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EDITORIAL

First-wave Left-Kantianism under Scrutiny

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Abstract

This special issue is intended to advance research in the neglected field of 'first-wave left-Kantianism'. We understand first-wave left-Kantianism as a current consisting of thinkers in the late nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century, marked by the commonly held assumption that we are interdependently connected with one another via linguistic concepts that shape our ideas of justice. Critical philosophy is understood in outlining the contradictions in our thinking, materialized in the social and economic conditions. This special issue is meant to revive and continue the work on central authors of that tradition.

Keywords: neo-Kantianism; left-Kantianism; republicanism

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The Kant that mattered most to the first-wave left-Kantians was the Kant who broke with dogmatic metaphysics and denied that given social hierarchies carry any built-in justification; what they most turned away from was the focus on individual rights and virtues, attending instead to the basic mechanisms of the social structure. Critique, accordingly, had to be substantive: a break with ideological forms of thinking that cast a veil over the outlook on society. Recovering this tradition is not only of historical interest: in the post-Rawlsian era, Kant has served primarily as a forerunner of contractualist and proceduralist accounts of justice, and the left-Kantians remind us that a Kantian framework can also reach the underlying social and economic structures within which people and institutions operate. Before we set out the individual contributions, we shall give first-wave left-Kantianism a place by discussing the "interdependence" thesis – the idea that linguistic concepts lie at the bottom of oppression – in more detail.

The left-Kantians started from the presupposition that we are interdependently connected with one another. According to them, Kant's Copernican revolution does

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not cover the substantive epistemological frameworks through which we make sense of our experience. What they thought Kant did well was work out the framework of the forms of cognition. But it was the *content* of thinking – consisting of culturally shaped linguistic concepts that constitute us as interdependent individuals – that informs positive laws that lead to forms of oppression. In the nineteenth century, the formalism problem was considered one of the central issues in Kantian ethics to overcome. The left-Kantians thought that if moral cognition has any value, we must not only set out logical inconsistencies but critically engage with substantive beliefs that justify our normative orders. This is neither simply a turn to Kant's theoretical philosophy nor a strong deviation from his system; rather, it is an acknowledgement of the situatedness of our thinking expressed in the concepts with which we think, and an attempt to criticise the materialised thought systems that justify domination, inequality, and oppression. Critical thinking is meant to challenge misleading concepts, and it does so by grounding them in the relevant socio-economic circumstances.

Hermann Cohen, who focused on the 'facts of culture', laid the foundation for the first strand of left-Kantianism with this interdependence thesis. He took his cues from what may be called a form of *cultural materialism* as presented by the *Völkerpsychologists* Moritz Lazarus and Heymann Steinthal (Widmer 2021). In their view, we are interdependent by being members of a linguistic group, sharing with one another concepts as carriers of meaning and values. This linguistic way of understanding interdependence was also the feature that separated them from right-wing Kantians. Right-wing Kantians such as Bruno Bauch, for instance, problematically argued for a natural form of interdependence, marked by shared genetics, blood, and soil. Bauch's take on Kant was meant to justify the idea that only some racial communities had developed critical thinking skills, and, sadly unsurprisingly, he saw that the German race had developed them most. Although many wrongs have been committed by indiscriminately branding thinkers as ideological forerunners of the Second World War, it is in this case truly not far-fetched to place this racial communitarianism in direct connection with Nazi ideology. The left-Kantians pushed strongly against such a naturalist understanding of interdependence. While it would be wrong to understand first-wave left-Kantians as a coherent group, the early left-Kantians of the Marburg School thought that our interdependence was grounded in the meaning and social standing *we ascribe* to specific concepts, and that this is what originally organises our social and economic realm. While Cohen understood critical thinking as conceptual labour to better align our social structures with the principle of humanity, other early left-Kantians such as Rudolf Stammler took critical thinking as focusing on the mismatch of the legal and economic realms. To Stammler, critical thinking was to recognise class struggles as a productive form of unrest that would signal that the legal system had not been responsive enough to the changing economic mode of production.

This increased focus on the substantive side of thinking as fostering interdependence in thought was also what they had in common with the left-Hegelians. As Marx had articulated it, the function of philosophy was 'to unmask self-alienation in its unholy guises' (Marx 1982: 171). Doing so from a Kantian framework means paying increased attention to statistical data. For this whole generation of neo-Kantians, this was one of the main tasks: to deploy the scientific tools available to delineate the

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morally salient features of moral cognition on objective grounds. This critique started out in the Marburg School and took on different forms. Friedrich Albert Lange, for instance, took Kant's 'unsocial sociability' as the main concept, based on which he claimed that we can observe a dialectic between these two tendencies evolving in history, and the empirical sciences are meant to help us understand this dialectic (Lange 1896; Widmer 2022). Hermann Cohen, on the other hand, saw in Kant's notion of *humanity* the central concept for such a critique. He argued that there is a personification of capital and an objectification of the worker, who, for a certain period of time, becomes the property of the employer (Cohen 2001/1877; Widmer 2024a). Ernst Cassirer, though he never explicitly identified as a socialist, similarly started in his critique of fascism from the idea that Kant's notion of autonomy was the pinnacle of rational thinking (Cassirer 1949). Rudolf Stammler, an explicit defender of democratic socialism, emphasised the sharp distinction between law and morality he identified in Kant, arguing that class struggles in capitalism were an indication that the legal system had not yet been aligned with the social mode of economic production (Stammler 1896; Widmer 2024b). Despite the wide variety in which their cultural critique played out, they all thought that what was needed was a substantive critique of interdependent concepts that ground forms of oppression.

The focus on the cultural side of thinking was not unproblematic. Although it avoided a racial understanding of a nation, it also led to the defence of a specific kind of German nationalism. Cohen and especially Natorp continued to hold onto a form of cultural nationalism even after the Marxist wing and many others had understood it as an unjustified imperialist war. This was the downfall of first-wave left-Kantians as in the Marburg School: the antisemitic and antinationalist climate in the postwar era made it hard for Marburg left-Kantianism to survive (Widmer 2023). However, they were also the ones that paved the way for various Kantian *socialisms*, resulting in the New Friesian School led by Leonard Nelson, the sociological approaches as reflected in Georg Simmel and Max Weber, the Austromarxists as represented by Max Adler, Otto Bauer, and Rudolf Hilferding, the legal positivist strands as reflected in Hans Kelsen, and materialised in some form in the ideas of Georg Lukács, and the Kantian Marxist Lucien Goldmann.

If we place first-wave left-Kantians more centrally in the Kant reception, their turn to the interdependence of concepts that structure our thinking could also be seen as a turn towards a Marx-inspired view on Kant that sought to combat the individualism often ascribed to Kant. One of the central themes running through the first wave is that they turned away from individual rights and virtues, and instead they show an increased focus on the basic social structure. If we consider the cause against which Kant and his direct followers engaged, opposing the ancien régime and its religious underpinning (see Maliks and Widmer 2025), it is easy to see why the basic mechanisms of the prevailing economy and society have not received the same attention. The Left at that time arose in the wake of the French Revolution, originally from the seating arrangements of the new National Assembly. The critics of absolute monarchy sat on the left, whereas its supporters sat on the right. The main social hypothesis they were opposing was the idea of a divine order and that the people should content themselves with the social position into which they were born, which had already been highlighted by the rationalist philosophers. Before Kant, Wolff and Leibniz understood natural differences and the consequent social differences as the

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outcome of the will of God, who had chosen the best of all possible worlds. Kant broke radically with what he took to be dogmatic metaphysics, which had at that point been sufficient to justify the given institutions and differences. By understanding nature and empirical differences as contingent, Kant's focus on the pure forms of thinking and the notion that it is fundamentally up to us to promote progress broke with the idea that the given hierarchies already have a justification. For Kant, any defence of innate prerogatives forming a given hierarchy was in direct contradiction with the idea of right. We can see this in the 'Theory and Practice' essay from 1792 and the *Metaphysics of Morals* from 1797, where the civil condition is embodied in the ideas of freedom, equality, and independence – close to the banner headlines of the French Revolution – with its aim of endowing everyone with equal rights.

The left-Kantians' outlook can be understood as a continuation of the spirit of the radical critique of the French Revolution. The idea that no one holds innate prerogatives – and that all are to be endowed with equal rights – was undoubtedly a very powerful one for rejecting and replacing feudal privileges. However, first-wave left-Kantians believed that the focus simply on individual rights was insufficient to account for the injustices that were structurally produced by markets within capitalism. From the standpoint of a later generation, they thought that the social differences produced by the economic mode of production were materialised in legal differences – for instance, in the limited suffrage granted to men. But what was needed further was to understand the mechanisms that placed individuals at a disadvantaged position in society. With this in mind, they not only found inspiration in Kant, who had carefully set out the limits of reason, but also in Karl Marx, who explained in plain language the oppressive logic of the underlying mechanisms of capitalism. To avoid such structural forms of oppression, the left-Kantians favoured a more democratic organisation of the rule of law, the state, and the dissemination of science in order to be equally free.

It is interesting to study first-wave 'left-Kantianism' and its aftermath in its own right, but it also has the potential for positive intervention with issues of contemporary political theory. As earlier mentioned, in the post-Rawlsian era and its aftermath, Kant served primarily as an intellectual forerunner for contractual, proceduralist, and non-domination accounts of justice. While fruitful, such accounts typically focus on rights independent of the underlying social structures within which people and institutions operate. More recent studies have, however, brought to our attention that the ever-increasing concentration of wealth in mature capitalism is often linked to authoritarianism, nationalism, and varieties of scapegoat politics, suggesting that the economic structure cannot be easily cast to one side. The partial recovery of the first-wave left-Kantian tradition is meant not only to provide a more complete picture but to encourage contemporary theorists to think these problems through in novel ways. In tracing their ideas not only in the classic neo-Kantians but also in thinkers of the twentieth century that took their cues from that tradition, it demonstrates the possibilities and limits both in their original context and in our own time.

The paper on Richard Price sets the scene: Huw Williams' article opens the issue by drawing Kant into dialogue with arguably his closest cognate thinker in the eighteenth-century Anglophone world: the Welsh dissenter Richard Price. Williams argues that Price – widely admired in his lifetime as the 'Apostle of Liberty' before

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fading to the margins of intellectual history, in no small part as a consequence of Burke's rebuke in *Reflections on the Revolution in France* – should be recognised both as a philosopher whose thought bore a striking resemblance to Kant's and as a precursor to the socialist thinking that would emerge in the early nineteenth century. The article advances two principal claims with respect to Left-Kantianism: first, that Price's anti-capitalist political economy and proto-socialist political theory, built upon a moral theory Kantian in essence, makes broadly construed Left-Kantianism more plausible; second, that the distinctive innovations in his political economy may extend the parameters of Left-Kantianism and the attendant discussion of Kant's own political economy.

Williams begins with biographical context, situating Price as a left-Kantian philosopher drawn from the periphery: born in 1723 in the village of Llangeinor in South Wales, raised in a Welsh Dissenting family of Puritan roots, and educated in nonconformist academies before moving to London at the age of seventeen. This periphery informs the radical politics that would later characterise his work. Williams then turns to Price's ethics, drawing on Korsgaard's account to present him as a moral realist and rationalist who stood in opposition to the moral sentimentalism of Hume and Hutcheson. For Price, right and wrong are first-order truths intuited through the understanding rather than derivatives of sense and reflection, and the moral law is autonomous from both our sentiments and from God's will. His firm defence of free will against Joseph Priestley's necessitarianism, and his insistence that virtue lies in rectitude rather than benevolence, place him strikingly close to the autonomy of the will that Kant would later articulate in his own moral philosophy.

This ethical framework underwrites a republican political philosophy emphasising self-government, non-domination, popular sovereignty, civic virtue, and patriotism ruled by reason. Drawing on Ameriks, Williams catalogues a series of points on which Price both prefigures and mirrors Kantian positions: the separation of church and state, the separation of powers, political authority as deriving from the will of the people, expansion of the franchise to those with independent means, a presumption in favour of direct democracy, and a rejection of political realism in favour of a peaceful international federation grounded in moral cosmopolitanism. Where the two thinkers most clearly diverge, however, is in tone: Price's millenarian Christian zeal animates a far more excitable and optimistic political consciousness, exemplified by his 1789 *Discourse on the Love of Our Country*, which welcomed the French Revolution as a harbinger of an imminent Second Coming. Kant's assessment of the era was, by comparison, definitively more cautious, backing away from anything stronger than a not-ruled-out possibility of significant political improvement in the distant future. The aim was very much the same as Price's aim: a republican form of government.

The decisive case for Price's left credentials, however, rests on his nascent political economy, and here Huw Williams draws on three layers of analysis. Marx's brief but revealing references locate Price as a defender of the working class against the interests of capital, particularly in his commentary on enclosure and its impact on rural depopulation, falling agricultural wages, and the forced migration of dispossessed labourers into urban manufacture. Williams then turns to Nicole Whalen's recent work, which positions Price as an adversary of Adam Smith and a defender of agrarian republicanism. Where Smith treats the ability to alienate one's labour as sufficient for independence, Price regards wage labour itself as a form of

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servitude – a position that requires economic self-sufficiency as the precondition of political freedom and that justifies the equalisation of property ownership. By Whalen's lights, Kant sits closer to Smith on this issue, and his contractual view of employment exhibits a blindness to the structural forms of coercion that put workers and employers on unequal footing.

Williams completes the picture by drawing on Rachel Friedman's work on Price's actuarial endeavours. Far from being a peripheral curiosity in his oeuvre, Price's work on insurance and annuities was, on Friedman's account, integral to his attempt to provide a form of 'mobile' property: a means by which the depropertied worker, dispossessed by enclosure, might secure the independence on which republican freedom depends. Through this practical innovation, Price helped lay the foundations of what would become the modern welfare state, in a spirit of mutualism and collective autonomy that would feed into the early cooperativism of figures like Robert Owen. Williams concludes by reflecting on the contrasts between the two thinkers – Price's nonconformist intellectual hinterland, his polymathic and activist disposition, and his immersion in the heart of the industrial revolution all helped push him in a more radical direction than Kant – and ends on a deliberately provocative note: that Price may have been a more thoroughgoing Left-Kantian than Kant himself.

Howard Williams' article, 'The Kantian Critique of Marx's Property Theory', argues that Kant's theory of property, outlined in the *Doctrine of Right*, offers a stronger ethical and normative foundation for critiquing capitalist property relations than Marx's historical materialist framework – and that the two thinkers are more complementary than is commonly recognised.

Williams begins by acknowledging Kant's political limitations. Despite his progressive leanings, Kant excluded wage workers and women from voting rights, believing economic dependency would corrupt their political judgement. Nonetheless, Williams contends that Kant's property theory contains genuinely left-wing implications that can enrich socialist thought. Marx's account of property is surveyed first. Drawing on the *Communist Manifesto* and *Capital*, Marx traces how capitalist private property emerged through primitive accumulation. This was a brutal process of dispossession that stripped direct producers of their tools and land. For a brief historical moment, small peasants and artisans genuinely owned their means of production, which Marx considered capitalism's ethical high point. But competitive pressures inevitably concentrated ownership into fewer hands, alienating the majority from the fruits of their labour. Marx predicted that this internal contradiction would ultimately cause capitalism to collapse and give way to socialised production.

However, Williams identifies significant normative gaps in Marx's analysis. Marx grounds his critique in historical and economic logic rather than explicit moral argument, assuming that history follows a rational, progressive course and that class conflict will organically produce socialist outcomes. This optimism, Williams suggests, is both unproven and politically inadequate, attested by two centuries of failed or distorted socialist experiments. This is where Kant becomes valuable. Unlike Marx, Kant approaches property through a metaphysical lens, distinguishing between *phenomenal* possession (physical control of an object) and *intelligible* or *noumenal* possession (ownership grounded in rational mutual recognition). For Kant, property

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rights cannot be established unilaterally. They require *omnilateral* agreement, meaning the consent of all members of a civil society under law. No individual can legitimately claim ownership without the tacit endorsement of the wider community, since the very conditions that make my ownership possible are the same conditions that make everyone else's ownership possible.

This omnilateral foundation has radical implications. It means large-scale capital accumulation – which grants a tiny minority disproportionate social power – must be publicly justified and held accountable to what Kant calls the united general will. Kant also invokes the idea of humanity's *original common possession* of the earth's surface, arguing that any individual acquisition only becomes legitimate in relation to a broader civil and eventually cosmopolitan community of right.

Howard Williams concludes that Kant's framework supplies what Marx lacks: a principled, non-revolutionary path to regulating and reforming capitalist economic relations. Rather than waiting for capitalism to collapse under its own contradictions, Kant's theory insists that property is always already embedded in social obligations, making gradual, law-based reform not just possible but philosophically necessary. Together, Marx's sociological insight and Kant's normative rigour offer a more complete basis for socialist thought than either provides alone.

Garrath Williams' paper engages with Hermann Cohen's neo-Kantian critique of capitalism and argues that, while his ethical instincts are sound, his account lacks grounding in the legal structures that actually constitute capitalist exploitation. A more rigorous application of Kantian principles – especially from the *Doctrine of Right* – can supply what Cohen's critique lacks. Cohen's starting point is Kant's principle that persons must be treated as ends-in-themselves and never merely as means. He applies this to capitalism by arguing that ownership of the means of production enables factory owners to reduce workers to mere instruments. He recognises that money, contract, and law are implicated but fails to explain how. His critique remains at the level of moral denunciation rather than structural analysis, relying on a broadly Marxist account of capital and offering only vague gestures toward juridical personhood as an alternative social ideal. Rather than abandoning Kant's *Doctrine of Right*, Garrath Williams proposes returning to it. Kant's insistence that legal right is essentially coercive is not a weakness but an insight: the authority to coerce is built into legal form itself, and this formal structure is open to critique when it systematically undermines equal freedom.

This materialism-within-formalism is exactly the tool needed to analyse capitalism, and Williams dives deeper into three concepts: money, employment, and capital. According to Williams, Cohen notes that law makes money possible but explains no further. Kant links money to the state's power to tax, prefiguring modern state theories of money: citizens must hold money to discharge tax obligations, which means the wealthy possess a legally grounded power to deploy others' labour. Money is not a neutral medium of exchange but a coercive instrument backed by sovereign power. Williams moreover argues that the legal structure of employment is itself the source of domination, not merely unequal ownership. Employment contracts impose legally enforceable duties of loyalty and obedience beyond any written terms. This resembles Kant's 'rights to a person akin to rights to a thing': employers gain ongoing authority over workers' active powers, not merely specific services. Workers cannot meaningfully consent in advance to what employers subsequently decide, that is, a

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structural, not merely material, form of unfreedom. Finally, the real legal protagonist of capitalism is the business corporation. Law grants corporations full legal personhood – rights to own property, make contracts, and employ people – making capital a collective legal actor rather than merely assets in individual hands. Shareholders press for financial returns while workers, despite being the corporation's actual agents, have no governance rights. The result is an *Ausbeutungsgemeinschaft* – an 'exploitation community' of directors and shareholders – that uses workers as means to profit.

According to Garrath Williams, injustice is legally constituted: Law creates capital by granting corporations personhood, structures employment to ensure workers' subordination, and underpins the coercive force of money. It is law, not capital, that dissolves the distinction between person and thing. Kantian principles, applied to legal form rather than abandoned for vague ethical aspirations, provide both a diagnosis of capitalism's injustice and a standard for demanding its reform.

Andrew Vincent focuses in his article on Ernst Cassirer and warns not to misread the 'echo' of Cohen's left-Kantianism that Widmer has identified in Cassirer's work (Widmer 2023) as Cassirer actually defending socialism. Through Vincent, we learn that Cassirer made his name with works in the history of philosophy. One of his most outstanding achievements was his three-volume study of epistemology, or rather the history of the subject, from Descartes to Hegel. His focus was almost exclusively academic in his studies. He was bent on establishing himself as a leading philosophical figure in the early twentieth century in the German-speaking world. He was quite successful in this, and the arrival of a fascist party at the centre of German politics considerably destabilised this goal and also the academic environment where it was sensible to pursue it.

The issue of whether or not Ernst Cassirer was a left-Kantian, which is pursued closely by Andrew Vincent in his article, arises from the extreme academicism that characterises Cassirer's career. In the 1920s, when German politics was, in the wake of the First World War, destabilised, Cassirer was thoroughly preoccupied by the task of completing his three-volume study of symbolic forms. This was a comprehensive appreciation of the role of myth, language, and science in the structures of human knowledge. Cassirer attempted to extend and modify Kant's critical philosophy with a vision of the creation of our experience of the world which draws upon our sensibility and imagination. It is not surprising in view of the time devoted to this major enterprise that the philosopher put pen to paper only infrequently in dealing with political issues. And as Vincent shows, even in the more political writings, the philosopher seeks to follow as narrow an academic path as possible. The philosopher's instinct is to keep apart philosophical reflection and political action. Although by the late 1920s, the very nature of his position as Rector of the University of Hamburg placed him in a position where he unavoidably had to address political questions, he was quite averse to taking any clear stand on the politics of his day. We have to work out what his political position might be from the implications of the understanding of his role as director and philosopher in a public office provided in his lectures. Even in his vulnerability as a Jewish scholar, he nonetheless stood for a progressive political position in the Weimar period.

Elisabeth Widmer's article examines how the Austro-Marxist philosopher Max Adler (1873–1937) reinterprets Marx's account of history through the lens of neo-

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Kantian philosophy, arguing that Adler's approach both anticipated later critiques of orthodox Marxism and offered a more robust framework for ideology critique. Orthodox Marxism rests on what is called the 'development thesis', that is, the idea that history is fundamentally driven by the growth of productive forces, with social structures rising and falling according to how well they enable or hinder that growth. Widmer uses G. A. Cohen's influential defence of this thesis as a foil, since Cohen argues that historical events can be explained by time-insensitive, law-like regularities grounded in material economic conditions.

Drawing on Hermann Cohen's 'experiential' neo-Kantianism, Adler challenges the idea that historical necessity derives merely from objective economic laws. Instead, he argues that the 'necessity' underpinning critical judgements is practical and moral in nature, which is rooted in what we determine history *ought* to look like from the standpoint of reason. For Adler, the communist state is not a historical inevitability but a 'hypothesis': a rational ideal representing the conditions under which a genuinely equitable society becomes possible. Adler proposes a two-step methodology. First, we gather empirical, and so inductive, knowledge about the social conditions producing inequality. Second, we test those conditions against the conditions implied by the 'omnilateral will', a Kantian formal principle requiring that laws reflect the equal interests of all citizens. Progress, on this account, occurs when people are motivated by the moral contradictions they discover through sociological study to transform exploitative structures. Widmer illustrates the contrast between the two approaches using Marx's analysis of the Irish famine. Cohen's framework explains the famine as a structural consequence of capitalism's tendency to prioritise capital growth over human welfare, that is, a law-governed outcome. Adler's approach, by contrast, begins with empirical evidence that redistribution was possible, then shifts to the moral question of whether it *should* have occurred, grounding the critique in practical rationality rather than historical determinism.

A central worry about Kantian ethics is that its formalism cannot adequately address ideology – these are false beliefs that legitimise exploitation. Widmer argues that Adler's experiential neo-Kantianism meets this challenge. By insisting that rational concepts are historically and linguistically embedded, Adler acknowledges that ideals can become outdated and must continuously be revised through empirical investigation. Furthermore, he identifies an 'ideology-emancipating' moment when individuals gain sociological insight into their structural exploitation, transforming them from passive subjects into active agents of historical change. Widmer also contends that Adler's approach avoids the 'totalising' problem that afflicts historical materialism, that is, the circularity of critiquing history from a perspective that itself claims to transcend historical conditions. Adler's reinvention of Marx replaces deterministic economic laws with a practical, morally grounded teleology, offering a framework for social critique that is both empirically sensitive and more resistant to ideological distortion.

Katharina Kinzel's article draws attention to the multifaceted nature of Lukács' approach to philosophy. Although Lukács is primarily known for his novel contributions to Marxist thought, he demonstrates in his 1923 book *History and Class Consciousness* a deep knowledge of Kantian ideas as well as some profound insights into the philosophy of Hegel, which reflects his background as a student of neo-Kantian philosophy who sought to adapt the ideas of the school to the study of

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aesthetics and literary criticism. He accepts Marx's understanding of capitalism and demonstrates an attachment to socialist revolutionary politics; nonetheless, he proves extremely capable in the deployment of Kant's ideas in seeking to explain contemporary society and also to demonstrate the potential for future change.

In a Marxian fashion, Lukács' *History and Class Consciousness* is throughout practice-oriented. He rejects a model of philosophy where the pursuit of a contemplative truth is the highest goal; rather, the preferred role for philosophy is as part of an active programme to change society and the economy for human benefit. This active programme is governed by the aim of emancipating the working class. This aim has to be realised by the working class itself, which he expects to become the predominant class in society. One of Kinzel's main aims is to show that Lukács' ambitious concept of history and the role of the working class within it may blind him to the contingencies of concrete historical circumstances. In a Hegelian fashion, he ascribes to the working class a world-historic role that members of that class have rarely been able to identify with. If social practice must become the main goal of philosophical endeavour, then it becomes clear that the agents of that change have to be better identified and theoretically informed than the revolutionary working class which Lukács puts forward. As Kinzel neatly puts it: 'the Hegelian language that enters his characterisation of the relation between theory and practice, and the becoming self-conscious of the proletariat, ends up obscuring Lukács' insights into the disunified and contingent character of political practice'.

The issue closes with a deliberate departure: where the preceding contributions reconstruct the left-Kantian tradition, Fabian Freyenhagen's article turns the tradition's critical impulse on Kant himself. It shifts attention from the content of texts about enlightenment to the writerly stance their authors adopt, that is, the position the author implicitly occupies in relation to the reader. Freyenhagen poses the question of how, if at all, a text can contribute to the enlightenment of its readers, and specifically how it might foster the development and exercise of their ability to think for themselves. He pursues this question through a contrast between Kant's 'Answer to the Question: "What is Enlightenment?"' (1784) and the opening parts of Horkheimer and Adorno's Dialectic of Enlightenment (1944/47), arguing that the conventional verdicts on these two texts ought to be inverted. It is Kant, normally celebrated as a liberal philosopher, whose writerly stance harbours an implicit epistemic authoritarianism, while Adorno and Horkheimer, often dismissed as preaching from a self-appointed pulpit, in fact exemplify a self-therapeutic stance more genuinely conducive to enlightenment.

Freyenhagen begins with Kant. To produce a text aimed at enlightening 'the great masses', Kant must implicitly count himself among the few who have already extricated themselves from immaturity – a stance through which he installs himself as a new and better guardian rather than abolishing guardianship as such. This is the very point that Johann Georg Hamann, in his December 1784 letter to Christian Jacob Kraus, registered with unusual sensitivity, accusing Kant of belonging to 'the class of guardians' and noting how the 'Kantian style' reproduces the social hierarchies it claims to disrupt. Freyenhagen draws on Hamann to show that Kant's text excludes women and the masses from the agents of enlightenment, requires them as passive recipients of the message of the enlightened few, and so exemplifies the bourgeois

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figure of thought, identified later by Marx, Lukács, and Adorno, of taking back one's radicalism in the same breath in which it is first expressed.

Turning to Dialectic of Enlightenment, Freyenhagen offers a non-standard reading aimed at dislodging the Habermasian interpretation that has dominated its reception. Habermas's well-known charge of 'performative contradiction' rests, Freyenhagen argues, on a tacit injunction to ignore the rhetorical form of the text and concentrate on its propositional content. But this misses what the text is actually doing. Far from being a literally meant negative philosophy of history of the fall, the opening essay (and first excursus) deploys what Freyenhagen calls a 'guard-lowering ruse': the text initially appears to meet the modern self-conception on its own ground, only to subvert and deconstruct that self-conception once the reader's defences have been lowered. Aporia, performative contradiction, and enigmatic formulations such as 'only exaggeration is true' are therefore not lapses in argumentative rigour but the mechanism through which critical capacities are fostered. The text functions as a kind of immunisation: rather than presupposing critical capacities in its readers, it seeks to develop them by stimulating the very defence mechanisms – notably rationalisation – that ordinarily protect a self-congratulatory self-conception from challenge.

Crucially, Freyenhagen argues that the writerly stance behind this strategy is first and foremost self-therapeutic. The ruse is one that Horkheimer and Adorno played, before anything else, on themselves: a genealogical working through aimed at extricating themselves from the Hegelian philosophy of history to which they had previously subscribed. This reframing dissolves the charge of authoritarianism, since the authors are not preaching from a vantage point of already-attained enlightenment but performing an enlightening process on themselves, with whatever exemplary value this might also have for others. Drawing on Foucault's distinction between 'demonstration books' and 'experience books', Freyenhagen suggests that genuine enlightenment is, by its nature, autodidactic: the only writing that captures the spirit of enlightenment is performative and exemplifying, oriented foremost at self-enlightening rather than at converting an unenlightened audience.

The article concludes with a close reading of Kant's text that traces three internal tensions: between maturity as a persistent result and as an ongoing process; between immaturity as self-incurred and as other-incurred; and between enlightenment achieved alone and enlightenment received through others. This culminates in what Freyenhagen calls the 'Enlightenment paradox': one must apparently already be mature to become mature, yet cannot be made mature through the direction of others. Rather than resolving these tensions in either direction in the book, Freyenhagen suggests that we learn more from preserving them, since they point precisely toward the path Horkheimer and Adorno would later take. In this way, the contrast between the two texts is not imposed from the outside but emerges from threads Kant himself half-pulled and, for the rhetorical purposes of his own intervention, suppressed.

The journey from Price onward shows Kant's critical resources being turned, step by step, on the social structures he left unexamined until, in this final contribution, they are turned on Kant himself. If an overarching theme emerges from these contributions, it is this: because our thinking is constituted by shared concepts that organise the social and economic world, the critique of reason cannot stop at the

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forms of cognition but must become a critique of society – and a critique of society, pursued in Kant's spirit, cannot exempt Kant himself. Left-Kantianism, so understood, is not a settled doctrine but an ongoing practice of situated critique, one that must remain willing to include its own founding texts.

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