

## MATTER OF FACT JOURNALISM AND THE *FAIT ACCOMPLI*

*Facts are simple and facts are straight  
Facts are lazy and facts are late  
Facts all come with points of-view  
Facts don't do what I want them to  
Facts just twist the truth around  
Facts are living turned inside out*

—Talking Heads  
“Cross-eyed and Painless”  
(from the album *Remain in Light*, 1980)

It has been said that we inhabit a “post-fact” era. Peter Pomerantsev, in his widely-circulated 2016 thinkpiece “Why We’re Post-Fact,” traces a curious inversion that has taken place over the last several years. Facts, once thought the guarantor of accurate and reliable knowledge, are today regarded with suspicion. Rather than pave the royal road to science, they now just seem to get in the way of what is truly essential. Earl Landgrebe’s infamous Watergate gaffe somehow appears less ridiculous in retrospect: “My mind is already made up; don’t confuse me with the facts.”

The sheer abundance of raw data is less a source of clarity than confusion. Anyone who wants to keep abreast of new developments must sift through countless figures and detailed accounts. Overwhelmed by the flow of information, fatigue begins to set in. When politicians like Trump or Putin play fast and loose with the facts, or sometimes invent them at a whim, Pomerantsev argues that they “aren’t so much lying as saying the truth doesn’t matter.” He explains how, contrary to optimistic forecasts, digital media merely compound the problem by rendering reports immediately accessible. “Instead of ushering a new era of truth-telling,” Pomerantsev observes, “the information age allows lies to spread in what techies call ‘digital wildfires.’ By the time fact-checkers catch a lie, thousands more have been created. Unreality becomes unstoppable.”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Peter Pomerantsev. “Why We’re Post-Fact.” *Granta*. (July 20, 2016). <https://granta.com/why-were-post-fact/>

Kellyanne Conway, Trump's erstwhile campaign manager, christened these inflammatory untruths "alternative facts" (an innocuous title, given their epistemological murkiness). Some were taken aback by her brazen relativism, which appeared to place reputable news outlets on equal footing with the yellow press, while others accused her of euphemizing falsehoods. Despite the rapid proliferation of fact-checking services over the last decade, the process of verifying claims is unable to keep pace with off-the-cuff remarks and current events, both of which require real-time updates. Yet no one seems to care if something is later found to be false, so long as it confirms prior biases.

Neoconservatives like Francis Fukuyama lament this state of affairs. He longs for a return to the rule of experts, a time when certain facts could be trusted. "One of the most striking developments of 2016 and its highly unusual politics," Fukuyama reflected in a January 2017 article published by *Project Syndicate*, "was the emergence of a 'post-fact' world in which virtually all authoritative sources were called into question and challenged by opposing facts of dubious quality and provenance." Recalling the initial enthusiasm that surrounded the online medium, he continued:

The advent of the internet and the world wide web in the 1990s was greeted as a moment of liberation and a boon for democracy worldwide. Information constitutes a form of power, and to the extent it was becoming cheaper and more available, democratic publics would be able to participate in domains from which they had been hitherto excluded. Already by the early 2000s, social media appeared to accelerate this trend, permitting the mass mobilization that fueled various "color revolutions" around the world (from Ukraine to Burma to Egypt). Peer-to-peer communication meant that the old gatekeepers of information, largely seen to be oppressive authoritarian states, could now be bypassed.<sup>2</sup>

But the dream turned into a nightmare, since in the fabled marketplace of ideas "there is no reason to believe good information will triumph over bad." Without a filter to separate fact from fiction, readers are bombarded from every angle with sensational headlines. Fukuyama suggests that "gatekeepers" are needed in order to ensure the truth, a sort of *Pravda* for the postcommunist era. Liberal democracy cannot tolerate such an unregulated free-for-all, and thus controls must be put in place.

"Just the facts, ma'am," Jack Webb used to say on the TV series *Dragnet*. Scandalized by the spread of right-wing populism, with its open disdain for journalistic standards, liberals feel this strict insistence might restore credibility to politics. Unlike liberals, however, Marxists do not regard reality as a *factum brutum*

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<sup>2</sup> Francis Fukuyama. "The Emergence of a Post-Fact World." *Project Syndicate*. (January 12, 2017). <https://www.project-syndicate.org/onpoint/the-emergence-of-a-post-fact-world-by-francis-fukuyama-2017-01>

impervious to human intervention. Obviously facts are important, and cannot be wished away, but neither do they exhaust the range of possibility. Given conditions may be altered, fast-frozen relations undone. Against those who hold that facts are everything, the historical materialist recognizes in the present a motive force which exceeds them. Meanwhile, against those for whom facts count as nothing, the inertia of that same present is entered as evidence.

### **Factuality, totality, and dialectic**

Lenin liked to quote the English saying, “Facts are stubborn things.” The phrase occurs more than a dozen times in his collected works, usually as a reprimand to adversaries. “Economists write mountains of books in which they declare in chorus, ‘Marxism is refuted’,” he observed in *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. “But facts are stubborn things, as the proverb goes, and they have to be reckoned with [*schibat’sia*], whether we like it or not.”<sup>3</sup> For him, hard facts demanded careful consideration.

Nevertheless, it by no means follows that he prostrated himself before the facts. Indeed, Lenin was keenly aware of the misleading ways information could be presented. Preparing a pamphlet on “Statistics and Sociology” in January 1917, he once again drew attention to the intransigence of the status quo, but immediately posed a pair of methodological questions: “How to gather the facts? And how do we then establish their interdependence?” Lenin saw a distinct danger when it came to the presentation of social facts – i.e., as opposed to facts of nature:

The most widely used (and most fallacious) method in the realm of social phenomena is to tear out individual minor facts and juggle with examples. Selecting chance examples presents no difficulty at all, but is of no value, or is of purely negative value, for in each individual case everything hinges on the historically concrete situation. Facts, if we take them in their *totality* [*tselom*], in their *interconnection* [*sviazi*], are not only stubborn things, but undoubtedly proof-bearing things. Minor facts, if taken out of their totality, out of their interconnection, if they are arbitrarily selected and torn out of context, are merely things for juggling with, or worse. We must seek to build a reliable foundation of precise and indisputable facts that can be set against any of the general or “example-based” arguments, now so grossly misused in certain countries. And if it is to be a real foundation, we must take not individual facts, but the *sum-total* [*vsiiu sovokupnost’*] of facts, without a *single* exception, relating to the question at hand. Otherwise there will be the inevitable, fully justified suspicion that the facts were selected or compiled arbitrarily, that instead of historical phenomena being presented in their objective inter-

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<sup>3</sup> Vladimir Lenin. *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism*. Translated by Yuri Sdobnikov. Collected Works, Volume 22: December 1915-July 1916. (Progress Publishers. Moscow, USSR: 1964). Pg. 200.

connection and interdependence and treated as a whole, they are merely a “subjective” concoction to justify what might prove to be a dirty business.<sup>4</sup>

By themselves, facts are meaningless. Rather, they only acquire meaning in and through their social context. Leon Trotsky, Lenin’s comrade-in-arms, made this same point four years later in a speech at the Third Congress of the Comintern. “Facts as such, separate and apart from historical tendencies, are of no great significance,” declared Trotsky.<sup>5</sup> Social facts, unlike facts of nature, are historically variable. They depend on a host of circumstances, which cannot be replicated in a laboratory setting or used to predict outcomes. (Eventually sociologists of the Frankfurt School would render this contrast explicit in the *Positivismusstreit* of the sixties, but it was already implicit in the twenties).<sup>6</sup>

Unbeknownst to either Lenin or Trotsky, Marx and Engels had argued along similar lines in their lost 1846 diatribe against *The German Ideology*, rediscovered in 1923 and deciphered over the course of the next decade. “[Historical materialism] is not devoid of premises,” the former wrote, describing their approach. “Its premises are men, not in any fantastic isolation and fixity, but in their actual, empirically perceptible process of development under particular conditions. As soon as this active life-process is represented, history ceases to be a collection of dead facts [*eine Sammlung toter Fakta*], like it is with the empiricists.”<sup>7</sup> Marx did not deem empirical facts irrelevant, of course, but held that their relevance could be ascertained solely by relating them back to the totality of the process.

Georg Lukács, the Hungarian Marxist, likewise complained about “blinkered empiricists” in an article from 1921. “Only from that vantage which sees the isolated facts of social life as aspects of the historical process and integrates them in a *totality*, can knowledge of the facts hope to attain knowledge of

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4 Vladimir Lenin. “Statistics and Sociology.” Translated by M.S. Levin and Joe Fineberg. *Collected Works*, Volume 23: August 1916-March 1917. (Progress Publishers. Moscow, USSR: 1964). Pgs. 272-273.

5 “Fakty sami po sebe – vne istoricheskikh tendentsii – ne imeiut bol’shogo znacheniiia.” Leon Trotsky. “Report on the ‘Balance Sheet’ of the Third Congress of the Comintern.” Translated by John G. Wright and R. Chappell. *First Five Years of the Communist International, Volume 1*. (Pathfinder Press. New York, NY: 1973). Pg. 381.

6 “Social facts are not as predictable as natural-scientific facts within their relatively homogeneous continua – a point to which Horkheimer first drew attention. The contradictory character of society resides in its objective, law-like nature, and ultimately too its irrationality.” Theodor Adorno. “Introduction.” Translated by David Frisby and Glyn Adey. *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*. (Heinemann Educational Books, Ltd. London, England: 1976). Pgs. 42-43.

7 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. *The German Ideology*. Translated by Clemens Dutt. *Collected Works*, Volume 5: April 1845-April 1847. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1975). Pg. 37.

reality,” he maintained.<sup>8</sup> Quite often, however, facts are treated as isolable, as if they were somehow autonomous. What is the reason for this error? Lukács provided a brilliant explanation for why this mistake is so common, locating its origins in the very fabric of society:

If [natural-scientific] methods seem plausible at first [in the treatment of social phenomena], this is because capitalism produces an economic structure that in large measure encourages such views. But for that very reason we need the dialectical method to puncture the illusion so produced, and help us to glimpse the reality underlying it. The “pure” facts of the natural sciences arise when a phenomenon of the real world is placed (in thought or in reality) into an environment where it can be inspected without outside interference... This procedure is reinforced by reducing phenomena to a purely quantitative essence: i.e., to their expression in numbers and numerical relations. Opportunists always fail to see that it is in the nature of capitalism to process phenomena this way. Marx gave an incisive account of such a “process of abstraction” in the case of labor, but he did not omit to point out with equal vigor that he was dealing with an *historical* peculiarity of capitalist society.<sup>9</sup>

Capitalism thus engenders its own characteristic forms of misrecognition. Specifically, it does so by presenting itself as natural. “A second nature,” Lukács put it in another essay from the same collection, “which envelops man with its fatalistic laws.”<sup>10</sup> No wonder, then, it would be interpreted as such:

The fetishistic character of economic forms and reification of human relations transform the phenomena of society and with them the way in which they are perceived. In this way arise the “isolated” facts, “isolated” complexes of facts, separate, specialist disciplines (economics, law, etc.) whose very appearance seems to have paved the way for such scientific methods. It thus appears extraordinarily “objective” to think out all the tendencies implicit in the facts, and then promote this activity to the status of science.

By contrast, in the teeth of these isolated and isolating facts and partial systems, dialectics insists on the concrete unity of the whole. Yet although it exposes these phenomena for the illusions they are – albeit illusions necessarily engendered by capitalism – in this “scientific” atmosphere, [the Marxian category of totality] nevertheless gives the impression of being an arbitrary construction.<sup>11</sup>

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8 Georg Lukács. “What is Orthodox Marxism?” (second version). Translated by Rodney Livingstone. *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. (MIT Press. Cambridge, MA: 1973). Pg. 8. “Totality” is *Totalität* in this instance. “Facts” are *Tatsachen*, “process” is *Entwicklung*, and “reality” is *Wirklichkeit*.

9 *Ibid.*, pgs. 5-6.

10 Georg Lukács. “The Changing Function of Historical Materialism.” *Ibid.*, pg. 240.

11 *Ibid.*, pg. 6.

For Lukács, materialist dialectic serves to disrupt the apparent naturalism of capitalist society. “The unscientific nature of this seemingly so scientific method,” he countered, “consists in its failure to take into account the *historical character* of the facts on which it is based... *Owing* to the source of this error, statistics and the ‘exact’ economic theory that relies on them will always lag behind actual developments.”<sup>12</sup> Hence, perhaps, the apocryphal quip Mark Twain attributed to British statesman Benjamin Disraeli, according to which “[t]here are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.”<sup>13</sup>

Amadeo Bordiga, who like Lukács contributed to the Viennese periodical *Kommunismus* in the twenties, also inveighed against “pure statisticians and demographers” during this time. “Shortsighted people if there ever were,” Bordiga added parenthetically. In contradistinction to their mode of operating, “our method does not amount to mere description of the social structure as it exists at a given moment... as in the scholastic classifications of the naturalists. The Marxist critique sees human society in its movement, in its development in time; it uses a fundamentally historical and dialectical criterion, studying the connection of events as they reciprocally interact.” Drawing upon the example of cinema, Bordiga analogized: “Instead of taking a snapshot of society at a given moment, the old metaphysical method, the dialectical method sees history as a film unrolling its successive scenes... Meanwhile, the photographer of statistics only records a cold series of lifeless data.”<sup>14</sup>

### Verum factum: Subject and object

Karl Korsch highlighted another aspect of “the factual order of society,” as sociologists came to refer to it: the way in which subjective energies congealed to form its outwardly objective edifice. A correspondent of Bordiga, denounced by Zinoviev in 1924 (along with Lukács and a few others), Korsch later embraced the council communism of Anton Pannekoek and Paul Mattick. While still a Leninist, however, he outlined “Some Fundamental Presuppositions for a Materialist Discussion of Crisis Theory,” calling attention to a treatise Lenin wrote in 1894 that simultaneously took issue with the “subjectivism” of Nikolai Mikhailovsky, as well as the “objectivism” of Petr Struve.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pgs. 6-7.

<sup>13</sup> Mark Twain. *Autobiography, Volume 1*. (University of California Press. Berkeley, CA: 2010). Pg. 227.

<sup>14</sup> Amadeo Bordiga. “Party and Class.” Translator not listed. *Rassegna Comunista*. ( 2: April 15, 1921). <https://www.marxists.org/archive/bordiga/works/1921/party-class.htm> In this connection, incidentally, Bordiga’s analogy confirms Pierre Missac’s suspicion: “There has never been... a more perfect model of the dialectical process, so concrete an example of negation that becomes constructive – in a word, of *Aufhebung* – than in film. Further, while it is very difficult to find a French equivalent for *Aufhebung*, in the case of film there is one: the *relève* (relieving, taking over from) proposed by Derrida.” Pierre Missac. *Walter Benjamin’s Passages*. Translated by Shierry Weber Nicholsen. (MIT Press. Cambridge, MA: 1995). Pg. 100.

<sup>15</sup> Karl Korsch. “Some Fundamental Presuppositions for a Materialist Discussion of Crisis

Lenin contended in this early work that materialism was distinct from either alternative. That he would reject subjectivist doctrines is unsurprising, since these are typically associated with capricious criteria imposed from without. But Lenin was no less adamant in his rejection of objectivist doctrines, with their pretense to sobriety: “In demonstrating the necessity for a given series of facts [*dannogo riada faktov*], the objectivist always runs the risk of becoming an apologist for these facts: the materialist discloses the class contradictions, and in so doing defines his standpoint.”<sup>16</sup> Max Horkheimer echoed this point in 1933 against the “scientism” then prevalent in social research, though he was likely unfamiliar with Lenin’s argument. “The demand to establish theory-free facts [*theoriefreie Tatsachen*] is false,” he indicated, “if by this one means that subjective factors are not already at work in the given objective facts [*in den objektiven Gegebenheiten*].”<sup>17</sup>

Here Horkheimer was influenced by Lukács, if not Lenin himself. “No path leads from the individual to totality,” the first had written in his *History and Class Consciousness*. “At best there is a road leading to fragments of particular areas, ‘facts’ bare of any context... For the totality of an object can only be posited if the positing subject itself constitutes a totality, and *class* alone in modern society is able to represent this total point of view.”<sup>18</sup> Without such a class standpoint, which Lukács identified as the standpoint of the proletariat, one is forced to adopt a crude strain of empiricism. Broader impulses, whether materialist or idealist in origin, which alone could grant raw data cohesion and shape, are forbidden in such an approach, as Horkheimer noted:

In the eyes of the empiricist, science is nothing more than a system for the arrangement and rearrangement of facts, no matter which facts are selected from the infinite number present. He proceeds as if the selection, description, acceptance, and synthesis of facts in this society have neither emphasis nor direction. Everything designated by idealism as idea and end and, by materialism, as social practice and conscious historical activity, is related to science just as objects of observations and not as definite interests and directive forces... Dialectical, critical thought, and the conscious connection between that cognitive process and historical life, do not exist for empiricism; nor do any associated categories like society and class, in the sense that presupposes specific viewpoints or interests.<sup>19</sup>

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Theory.” Translated by Karl-Heinz Otto and Andrew Giles-Peters. *Revolutionary Theory*. (University of Texas Press. Austin, TX: 1977). Pg. 186.

<sup>16</sup> Vladimir Lenin. *The Economic Content of Narodism and the Criticism of It in Struve’s Book*. Translator not listed. Collected Works, Volume 1: 1893-1894. (Progress Publishers. Moscow, USSR: 1960). Pg. 400.

<sup>17</sup> Max Horkheimer. “Materialism and Morality.” Translated by Frederick Hunter. *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Essays*. (MIT Press. Cambridge, MA: 1993). Pg. 47.

<sup>18</sup> Georg Lukács. “The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg.” *History and Class Consciousness*. Pg. 28.

<sup>19</sup> Max Horkheimer. “The Latest Attack on Metaphysics.” Translated by Matthew O’Connell and others. *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*. (Continuum Books. New York, NY: 1982). Pg. 145.

As a result, the picture that emerges of society is governed by static regularities. "Verification through perception is the alpha and omega of empiricism," wrote Horkheimer. "It holds only to what is, to the guarantee of facts... New forms of being, especially those arising from the historical activity of man, lie beyond empiricist theory."<sup>20</sup> Yet empiricists failed to even grasp the immediacy of the world in all its fullness, since "the existing state of things is a fact of the same kind as the desire to change it, especially if this desire resides not just in a few men but is present in the common consciousness."<sup>21</sup> Countervailing pressures can be found in almost every epoch, the germ of deace in the prevailing structures of life, but these rarely register as more than unrest.

Still, Horkheimer pushed this line of thought further, beyond just acknowledging the fact that antagonisms exist at any given moment. He pointed out the different ways facts can be recognized: "Knowledge [*Erkenntnis*] of facts should be clearly distinguished from acceptance [*Anerkennung*] of facts."<sup>22</sup> The Soviet author Sergei Tret'iakov, whose avant-garde "literature of facts" was introduced to German readers by the critic Walter Benjamin in 1934,<sup>23</sup> drew a similar distinction with his opposition of "operative" versus "informative" writing techniques. "Essayist-operatives do not simply list facts," wrote Tret'iakov in 1930, "but see these facts in their development and demand immediate intervention in ongoing events, replacing essayist-informants."<sup>24</sup> In other words, he proposed an active rather than a contemplative attitude to the realization of truth.<sup>25</sup>

Objectivity can be deceiving in the realm of social facts. All the more so when it regards things as happening automatically, devoid of human input. "Men make their own history, but do not make it as they please," the old line goes, "not under self-selected circumstances, but under those directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past." For Marx, however, this was not so much a perennial problem as an historical challenge, a situation that must be reversed. Under

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20 *Ibid.*, pgs. 143-144.

21 *Ibid.*, pgs. 150-151.

22 Max Horkheimer. "Authority and the Family." *Ibid.*, pg. 124.

23 "I would like to direct your attention to Sergei Tret'iakov, and to the type (which he defines and embodies) of the 'operating' writer... Tret'iakov distinguishes the operating writer from the informing writer. His mission is not to report but to struggle; not to play the spectator but instead intervene actively." Walter Benjamin. "The Author as Producer." Translated by Edmund Jephcott. *Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2: 1931-1934*. (Harvard University Press. Cambridge, MA: 1999). Pg. 770.

24 "Oni [ocherkist-operativniki] ne prosto perechisliaut fakty... oni vidiat eti fakty v ikh razviti i trebuiut nemedlennogo vmeshatel'stva v sovershaiushchiesia sobytia... Ocherkist-operativnik smeniaet ocherkista-informatora." Sergei Tret'iakov. *Mesiats v derevne: Iiun'-iul' 1930 g., operativnye ocherki*. (Izdatel'svo Federatsiia. Moskva: 1931). Pg. 13.

25 *Vita activa* was the medieval Latin rendering of the Greek *bios politikos*, Aristotle's term for political life, and suggested an engaged stance, whereas *vita contemplativa* implied a more detached perspective. Hannah Arendt. *The Human Condition*. (University of Chicago Press. Chicago, IL: 1958). Pgs. 12-14.

capitalism, everything that came before is experienced as an encumbrance, a burden crushing the present beneath its accumulated weight.<sup>26</sup> Dead labor rules over living labor, and the present serves the past.<sup>27</sup> Just as surely as this past itself was made, though, so too can it be unmade. Better yet, it can be *remade*: i.e., to serve the purposes of a fully socialized humanity existing today.

Lukács pinpointed the subject-object split that occurs in modern thought here. “The contradiction [which appears between subjectivity and objectivity in rationalist systems] does not lie in the inability of philosophers to give a definitive analysis of the available facts,” he asserted. “It is rather the intellectual expression of the objective situation itself which it is their task to comprehend... While on the one hand men are constantly smashing, replacing, and leaving behind all ‘natural,’ irrational and actually existing bonds, on the other hand they erect around themselves in the reality they have created and ‘made,’ a kind of second nature that evolves with the same inexorable necessity as the first.”<sup>28</sup> Herbert Marcuse built on this insight in 1961:

Reason is turned into submission to the facts of life... which blunt the recognition that facts are *made*, or mediated by subjectivity – a recognition long since incorporated into scientific method. The dominant habit of thought does not allow itself to proceed to the assumption that the facts contain their negation: that they are what they are, and how they are, because they exclude the possibilities whose realization would undo them as facts... In any case, the ability to evaluate the alternatives requires the freedom to go beyond the facts, and beyond operations defined by the facts.<sup>29</sup>

Marxism’s verity does not consist in an exact science of the present facts and conditions, so much as the prescience to act upon and irrevocably transform them. As Marx maintained in his second Thesis on Feuerbach, “the question of whether objective truth can be attributed to human thinking is not a theoretical but a *practical* question. Human beings must prove the truth: i.e., the power and this-sidedness of their thought in practice.”<sup>30</sup> Epistemologically, the ability to

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26 “The tradition of all the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.” Karl Marx. *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon*. Translated by Saul K. Padover. *Collected Works, Volume 11: August 1851–March 1853*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1979). Pg. 103.

27 “In capitalist society, the past dominates the present; in communist society, the present dominates the past.” Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. *Manifesto of the Communist Party*. Translated by Samuel Moore. *Collected Works, Volume 6: August 1845–March 1848*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1976). Pg. 499.

28 Georg Lukács. “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat.” *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*. Pg. 128.

29 Herbert Marcuse. “The Problem of Change in Technological Society.” *Collected Papers, Volume 2: Towards a Critical Theory of Society*. (Routledge. New York, NY: 2001). Pg. 55.

30 Karl Marx. “Theses on Feuerbach.” *Collected Works, Volume 5: April 1845–April 1847*. Translated by Clemens R. Dutt. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1975). Pg. 3.

know the world is inseparable from the ability to change it. Unlike those theories of knowledge in which truth is passively contemplated, here truth is actively made. Giambattista Vico's famous maxim, which holds that "the true is what is made" [*verum esse ipsum factum*], captures this marvelously.<sup>31</sup> Truth cannot be intuitively received as a preexistent datum if the world itself is untrue.

### History or journalism?

Perhaps no other field of human activity is so beholden to facts as journalism. Indeed, when reporting a story, journalists are generally encouraged to "stick to the facts" and refrain from too much interpretation. Further commentary on their part is either seen as editorializing or a needless supplement. Reporters ought to include only that which can be authenticated. Of course, this does not prevent them from omitting certain facts or from being selective about the information they choose to report (Lenin was always wary of liberal newspapers for this reason).<sup>32</sup> But it does place definite limits on what can be written, at least when it comes to mainstream media outlets.

Journalism would thus seem on the whole a politically neutral medium, even if rival class interests can be readily discerned. Labor dailies competed early on with the bourgeois press, and later a reader's outlook could often be gauged by his subscription to *Daily Mirror* or *The Sun*. Vasilii Grossman and Isaak Babel were both employed as "worker correspondents,"<sup>33</sup> in World War II and the Russian Civil War respectively, while Marx wrote pieces for *The New York Daily Tribune* during the 1850s and 1860s. As noted previously, "poetic journalism" and "factography" enjoyed some support among Marxist literary circles between 1921 and 1929, despite falling out of favor the next decade.<sup>34</sup> So the form was not considered antithetical to socialist politics in the least. Writers simply reported the facts, while individual papers would enforce their editorial lines.

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31 Giambattista Vico. *On the Most Ancient Wisdom of the Italians*. Translated by L.M. Palmer. (Cornell University Press. Ithaca, NY: 1988). Pgs. 45-47.

32 "By facts, different people understand different things. Liberal journalists do not hesitate to lie by omitting to cite a single precise and clear fact... Workers must learn to grasp facts and verify them on their own." Vladimir Lenin. "A Few Words on Results and Facts." Translated by George Hanna. *Collected Works, Volume 19: March-December 1913*. (Progress Publishers. Moscow, USSR: 1963). Pgs. 63-64.

33 Trotsky had the following advice for worker correspondents, as regards the facts: "In good exposition there must first of all be internal logic, in order to set forth facts consistently and give readers a chance to go in their own minds through all the steps that will bring them to the proper conclusion. Often one meets journalists or orators who do not develop themes consistently but throw readers and listeners off with disconnected facts." Leon Trotsky. "The Cultural Role of the Worker Correspondent" (1924). Translated by Marilyn Vogt. *Problems of Everyday Life*. (Monad Press. New York, NY: 1973). Pgs. 166-167.

34 "So-called poetic journalism and the literature of facts, praised between 1921 and 1929, are receding now." Ernst Bloch. "Marxism and Poetry." Translated by Frank Mecklenburg. *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*. (MIT Press. Cambridge, MA: 1988). Pg. 158.

It was Lukács who first problematized journalistic writing as such, which he felt mirrored the fetishism of commodities. “[Reification] can be seen at its most grotesque in journalism,” he wrote. “Here it is precisely subjectivity itself – knowledge, temperament, and powers of expression – which is reduced to an abstract mechanism, divorced from the personality of their ‘owner’ as well as the material and concrete nature of the subject matter at hand. The journalist’s ‘lack of convictions’ is comprehensible only as the apogee of this phenomenon.”<sup>35</sup> Others subsequently drew on Lukács’ analysis, notably Adorno in *Minima Moralia*, where he quoted this passage at length.<sup>36</sup> Daniel Bensaïd, the late French Trotskyist, likewise made use of Lukácsian motifs in his discussion of journalism in a chapter of *An Impatient Life: A Political Memoir* (2004):

An immediate, empirical reality, a tautological one of facts that “are facts,” “facts as naked as facts can be,” as Joseph Conrad once put it, an authoritarian reality before which nothing can be done but accept, is beyond debate. Naked reality, of the kind presupposed by journalistic objectivity, belongs to ideological empiricism... Unraveling the intricacies of the totality does not mean, as is often believed, “de-realizing” the obscenity of naked facts, in order to revise them or dress them up just as one likes. Quite the contrary, it always means embarking on a perilous sifting of evidence... The illusion of “true small facts” is necessary for the journalist’s good conscience. Wittgenstein lampooned this reveling in facts. Foucault, on the other hand, said in 1978 he had been “seized by the anger for facts.” He proclaimed himself a journalist and declared war on systems conceived to absorb and digest everything without ever being disturbed or surprised. At this time, it was urgent to “free political action from every unitary and totalizing paranoia.” Scarcely two years later, the same Foucault again made fun of “true small facts against vague great ideas,” and of the stereotypical “champion of exactitude stuck in his own approximations.”

In the fragmented timescales of journalism there is a recurrent tendency to fetishize facts, foolish and stubborn though they may be. Precisely this foolishness of facts, unable to explain anything by themselves, hobbles Lord Jim and renders him mute before his judges at the trial about the Patna shipwreck. The establishment and checking of facts is crucially important, of course, true as it is that discourse always has to render account to reality. But inquiry, in the methodical sense Dewey gave it, is not just geared to the work of recording but also to the work of agency, combination, evaluation... Just as a cookery recipe is not simply the sum of its ingredients, so a newspaper is not a collage of facts to which an editorial mind is added as a kind of supplement. Like judicial controversy or the presentation of a scientific experiment, it is actively created. The front page, headline, the hierarchy of information, illustrations, and captions,

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35 Lukács, “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat.” Pg. 100.

36 Theodor Adorno. *Minima Moralia: Reflections on Damaged Life*. Translated by E.F.N. Jephcott. (Verso Books. New York, NY: 1974). Pg. 230.

the choice and placement of op-ed pieces and readers' letters all contribute to it... Yet the effects of distortion and concealment that result are not the work of a conspiracy or plot; the media's unconscious is more inscrutable than that. Depoliticizing the *fait accompli*, it manufactures public opinion.<sup>37</sup>

For Lukács, as for Bensaïd, the main shortcoming of journalism was not just false impartiality but above all its unhistorical relationship to current events. "We see the reified character of bourgeois thought most strikingly when we consider *the present as an historical problem*," he explained. "Ever since the war and the revolution, the complete inability of every bourgeois thinker to grasp the world-historic import of the present has reduced otherwise meritorious historians to the pitiful level of provincial journalism."<sup>38</sup> Karl Kraus, whose acid pen no doubt informed Lukács' reflections, aphoristically quipped: "Journalism only *seems* to be serving the present, when in fact it destroys the intellectual heritage of posterity... An historian is often just a journalist facing backwards, but the journalist is always someone who afterwards knew it already beforehand."<sup>39</sup>

History, like journalism, deals with facts. One of the subtler British Sovietologists, Edward Hallett Carr, spent a whole chapter on the issue of historical facts in *What is History?* (1961). Leopold von Ranke's motto, to tell the past as it really happened [*wie es eigentlich gewesen*], had bequeathed to subsequent generations of historians a "fetishism of facts" – i.e., a belief in "untiring and unending accumulation of hard facts as the foundation of history, the notion that facts speak for themselves, and that we can never have too many facts."<sup>40</sup> Carr felt that this conceit lent itself too easily to the traditions of Anglophone empiricism and Continental positivism, each of which rigidly upholds the division of subject and object.<sup>41</sup> The difficulty, as he saw it, was how to navigate "between the Scylla of an untenable theory of history as the objective compilation of facts..., and the Charybdis of an untenable theory of history as the subjective product of the historian's interpretative framework."<sup>42</sup> Nevertheless,

37 Daniel Bensaïd. *An Impatient Life: A Political Memoir*. Translated by David Fernbach. (Verso Books. New York, NY: 2013). Pgs. 194-196.

38 Lukács, "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat." Pg. 157.

39 Karl Kraus. *Half-Truths and One-and-a-Half Truths: Selected Aphorisms*. Translated by Harry Zohn. (University of Chicago Press. Chicago, IL: 1990). Pgs. 72-74.

40 E.H. Carr. *What is History?* (Penguin Books. New York, NY: 1990). Pgs. 15-16.

41 "When Ranke, during the 1830s, in legitimate protest against moralizing history, remarked that the task of the historian was 'to show how it really was [*wie es eigentlich gewesen*],' this not very profound aphorism met with astonishing success. Three generations of German, British, even French historians marched into battle, intoning the magic words *wie es eigentlich gewesen* like an incantation – designed, like most incantations, to save them from the obligation to think for themselves. Positivists, eager to stake out history as a science, contributed the weight of their influence to this cult of facts. First ascertain the facts, they said, then draw your conclusions from them. In Britain, this view of history fit perfectly with the dominant empiricist tradition. The empirical theory of knowledge presupposes the total separation of subject and object. Like sense-impressions, facts impinge upon the observer from outside; the process of reception is essentially passive." *Ibid.*, pgs. 8-9.

42 *Ibid.*, pg. 29.

Carr insisted a course was still open to anyone willing to admit that “[an] element of interpretation enters into every fact of history.”<sup>43</sup>

Rankean historicism no longer enjoys the stature it once held within the academy, but it remains the default lay orientation toward the past. “Get your facts straight, then plunge at your peril into the shifting sands of interpretation – that is the ultimate wisdom of the empirical, commonsense school of history,” wrote Carr.<sup>44</sup> Yuri Lotman, the Soviet semiotician, likewise regarded *wie es eigentlich gewesen* as an antitheoretical theory, a journalistic method ill-suited to the task of handling historic details.<sup>45</sup> Understandably, Carr was skeptical: “So-called basic facts are the same for all historians... Every journalist today knows, however, that the surest way to sway public opinion is by the selection and arrangement of appropriate facts.”<sup>46</sup> Plus, even basic historical facts are mediated *vis-à-vis* conditions that permitted them to survive or persons who judged them noteworthy: “The facts of history never come down to us ‘pure,’ but rather refracted through the mind of the recorder.”<sup>47</sup> Little wonder, then, that Benjamin would take issue with Ranke in his theses “On the Concept of History,” for having projected the present onto the past.<sup>48</sup>

### What might have been

By way of conclusion, the idea of historical possibility can be further elucidated with respect to facts. Oftentimes Marxism is caricatured as a determinist worldview, whose stress on the inevitability of social change allows no room for individual agency. Determinism needs to be carefully differentiated from fatalism, though, “which would leave us as passive spectators of phenomena in which no direct intervention is felt possible.” Voluntarism, or “the fond

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43 *Ibid.*, pg. 13.

44 *Ibid.*, pg. 10.

45 “Historians not given to theorizing, who concentrate on research into the primary material, are often content with Ranke’s formula of reestablishing the past *wie es eigentlich gewesen* – as it actually was. Reestablishing the past involves elucidating facts, then making connections between them. Facts are established by collecting and comparing documents and adopting a critical approach... But even granting that a reader has broad erudition, experience, and shrewdness, his or her position is in principle different from that of colleagues in other fields of science. The point is that by the word ‘fact,’ the historian means something very unusual. Unlike the deductive sciences which construe their premises logically, or the experimental sciences which can observe them, history is condemned to deal with *texts*. In the experimental sciences a fact can be regarded at least in the initial stages as something primary, a datum that precedes the interpretation of it. A fact can be observed in the laboratory, repeated, subjected to statistical study.” Yuri Lotman. “The Problem of the Historical Fact.” Translated by Ann Shukhman. *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*. (I.B. Tauris & Co. New York, NY: 1990). Pg. 217.

46 Carr, *What is History?* Pgs. 10-11.

47 *Ibid.*, pg. 22.

48 “Articulating the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was.’ It means appropriating a memory as it flashes up in the moment of danger. Historical materialism wishes to hold fast to that image of the past.” Walter Benjamin. “On the Concept of History.” Translated by Harry Zohn. *Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*. (Harvard University Press. Cambridge, MA: 2003). Pg. 391.

hope that one can speed up processes through the force of example and self-sacrifice,” lies across from it on the political spectrum. In fatalistic doctrines of history, events transpire as a result of objective factors following with mechanical necessity, whereas in voluntaristic doctrines of history, events transpire as a result of subjective factors brought about “by a gigantic effort of heroism and will” and so on. “Marxian determinism does not seek a compromise halfway in between,” Bordiga maintained, “but dialectically and historically rises above them both.”<sup>49</sup> His colleague Lukács put it succinctly: “Fatalism and voluntarism only appear contradictory to an undialectical and unhistorical mind.”<sup>50</sup>

Still, the charge of determinism – in the narrow sense, as a synonym for fatalism – has proven difficult to shake. Counterfactual narratives would thus seem a good test for Marxist theory, to see whether it grants that the past might have been otherwise: What if such and such had occurred, instead of this or that? *Ex post facto* reasoning of this sort does not carry much weight in historical research, to be sure. Necessity is a tricky enough concept even for philosophers, let alone historians, who are taught not to speculate if other possibilities were latent in a given set of facts. “One can always play a parlor game with the might-have-beens of history,” Carr opined, “but this has nothing to do with determinism, since the determinist will simply reply that the causes had to be different for things to have been different.”<sup>51</sup> The source of Carr’s annoyance here was more specific, however, than any general objection to counterfactuals as such. It concerned the example routinely chosen as a basis for these conjectures: namely, what the world would be like if October 1917 never took place. As Carr saw it, the conservative motivation behind this choice of topic was obvious, indicating a wish to reverse the results of the Russian Revolution.<sup>52</sup>

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49 Amadeo Bordiga. “The Lyons Theses: Draft Theses for the Third Congress of the Communist Party of Italy.” *L’Unità*. (January 1926). Translator not listed. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/bordiga/works/1926/lyons-theses.htm>

50 Lukács, “What is Orthodox Marxism?” Pg. 4.

51 Carr, *What is History?* Pg. 97.

52 “Last term here in Cambridge I saw a talk advertised under the title ‘Was the Russian Revolution Inevitable?’ If I had seen a talk advertised on ‘Were the Wars of the Roses Inevitable?’, though, I’d at once have suspected some joke. Historians write of the Norman Conquest or American War of Independence as if what happened was in fact bound to happen. Nobody accuses them of being determinists or of failing to discuss the possibility that William the Conqueror or the American patriots might have been defeated. Whenever I write about the Russian Revolution of 1917 in precisely this way, however – the only proper way, for the historian – I come under attack for depicting what happened as something bound to happen, and for failing to examine the other things which might have happened. Suppose Stolypin had time to finish his agrarian reforms, it is said, or Russia had not gone to war. Perhaps the revolution would not have occurred. Or suppose the Kerensky government had made good, and leadership of the revolution assumed by the Mensheviks or Social Revolutionaries instead of the Bolsheviks. . . . The point here is that today no one seriously wishes to reverse the results of the Norman Conquest or American Independence, so nobody objects whenever historians treat them as a closed chapter. But plenty of people who have suffered, directly or vicariously, from the results of the Bolshevik victory, or still fear its remoter consequences, desire to register their protest against it.” *Ibid.*, pgs. 96-97.

Lately, the Slovenian critic Slavoj Žižek has also explored this theme of counter-factuality. Reviewing the essay collection *What Might Have Been: Imaginary History from Twelve Leading Historians* back in 2005, he underscored “the conservative sympathies of ‘what if?’ volumes.” Does this mean that, in order to avoid being labeled a conservative, one has to subscribe to a crudely deterministic vision of the past? In such a vision, whatever ends up happening is all that ever could have happened. Žižek rejects this premise emphatically, however, associating it with the vulgar Marxism of Georgii Plekhanov, Lenin’s onetime mentor. Plekhanov argued that there was a “deeper historical necessity” at work in the transition from Jacobin Republic to Napoleonic Empire in France, beyond the individual traits of Napoleon. Yet this raises the issue of whether something similar was going on in the shift from Bolshevism to Stalinism in post-1917 Russia:

For many, the rise of Stalinism was necessary... such that without Stalin, or in the case of his premature death, another leader would have played the role: maybe even Trotsky, his great rival. But for Trotskyists, as for others (e.g., Kotkin), the role of Stalin’s contingent person was crucial: no Stalinism without Stalin. Had he suddenly disappeared from the scene in the early 1920s, things like the forced collectivization of agriculture and “the construction of socialism in one country” would never have taken place. Was the rise of Stalinism simply an accident, then? In other words, the actualization of just one of the historical possibilities lying dormant after the Bolsheviks’ victory?<sup>53</sup>

One could extend this argument further, however, pointing out that a political phenomenon like Stalinism perhaps resulted from the fact that revolution failed to spread westward, which left Russia isolated and hence vulnerable to capitalist encirclement. Minor details might have been different if someone else succeeded Lenin, but the overall effect largely the same. This begs the question of whether the fate of the Russian Revolution ultimately depended on the success or failure of the German Revolution in 1919. Adorno later mused that “[h]ad things gone otherwise here in 1919, the potential existed to influence developments in Russia and with great probability prevent Stalinism.”<sup>54</sup> Such hypotheticals may seem an idle exercise, or an attempt to save face after the fact, but with the centenary of October 1917 having recently passed it is opportune to reflect. Žižek, for his part, suggests that “a properly dialectical relationship between necessity and contingency... cannot change the past causally, retroactively undoing what happened at the level of facts, yet it can do so counterfactually, retrospectively altering what happened at the level of meaning.”<sup>55</sup>

53 See the section “Counterfactuals,” in Slavoj Žižek. *Disparities*. (Bloomsbury Academic Publishers. New York, NY: 2016). Pgs. 277-281.

54 Theodor W. Adorno. “Those Twenties.” *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchphrases*. Translated by Henry W. Pickford. (Columbia University Press. New York, NY: 1998). Pg. 43.

55 Žižek, *Disparities*. Pg. 278. This is a better formulation than appears elsewhere in the book, where he tries to describe this relationship as “a contingent choice which retroactively becomes necessary,” coming dangerously close Lenin’s warning against dialectical “zigzags” or retroactive justifications.

*Endnotes*, a communist theoretical journal located in Britain and the United States, does not indulge such second-guessing when it comes to the history of failed revolutions. “When we address the question of these failures, we cannot resort to ‘what if’ counterfactuals,” the authors indicate in their inaugural issue, “blaming the defeat of revolutionary movements on everything (bad leaders, inadequate organization, wrong ideas, unripe conditions) other than the movements themselves in their determinate content.”<sup>56</sup> But if their defeat was somehow preordained – written in the stars or the historic constellation of forces, as it were – then it is futile to do more than just report the facts. These movements failed because they were bound to fail. Nothing could have been different, so it is impossible to assign responsibility to anyone involved. Interpretations which see failure as the consequence of “betrayal,” “loss of nerve,” or even “miscalculation” are no doubt dissatisfying. Precisely because revolutionaries aspire to historical agency, however, seeking to make history rather than simply be made by history, they must be held accountable for their failings. For this very reason, moreover, one finds them preoccupied with the judgment of future generations, which leads to one of Žižek’s more ingenious reversals:

Seeing as the non-occurrence of the Bolshevik Revolution is a favorite topic for all the “what if?” historians, it is worth looking at how Lenin himself related to counterfactuality. He was as far as could be from any reliance on “historical necessity.” Quite the contrary, his Menshevik opponents were the ones who emphasized the impossibility of omitting one of the “stages” prescribed by historical determinism: first bourgeois-democratic, then proletarian revolution. And so when Lenin claimed this was the *Augenblick* in his “April Theses” of 1917 – i.e., the unique opportunity to start a revolution – his proposal was at first met with contempt and stupefaction from a large majority of his colleagues. Yet he understood that this chance had been made possible by a variety of circumstances, and that the propitious moment might be forfeited if it was not seized, perhaps for decades. Lenin entertained the alternative scenario: What if we do not act now? It was his acute awareness of the catastrophic consequences of not acting which impelled him to act.<sup>57</sup>

Žižek forgets, though, that the negative impulsion to act seen in this example is just another form of historical necessity, what Marx referred to as “absolutely imperative *need* – the practical expression of theoretical necessity.”<sup>58</sup>

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56 *Endnotes*. “Bring Out Your Dead.” *Volume 1: Preliminary Materials for a Balance Sheet of the Twentieth Century*. (London, England: 2008). Pg. 4.

57 Slavoj Žižek. “Lenin Shot at Finland Station! Review of *What Might Have Been: Imaginary History from Twelve Leading Historians*.” *London Review of Books*. (Volume 27, 16: August 2005). Pg. 23.

58 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. *The Holy Family, or Critique of Critical Criticism: Against Bruno Bauer*. Translated by Clemens Dutt and Richard Dixon. *Collected Works, Volume 4: August 1844–late Autumn 1845*. (International Publishers. New York, NY: 1975). Pg. 37.

This counterfactual injunction is likely what Lukács had in mind when he claimed in 1919: “Lenin and Trotsky, as truly orthodox, dialectical Marxists, paid little attention to so-called ‘facts,’ blind to the ‘fact’ the Germans had won, and secured for themselves the military means to march into Petrograd at any time, occupy Ukraine, and so on. Because they grasped the necessary materialization of world revolution, they adjusted their actions to this reality, not the ‘facts’.”<sup>59</sup> Marxists regard freedom as insight [*Einsicht*] into necessity, following Hegel and Spinoza, as an accurate appraisal of what must be done in order to liberate mankind.

*Faits accomplis* are to the future what counterfactuals are to the past, as far as possibility in history is concerned, just with the polarities switched. Accepting that the future cannot be otherwise is akin to denying that the past could have been otherwise. *Que será, será*, the Doris Day lyrics say, “whatever will be will be.” Each is symptomatic of a reified timeline, annexing both the future and the past to grim fatalism. Same with the present-tense cliché: “It is what it is.” Politically, however, *faits accomplis* often turn out to be apparitions. How else is one to make sense of the 2016 election in the United States? Beforehand, all the TV pundits and analysts thought Hillary had it in the bag. Nothing could have been further from the case, as everyone soon learned.

## Conclusion

Marxists must maintain a studied ambivalence toward the facts, regarding them neither as all-important nor irrelevant. Facts change and, perhaps even more so, can be changed. There is a certain momentum that carries over from the past and spills into the present, on its way to possible futures. Communism according to Marx is nothing other than “the real movement that abolishes the existing state of affairs.” If history is to have any meaning at all, in the philosophical sense, revolutionaries will have to seize on those moments that surpass the reproduction of the *status quo*. Other potential outcomes lie dormant beneath the temporary veneer of “the way things are.”

Yet this should not lead one to endorse some sort of postmodern relativism, where anything flies and the truth is whatever people want it to be. Historical reality cannot be transformed at will, just as little as current conditions can be outsmarted through mere cleverness. Social action is required for a shift to take place, action involving more than a scattered collection of individuals. By that same token, however, it is folly to think that recent reactionary political developments can be defeated or reversed simply through fact-checking mechanisms or higher journalistic standards. Public opinion is not swayed by such considerations. Reversing a common right-wing refrain,

<sup>59</sup> Georg Lukács. “What is Orthodox Marxism?” (first version). Translated by Michael McColgan, in *Tactics and Ethics: The Question of Parliamentarism and Other Essays*. (Verso Books. New York, NY: 2014). Pg. 26.

applicable to liberals and conservatives alike, mass feelings do not care about supposed facts.

All the points about counterfactuality ought to be brought to bear upon the materialist conception of history. Nearly a century after the defeated revolutionary sequence of 1917-1923, it is still unclear what might have been if things had played out differently in Russia, Germany, and elsewhere around the world. What might yet be is no less opaque. In order for the future to be otherwise, communists should not bow before the facts that presently obtain.