentary on the modern administrative system makes my point perfectly:

“Everything is connected in the real world, but reification differentiates the totality into fragmented parts. Disciplinary specializations follow the reified pattern in isolating particular cross-sections of the totality for analytical treatment. The cognitive advantages of specialization are undeniable, but it can lead to unanticipated problems in the application. For example, not infrequently engineers design a production process or a device that is hazardous for the workers who use it. Once it is deployed, medical complications ensue and another specialization must be called in to deal with non-engineering aspects of the concrete system formed by
the device and the workers’ physiology. In the best of cases, the combination of
specializations initiates an iterative design process that resolves the problem.”

The Russian Revolution was not over when the Bolsheviks seized power. There
remained a million tasks, such as rationing, transportation, restructuring work, and
maximizing industrial capacities. At a first glance, they may seem like logistical concerns
peripheral to the theoretical framework motivating the praxis. On the contrary, they are
articulations of that very praxis, and as such, call for critical, explanatory reflection—
theorizing—to prompt, guide, and justify their performance. To accommodate the sheer
variety of the many particular problems and the many particular solutions, thinkers and
actors from various realms of knowledge and knowhow must come together. To
accommodate the inevitable interplay of their contributions, they must communicate and
co-ordinate, both because and despite their different paradigms and foci.

Such thinker-actor and inter-expertise collaborations take more than mere
willingness to foster. As suggested in the last chapter, there may be institutional barriers to
cross-disciplinary productivity that need to be addressed. For instance, in the university,
that members of different academic fields find each other’s methodologies, paradigms,
discourses, and concepts irrelevant or even incomprehensible may partly be a result of the
difference in objects of study, but may also partly be a gratuitous byproduct of historical
isolation among departments. Construction of spaces, research programs, resources,
incentives, and other infrastructural opportunities for ongoing inter-specialty dialogue may
do much to foster collaborative work. Fostering communication and collaboration between
theorists and activists call for similar initiatives. Perhaps we can hold conferences where
the two meet and discuss ongoing practices with the goal of improving them and reflecting
on their meaning. Perhaps academic and research institutions can reach out more often to people directly engaged in praxis and invite them to talk about their impressions of the task at hand, and vice versa. 

The world keeps changing, but our words and ideas, if they become entrenched, may stay the same. In result, they become at best irrelevant and ineffective, or at worst, a dangerous impetus and justification for oppressive, totalitarian practices. While this is a potential that any explanatory claim contains, and one that is necessary if the notion is to grip people, its actualization is not inevitable.

An immunizing measure comes from the direction of *Yo! And Lo!,* a work of linguistic investigation by Rebecca Kukla and Mark Lance. Speech acts aim to affect the normative space. Specifically, they do so by summoning the audience to a new location in that space by inviting them to live out a new ‘should.’ As such, they are always claims made by someone, on someone. While this may seem obvious for “Hanna, you should eat this,” it does not seem to apply to “The advances made by the theory of utility and exploitation, its various phases, are closely connected with the various periods of development of the bourgeoisie.” Yet it does—the latter is also a speech act, as an embedded piece of prose, made by Marx, to his readers. He calls his readers to give him their trust and take up his claim about economic history, to see things the way he does. Marx, in having had extensively studied, read, and thought about material development, is entitled to—he is able to hold—the knowledge-claims that he is committed to. In making the declarative speech act, he is trying to impart the entitlement and commitment to a specific person (e.g. me, you, them), changing their status as normatively-bound thinker-actors, and in turn,
their location in normative space. Perhaps responding to Marx or Marxists, engaging in conceptual and discursive exchange about the subject matter, may become a new ‘should’ structuring their action. Perhaps becoming wary of utilitarian justifications of the status quo and not pursuing utilitarian-minded reforms are also new directions that the reader is called to.

Kukla and Lance’s formulation is relevant to theorizing in that our theoretical thoughts and talks, in having to exist socially if they are to effect praxis, are speech acts. As such, they are emitted from one agent to a specific other, striving to influence their normative position in the nexus of people and things. With our books, essays, articles, questions, lectures, and challenges, we are not so much impersonally presenting truths for the sake of truth, but inviting people to do certain things—to see things the way we do, enter into a dialogue with us, act in certain ways towards the material environment. What seems to be in order against the reification of theoretical knowledge is the explicit acknowledgement—as both the utterers and recipients of explanatory ideas—of this fact.

As the person hearing or reading theoretical assertions, I should keep in mind that even the most declarative, seemingly ‘objective’ statements are coming from a specific person, within a specific context. In being a human being embodied in a limited vessel and embedded in a certain sociopolitical milieu, the utterer of an assertion is restricted in the scope of their research, breath of their knowledge, and comprehensiveness of their approach. Staying aware of this will encourage me to engage critically with her claims, as I know that there will be partiality. In applying them to praxis, I will be more cautiously attuned to its effects than counterproductively clinging to it as an a priori. I should also keep in mind that an explanation, even when it is put forth with the confidence that makes
it seem like the word of God, cannot be abstracted from its specific temporal and local context, this context always being an interaction between two people, where one is inviting the other to see the thing that they are seeing, a thing which will eventually render the invitation absurd as it changes with the fluctuating reality. Against the temptation to hold onto a certain worldview, I have to constantly reassess it vis-à-vis the here and now that it must harmonize with. As much as a declaration is a summon for me to accept it, I should keep in mind that it is also always an invitation for me to challenge, question, and rethink it. In taking up the latter call, I avoid being frozen in dogmatism, staying attuned and continuing to learn by flowing within the decentered, restless conversation that is theorizing.

As the person saying, writing, and sharing explanatory claims, I can explicitly acknowledge that my ideas come from a place of certain entitlements, commitments, and limitations. I can disclaim that my work takes into consideration some aspects of our reality, but only from a certain perspective, and that I fail to accommodate other concerns, such as future developments. Such metadiscourse can do much to remind my recipients of the knowledge’s limitations and orient them on how to understand, reckon with, and amend its partiality. I can also declare the summoning purpose of the work, naming its audience and stating what I was trying to get them to do. These suggestions may seem nonsensical at first. If I am trying to convince someone of my argument, I would be more successful in presenting it as a purpose-neutral truth emanating from a place of near-omniscience. But the goal of critical theorizing that I am interested in is not instilling a final conviction, but working and learning with people to understand the world in a way that can help me work to bring about positive change. In respect to this conception of theorizing,
then, the aforementioned ‘successful’ way is irresponsible and counterproductive. Would some communist revolutions have been so gruesome, were it not for the rhetoric of ‘necessity,’ ‘truth,’ and ‘must’ in their founding texts?58

Though I’m certain that my words here will not get taken up as unobjectionable facts in any sense by anyone, I want to walk the talk here by saying that Kukla and Lance’s characterization of speech acts resonates with how I have been thinking about my own knowledge-claims. They come from an undergrad of an American college in the year 2016. Although I believe that the things I’m putting forth about critical theorizing can speak to all the various conceptual and discursive activities aimed at making a difference, they are based on concerns arising from my experience with one specific manifestation of theorizing—the one done in modern academia. But even of this institution, I really don’t know much at all. Only, as one type of its participants, a student just starting out, I wanted to invite fellow constituents to wonder and reflect with me—what are we doing? Why are we reading the canon and writing essays? Must our thinking and talking be ends in themselves, or do they have great potential as a means to something else? If so, how can we tap into it?

I suspect that the self-conscious effort to situate my and other’s words and ideas within, and therefore surrender them to, a critical discourse can extend beyond mere disclaimer, rhetorical caution, and I-statements. A further investigation may do much to foster a dynamic conversation that is truly responsive to our changing condition, needs, and observations.

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What theorizing is comes down to how it is done. This means that, as Marcuse points out in his critique of our educational system, our thinking and talking can only be understood in terms of the people, structures, and objects that they exist as. When we are looking to improve critical theorizing—its responsiveness to material reality, its relevance to ongoing political efforts, etc.—we must address it as it confronts us in institutional form.

We need not look far and wide for this institution due critical reflection. It is the texts read in class, people writing on blackboards, people taking notes, people funding the whole affair, buildings, assumptions, capabilities, resources, norms, and so on. It is the social, material network that knowledge lives as. Someone who finds our theoretical practice deeply problematic then, may be tempted to bulldoze all schools, disrupt all conferences, and halt all publications to afterwards ‘start fresh.’ The vision is appetizing in its simplicity, but its implementation will be counterproductive, if not impossible. As Hegel points out through the disastrous results of the French Revolution’s ambition to rebuild civilization from the ground up based on vague but vogue ideals such as freedom and rights, our critical and creative capacities are embedded in our existing practices. The radicals failed in two senses. First, the ideals that they held as primordial and original were not so, but rather products of existing cultural and academic institutions. Second, no sustainable future could be built on an attempt to totally negate the past. When the monarchy was thrown out, the vacuum that replaced it was not only of power but of norms, definitions, and procedures for political conduct and configuration. Our very ability to change institutions is powered by the infrastructure, practices, accumulated work, and ongoing exchanges within those sites.
The necessity of participating in the way things are done now to move towards something else does not preclude the possibility of radical rethink, however. As MacIntyre says, traditions are not so much a set of dogmatic rules and assertions as they are conversations stretching generations deep and a community wide. Thinking about our conceptual and discursive traditions in this light, I can see how conventional categories and claims can serve as tools for their own transcendence. As for the institutional mechanisms and practices of such thinking and talking, we can rely on similar processes: we are doing things a certain way now, but we can use our current apparatus to do things differently in the future. What are we doing when we decontextualize canonical texts from their historical settings? How can academia overcome its reputation as an ivory tower? Are our meeting spaces safe for the disclosure of minority positions? There are many important questions to raise if we want to think and talk in a way that responsibly and powerfully impacts our material reality. Self-work such as restructuring meeting spaces can be one of the most important praxis that our theorizing can motivate and guide.

To make a meaningful impact on the fundamental structures and forces of society, people need to come together. Social alignments are the resulting networks of coordination and conversation through which people comport towards the same cluster of constantly-renegotiated ends and means. So defined, the advantage of a large, expansive scale is self-evident. More participants means more force and more resources directed towards achieving the goals. The discontent of an individual may be ignored by the authorities, but imagine the possible impact of a million demanding change. In addition, the contributions of people from different perspectives and walks of life will make for actions
that are more thoroughly considered, and therefore more effective. Think of Marcuse who, while gloomily predicting that the only remaining agents of subversion are the few outcasts unusable by the modern administration, recognizes the importance of a broad, diverse participatory basis. It is only when the material deprivation of the ghettoized, the new aesthetic urges of the youth, and the productive powers of the working class come together that we can really start formulating and working towards a revolution. In embodying a diverse set of needs, being great in number, and connecting disparate realms of society, the association could be a formidable opposition to the system.

In the last chapter, we said that theorizing, in helping inspire, direct, and justify the co-operation of people in their efforts to change their material reality, is important to the cohesion, continuation, and success of a social alignment. People are bound together in thinking and talking together. This means that if it is in our interest to have our social alignment be as broad and big as possible, we should make sure that our theoretical conversation is something that many people can participate in. People are unlikely to join a cause whose words and ideas do not engage them, or stay involved in a movement that does not have a place for their questions, concerns, and contributions. A conceptual, discursive stream that hopes to be a part of an inclusive—and thereby impactful—praxis must welcome and embrace many interlocutors. How can critical theorizing do this?

Kukla and Lance’s point can be reiterated to bring up a suggestion. Speech acts summon specific agents to take up certain positions in normative space. An explanatory utterance may, for instance, invite its audience to engage in a conversation about a topic or carry out certain actions towards material objects. Whether the utterance ‘works’ or not
depends on whether the addressed person accepts the invitation and responds appropriately.

There are ways to set oneself up for failure. Consider the following scenario: Sein says, “Shinwu must do this” to Hanna out of Shinwu’s earshot, with the aim of getting Shinwu to do this. True, as the life of *One-Dimensional Man* shows, it is possible for Shinwu to overhear the declaration and do as he is wished, but Sein’s commenting to Hanna remains a rather silly alternative to her directly addressing the agent she wishes to reposition, saying, “Shinwu, please do this.” Another counterproductive move Sein can make is to communicate her invitation to Shinwu in a way that he cannot understand. If she says, “Shinwu, please do this,” when he does not understand English, her speech act can only be unsuccessful in its normative function.

These are patterns at times repeated in academic discourse. Theoretical works clearly aimed at conveying shoulds to the working class are not addressed to the working class. Even if they are, they are filled with jargon and references that alienate even the most educated nonspecialist. Contra these instances, we must talk to the people that we are trying to invite into action, and talk to them in a way that makes them feel like they are part of the conversation. And the people we engage this way should be the broad, diverse public, because any movement benefits from seeking many participants.

How can such inclusiveness be fostered? I must understand that widening a discussion cannot stop at writing with a wide audience in mind. I must be assertive in my invitation. In the age of information overload, “truth will out” is an indefensible position. An idea or a conversation must self-promote, appeal popularly, circulate widely, be especially digestible—do something more than just exist—to engage people. What would such
theoretical communication look like? Could this kind of theorizing be sustained in some of its present institutional forms, such as the university? I wonder about the potential of blog platforms, online forums, and other social media to diversify and broaden—and therefore strengthen—a theoretical dialogue that aims to support effective political movements.
Conclusion—

So it turns out that to talk and think in a transformative way, I need to move beyond mere talking and thinking. I must reach out to others to collaborate with them, work to contextualize other’s as well as my own ideas, change the material structures that make up the discursive space, and embrace society not only as my subject but my interlocutors. These tasks cannot be considered ‘theoretical’ in the traditional sense, but they are goals internal to critical theoretical activity that aims to make an impact on our everyday reality. If I want to think, speak, learn, and share ideas that can inspire and guide people, including myself, towards praxis, I must foster and participate in a conversation that is truly attuned to the fluctuating reality and interwoven with our evolving discoveries, needs, and practices. The suggestions made in the last chapter are just a few measures I can take to this end.

Getting to engage with the theories of Hegel, Marx, and Marcuse was a great privilege. I walk away with new ways of seeing my world and framing its utmost possibilities. Yet, I realized in the process that such works, in and by themselves, are not the most important things. What I should focus on instead is the decentered, dynamic, pluralistic movement in and through which the works live and maintain the potential to touch our lives. Because praxis is better served by a responsive activity than by any explanatory artifact, how we continuously think and talk matters more than what was ever thought or said. As the texts become dated, how will we appropriate their insights without being weighed down by the canon? Will we discuss them with people of various disciplines and talents to flesh out the rather abstract ethical spaces they delineate in terms that can motivate and direct our contemporaries? Given how difficult they are to read and
understand, how can we get more voices into their discussion? These are a few questions to
start brewing a conceptual and discursive flow that can change our reality.

I would love to participate in such critical theorizing. What exactly would it look
like? I hope to try to play my part in bringing it about or keeping it going as part of my
efforts to make a positive if small contribution to my world.
Endnotes—

1. The phrasing “ethical space” can also be found in Charles Taylor’s “Dialogical Self.” Although I will be using other aspects of the text to develop my ideas, our usage of the term are not similar enough to merit an extended discussion.


3. Ibid., 69.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid., 81.


8. Ibid., 59.


10. Ibid., 307.

11. Ibid., 309.


16. Ibid., 63.

17. Ibid., 64.


21. Ibid., 257.

22. Ibid., 226.

23. Ibid., 253.

24. Ibid., 252.

25. Ibid., 243.


28. Ibid., location 157.


31. Ibid., viii-ix, 29.

35. Ibid.
38. Ibid., 23.
40. Ibid., ¶ 174.
42. Hegel, *Phenomenology*, ¶ 36.
44. Feenberg, *Philosophy of Praxis*, location 5333.
50. Ibid., 96.
51. Ibid., 98.
61. Susan Buck-Morss, in *Hegel and Haiti*, addresses how our tendency to decontextualize philosophical works may distort their meaning and assimilate them to existing ways of thinking.