Book Symposium

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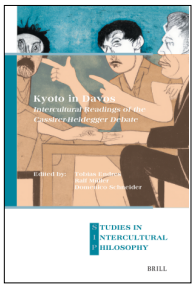

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Bringing Historical Materialism to Davos (and Kyoto)

Philosophy as the open and reasoned reflection of fundamental questions of human concern comes with two challenges:

First, the challenge to question the apparently "given," the *doxa* one inevitably brings to the table by way of being, in the words of Heidegger, "thrown into the world"—a being endowed with some degree of spontaneity, but one that finds itself in a position that is to a large part determined by conditions beyond its control.

Second, the challenge to pursue that questioning and reflection in the spirit of a common search for "truth," a search that unites one with all other beings willing and capable to reflect on the issues in question. This spirit of a common search translates into an open scrutiny of "reasons" that are explicable and understandable to those deciding they want to be part of that endeavor.

The convenors of the Davos debate certainly understood philosophy in this spirit. For various reasons, their response to these two challenges was, however, limited in two regards: They operated from within the colonialist-imperialist paradigm by conceiving of philosophy as a more or less exclusively "Western" tradition—a *contradictio in adiecto* which the convenors of *Kyoto in Davos* admirably sought to redress by highlighting the Kyoto School as a possible group of peers who could have joined the debate. Bringing Kyoto into the Davos debate certainly can serve to wedge a first fissure in the walls of Eurocentric discourse. Nevertheless, one has to be aware that the Kyoto School is only one of the traditions of modern Japanese philosophy, and that it aligned itself with the Japanese imperialism of the time when push came to shove. With *Kyoto in Davos*, we are therefore still within the framework of discourses that justify political hegemony with cultural superiority—and as much as I would love to exempt Ernst Cassirer, in 1929 still a future exile, from this verdict, in all honesty, I can't.

The second limitation of Davos was that it did not seriously engage with the one heir to the philosophical tradition that is committed to include all living beings capable of questioning their existence into its purview—and

not only those admitted to "good society" by "being thrown" into a position of privilege by birth, education, luck, and a certain degree of wealth resulting from each. That heir is historical materialism, which is not, despite its association with Marx first and Engels second, a uniquely "Western" tradition—as Saigusa Hiroto 三枝博音 (1892–1963) could have told participants in Davos, had anyone cared to invite him.[1]

Students and younger scholars at Davos, Alfred Sohn-Rethel and Herbert Marcuse notably among them, therefore were onto something when they created a workshop on the subject of "Marxism." They were, however, not in a position to extend invitations. Otherwise, they could have invited Karl Korsch, at the time *sinecure* Professor of Law in Jena until he was forced into retirement by the Nazis with the help of their legal and academic experts in 1933. On that note, let us remember that Heidegger personally intervened in favor of relegating the philosopher Richard Hönigswald from his chair of philosophy in Munich on the grounds that Hönigswald's cosmopolitan ideas posed a danger to the new German spirit of 1933.[2] So much for open dialogue on this end.

Korsch, who had been a member of the Communist Party until his exclusion for diverging from Stalin's party line in 1926, wrote a number of articles and a book on the topic of Marxism and Philosophy in the 1920s.[3] He argued against the conviction that philosophy had no place in "scientific socialism" and the underlying naturalist-mechanistic materialism that was endemic in the party and strongly informed the theoretical writings—if you want to call them that—of Stalin.

I will base myself partly on Korsch's writings in introducing the basic propositions and insights of historical materialism as well as some of its problems. I shall then very briefly propose some avenues to follow if one wanted to envision a "Kyoto in Davos" debate that included contemporary historical materialists beyond the somewhat wavering Miki Kiyoshi.[4] My chief concern, however, is how the ideas of those present in Kyoto and

1. Cf. his "Japanese Materialists" (*Nihon no yuibutsu ron sha*) in SAIGUSA 1972.

2. Cf. VAHLAND 1995. Further information on Heidegger's activities in the "arianization" of German academic philosophy will be available in a forthcoming monograph by Adam Knowles, *Creative Radicalism: Martin Heidegger and the Administration of Fascism*.

3. KORSCH 1966, 2012.

4. Cf. WIRTZ, 2024.

Davos could be improved by taking insights from historical materialism into account. For reasons of space, and because I regard his ideas to have the greatest potential for further development, my main focus will be on Cassirer. I will demonstrate how Cassirer's turn to the symbol as the essential medium of ideas—whether aesthetic, theoretical, or practical—in its consequences lends itself to, even calls for, a historical materialist development that moves it beyond the "impasse" noted by Steven Lofts in his contribution to *Kyoto in Davos*.[5]

Historical Materialism

Historical materialism starts from an observation that is, curiously, also essential to Cassirer's first systematic theoretical study, *Substance and Function,*[6] and which may be summarized as follows: "ideas" are not given, neither by the gods nor by nature. They are the reified products of "ideations," that is, activities involving discernment, reflection, and, as Cassirer will later emphasize, articulation by way of symbols. Symbols, again, are sensible objects produced by human activity to convey meaning. Cassirer takes this observation as the basis for a critical exploration of metaphysical ideas and their basis in a specific mode of conceptualization.

Marx and Engels, if, for the time being, we stick to the authors who invented the concept of "historical materialism," mainly were interested in the consequences of this observation for the study of human society and its history. Their transcendental argument was that the activity that produces ideas is, in the final analysis, the activity of a living being, a living being that must sustain itself by commerce with its environment, by a give and take of "stuff." Therefore, ideas are dependent on that *commercium,* that taking and sharing of "stuff."[7]

From this derives the thesis that the material "basis"—the processes concerned with acquiring, molding, and distributing the "stuff" necessary to support survival and enable the articulation and realization of ideas of whatever kind—is the prime mover behind developments in the realm of ideas,

5. Endres, Müller, Schneider 2024, 414.
6. Cassirer 1990; Cassirer 1956.
7. Goerdt & Dahm 1980.

which form a secondary and dependent layer, the so-called "superstructure." As Korsch put it:

> Historical materialism identifies the process of 'material production', the economical process by which human beings continuously reproduce their means of survival and thereby, their life with everything it entails, as the primary link between natural and social evolution. In comparison to this most important 'reality' in social life, all other events and elements of the historical, social, and practical process of life in its broadest sense, including its 'mental' and 'spiritual' side may be no less 'real,' but they are less potent and efficacious elements in the overall development of the whole; they are, to use Marx's simile, only the superstructure in the architecture of social life, while the specific economical structure of a society constitutes its fundament.[8]

This paradigm of basis and superstructure was reified in vulgar Marxism in the form of the so-called Widerspiegelungstheorie or "theory of reflection," which basically assumed that religious, philosophical, legal, or aesthetic ideas are somewhat blurred and refracted mirror images of what happens at the "basis." Korsch insisted that things are not that simple, since ideas—technical, legal, aesthetic, even religious—inform the process of production in many ways: historical materialism is therefore not naturalism, which continues the simple opposition of matter and ideas. Historical materialism accounts for the historical, social, practical life process of human beings. In the formulation of Marx and Engels, human beings distinguish themselves from other living beings when they start to rely on socially producing their own means of survival.[9] This social production of the means of survival introduces a layer of mediation by tools, symbols, and ideas that on the one hand expands the room for discretion; on the other hand, it ties individual human beings to the society that, ideally, sustains them in their life process. Not only their survival, but also all other aspects of their life depend to a great extent on the position they are accorded in society in relation to the means of production—or, in Marx's terms, their class affiliation.

8. Korsch 1966, 157, my translation.

9. "Men can be distinguished from animals by consciousness, by religion or anything else you like. They themselves begin to distinguish themselves from animals as soon as they begin to produce their means of subsistence, a step which is conditioned by their physical organisation. By producing their means of subsistence men are indirectly producing their actual material life." (Marx & Engels 1932; Marx & Engels 1978, 21.)

Looking at the realm of ideas from a historical materialist perspective therefore means firstly to understand that all ideas must be *historical* in the sense that they arise in a specific society and that they are conditioned by its relations of production and reproduction. Their transmission across time depends on the way they prove relevant to the life process of individuals and groups—to their "day to day activities", as Tosaka Jun later called it—and these individuals and groups must manage to survive long enough to pass the ideas in question on to others who find them sufficiently relevant to spend time, energy and resources on their acquisition, reproduction, and, possibly, further development. It is to be expected that the significance, and even meaning, of an idea will change in this process, in correlation to the development of the means and relations of production.

Marx and Engels in their early works went further and posited that developments in the realm of relations of production are the ultimate driver of history: they necessitate and entail changes in law, religion, aesthetics, and science. This became a dogma with later historical materialists, Korsch included. However, the Marx of *Capital* takes a far more nuanced approach when he describes, for example, the importance of legislation in driving peasants from their land and providing the surplus labor force that supported minimal wages in the early phase of English industrialization.[10]

What remains beyond or below problematic dogmas concerning supposed laws of history is, in essence, a tool of critique: historical materialism's insistence on tying ideas back to the human and social life processes of which they form a part, refuses to take ideas simply at their face value, to assume a purely internal "development of ideas" in a realm separate from society. Critically, historical materialism insists on asking how the ideal relates, on the ground, to the promise of the true and good that those whom Plato ironically called "friends of ideas" (*eidon philoi*)[11] like to associate with it.

One has to remember here that the historical materialism of Marx starts from the "categoric imperative to overthrow all relations in which man is a debased, enslaved, abandoned, despicable essence"[12]—an imperative that is, as Cornelius Castoriadis once argued, nothing other than the ethical side of

10. Marx 1962, 741–788.
11. Platon 1967, 248a–249d.
12. Marx 2005.

the project of philosophy itself.[13] Tying ideas back to relations of production is therefore both a theoretical, anti-metaphysical move and an essential tool to dispel the notorious *mauvaise foi* of "good society" and its philosophers—the false authority coming from association with eternal truths and higher beings, the facile and self-congratulatory identification of the "ought" with the "is," the oppressive judgmental moralism directed at those society deprives of access to the means of production and, to some extent, life.

Korsch in this regard emphasized the critique of religion and an "active atheism" as indispensable to historical materialism's program.[14] Put at once more generally and less dogmatically, one might say that historical materialism calls for the relentless critique of all appeals to timeless truths or reified, metaphysical forces—including, by the way, not only "god," "being," or "nothingness," but also "nature," "science," or "culture." And it asks us to inquire about the social meaning of these and other ideas and the functions they may perform in submitting human beings to exploitation and oppression.

With this in mind, it is easy to fathom historical materialist criticisms of the positions brought forth in Davos, or in Kyoto, for that matter. In fact, some of these criticisms have been spelled out, starting early on with Marcuse's assessment of Heidegger's "fake concreteness,"[15] the critiques of Nishida by Tosaka Jun, Hayashi Naomichi, or Makino Shūketsu,[16] Adorno's trenchant observations on Heidegger in "The Jargon of Authenticity,"[17] and the much more recent analyses of Elena Louisa Lange concerning the fetishism integral to Nishida's thought.[18] I shall not go into these criticisms here—they are published and available for everyone to read. I'll leave the task of a constructive response to those wanting to pursue philosophy along Nishida's and Heidegger's lines—who, by and large, have so far chosen to ignore them, to the detriment of their positions.

13. Castoriadis 1989, 10–11.

14. Korsch 1966, 161.

15. The term appears in an interview reprinted in Marcuse 2005, 168. The pertinent critique can be found already in Marcuse 1929, published in the year of the Davos conference.

16. Tosaka 1933; Hayashi 1948; Makino 1953.

17. Adorno & Tarnowski 1973; Adorno 2013.

18. Lange 2011.

Moving Beyond Cassirer's Idealism

Instead, I want to take a different approach and engage with Ernst Cassirer's ideas. I intend to show that the "impasse" that Cassirer had run into according to Steven Lofts, his inability to fully engage with the historicity of human existence and its cultural expressions, is not so much a problem of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* per se. As Gideon Freudenthal observed, the problem lies more in Cassirer's unwillingness to spell out in full the consequences of his fundamental idea that the symbol is the necessary medium of thought.[19] Cassirer may have felt intuitively that considering these consequences would force him to leave behind the bourgeois philosophical idealism that was his intellectual home ground and remained such until the end of his life. But there is also another factor involved—Cassirer's general reluctance to analyze the logical relations between the elementary functions of thought he posited, to venture into the territory of his mentor Hermann Cohen or his older colleague Paul Natorp.

In the introduction to the first volume of *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms,* a few pages are dedicated to the "deduction" of the idea that thought itself is "symbolic" in its innermost constitution. Unfortunately, as already indicated by the scare quotes Cassirer adds to the word "deduction,"[20] these pages go no further than presenting an analogy between the referential character of thought and that of symbols.

Thinking through the consequences of the idea that thought itself is symbolic would have brought Cassirer much closer to historical materialism than he was able and willing to consider. In other words, what I propose here is an "internal" critique and development of Cassirer that is inspired by historical materialism, but starts from Cassirer's own premises. This development will bring us closer to a philosophy that is both historically concrete and better aligned with the critical aim of overturning "all social relations in which human beings are oppressed, in fetters, desolate, despised." I can only present an incomplete sketch here, but even so, this will require that we begin with Cassirer's tentative and hesitant first step into a transcendental deduction of the symbolic. As I have mentioned earlier, Cassirer

19. Freudenthal 2004.
20. Cassirer 2021, 38.

chiefly points to the referential structure of thought. A thought—whether it is the simple "now it is night" that Hegel takes as his starting point in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* or, say, Heisenberg's indeterminacy theorem—is never isolated and self-contained: it relates to something, its "content"; more importantly to Cassirer, it relates to other thoughts—the "now" to the "then" and both to the "I"; the "night" to the "day;" "indeterminacy" to "determinacy," "wave functions" and "matter," and so on: each thought is part of a system of references that mutually co-determine each other.[21] We can call this aspect of thought its self-transcending aspect: the part of thought that moves constantly beyond itself, that drives the thinking mind into the endless process of moving from one thought to another, at once a source of its creativity and plasticity and the driver of its tendency toward "bad infinity," to use a Hegelian expression. There is, however, also another side to this self-transcendence, the side of concentration: precisely because thought can transcend its actuality, it is also able to re-connect with itself over time. Any attempt to grasp the indeterminacy theorem identifies it as the theorem proposed by Heisenberg. This ability of a thought to identify itself as the same on different occasions is what differentiates it from mere impressions. It is also, and yet again, something it has in common with a symbol—consider the word "thought," which, when understood, is identified as the same whether you encounter it in the previous line or hear it voiced in a talk. What is different between a thought and a word is that the thought is always also self-referential, it implies its own being thought.

This brings me to a final and decisive point: if a thought is a thought by way of being thought—that is, if it is constitutive for a thought to have actuality, to be a thought that someone thinks and identifies as their thought; and if, at the same time, it is constitutive for a thought to transcend its actuality, to be identifiable across various occasions of being thought, then the thought carries within itself the distinction between its factuality and its meaning. The instance of being thought, in other words, is at once an inalienable aspect of thought and different from it, insofar as the same thought can be had on different occasions. If we understand that which is identical in a thought across occasions as its "ideal" aspect, then it makes sense to address that which makes it a fact—someone is thinking it, or this

21. CASSIRER 2021, 28–30.

thought is occurring to someone, to avoid overloading thinking with spontaneity—as its "material" aspect—exactly in the sense that historical materialism speaks of the "material", the real, factual actions of people. In other words, thought carries in itself the distinction between the material and the ideal, as necessary aspects of itself. We can then understand the instance of thinking—an instance one may remember, e.g. having sat in a café or at a lake gazing over the water, as a symbol of the thought one tries to actualize once more by going back to that memory, much like Proust's famous madeleine provided the narrator of the *Recherche* access to the memories of his childhood. Thought itself is, thereby, symbolic. Conversely, the symbol is not an extraneous means that alienates thought from itself. It is its very medium. This is why thinking takes a great step forward through articulation in symbols.

The above implies that, while we may distinguish, in thought, the ideal from the material, we cannot separate both from each other. Reductive materialism is therefore nothing but a misguided idea. Korsch, by the way, emphatically stated as much, and in another, less Eurocentric and less bourgeois Davos, Cassirer, Korsch and Tosaka might have gone a long way to draw out the conclusions.

Conclusions

The consequences of this deduction of the symbolic are vast and I can only enumerate three of them in the space of this paper. To start from one aspect that Cassirer might have found easy to agree with: if the symbolic can never be fully divorced from its material actualization, what follows is that no symbolic form can ever appear in a "pure" articulation. First of all, each instantiation of a symbolic form works with symbols that are historically evolved: what we encounter is never the symbolic form as such, but always one of its historical formations, which are based on a repertoire of sign systems, conventional terms and syntactic rules that are historically contingent without therefore being arbitrary. These symbols connect with symbols and symbolic artifacts belonging to other symbolic forms present at the same time and place, partly by way of association, partly by way of integration: the classic texts of Japanese imperial mythology include calendar dates based on the calculations of medieval Chinese astronomy.

Such associations are, for the most part, not arbitrary, but they remain contingent. They do not issue from the internal logic of the symbolic form in question. To believe that, at any point in time, a symbolic form had fully come into its own, is to neglect the historical materiality inherent and necessary to all symbols.

This relates, secondly, to a consequence that is less comfortable to a professed idealist like Cassirer: The inseparable conjunction of the ideal and the material imparts an inextricable tension on each symbolic form, and this tension only increases with its degree of elaboration: Sophisticated art, science, religion, and technology place demands on material resources, most importantly, on human lifetime. There is, for this very reason, not only contention between the values intrinsic to each symbolic form, but also competition between them for resources. As a consequence, there is inevitably a conflict *within* the institutions dedicated to a symbolic form like art, science, or religion between the defining value of the respective symbolic form and the economic and political demands connected to the need to acquire the resources necessary for the production and maintenance of its artifacts. Think of a gothic cathedral, a dry landscape garden with its monumental stones, or a large hadron collider. To this add the support of institutions hosting these artifacts and the resources going into the education and sustenance of professionals creating and operating them.

The way these contentions and conflicts play out is intricately intertwined with the relations of production in place at the historical moment in question—and one cannot, therefore, ignore the possibility that the further development of a given symbolic form, however positive we think of its ideal connection to the freedom of the human spirit, may impact negatively on the freedom available to those living in the perimeter of its actualization.

This brings me to the third and final conclusion: Cassirer had a point when, in relation to the question of mortality, he posited the actualization, by the individual, of the ideal through participation in the cultural processing of symbolic forms as a means to overcome the anxiety associated with human finitude and the contingency of human life. This is a point historical materialists would do well to consider to better understand why the denial of cultural traditions or their simple "criticistic" reduction to tools of subjugation misses the mark and will only alienate them from those they primarily seek to address.

However, participation in time-transcending cultural endeavors does not dissolve, and not even sublate, the positionality of human existence—and this positionality is indeed primarily a social one, as long as humans secure their means of life by way of social collaboration. In addition, historical materialists rightly highlighted one's position in relation to the means of production as a decisive factor in this regard: it is not so much Heidegger's *Volksgemeinschaft* or Nishida's Eastern or Western spirit that determines how one finds oneself in the world, but where you find yourself placed in the fabric of channels of acquisition, production, distribution and consumption of the means to produce and reproduce what is needed to sustain human life. In this regard, and with all due respect to Stephen Lofts, who has remarked to the contrary,[22] I would argue that all those of us who need to sell their labor power, in whatever combination of the physical and mental, in order to get access to the means of life, as well as all those who depend on others who sell their labor power for such access, are, in fact, proletarians. We had better remember this, whatever our other labels of identification.

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22. Endres, Müller, Schneider 2024, 414.

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