

## Critical Theory in Adorno and Marcuse

Ruggero D'ALESSANDRO

**Abstract:** *Critical Theory is the key-word representing all the universe of thought commonly known as "Frankfurt School". Within it, Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno and Herbert Marcuse are not so far each other, as instead are Max Horkheimer and Marcuse – considering what I in this paper define as the conservative turn of the director of the Institut für Sozialforschung. Whereas Adorno refuses any engagement in the political and lives as an obsession the theory-praxis relation, Marcuse is closer to a certain critical Marxism and to the student movements of Sixties and Seventies. The crucial issue of the theory-praxis relation comes back clearly in the distance between Marcuse and the other two maîtres à penser, about their judgment on the '68 movement.*

**Keywords:** *Critical Theory, Theory/Praxis, Administered World, Student Movement, Engagement.*

### A laboratory of philosophical and social criticism

The non-systematic nature characterizing the group of critical theorists associated with the *Frankfurt School* is far from a simple, Capricious, stylistic choice. The aphorisms and scattered notes, the collection of thoughts and reflections not neatly categorized in a complete and official System reflect a very specific need: the theory is not systematic thought and is a penetrating criticism of other ways of thinking, ones that are organized into systems.

As if escaping the closed world's temptation were enough to guaran-

tee that the scores be settled with systems – and so to feed the hope of a World that is finally open, thus on a human scale.

The partners of the group deal with the pre-idealistic system and Idealism (thus, the tetralogy of Kant-Fichte-Schelling-Hegel), having to consider who has been there: Marx and Schopenhauer, Weber and Nietzsche, Dilthey and Bergson, Husserl and even Freud (in the sense of a non-philosopher *stricto sensu*).

Another possible explanation of the refusal of the concept of "Systems of concepts" (recalling Deleuze's definition, "to do philosophy is to elaborate concepts") is that it occurred in the 1920<sup>s</sup> and

1930s and thus had to grapple with two worrisome, well-established Systems: Stalin's Soviet Union and European fascisms (Hitler and Mussolini, Franco and Antonescu, Horthy and Salazar).

Young Adorno is educated in philosophy at the same Frankfurter school owned by Hans Cornelius where Horkheimer attended. Thus the "odd couple" was born: on the one hand, Horkheimer is the great organiser and fundraiser (as we say nowadays) and author in the 1930s and 1940s of a series of articles of great originality and depth on philosophers and topics of modern and contemporary philosophy,<sup>1</sup> as well as author of a notable compendium of aphorisms;<sup>2</sup> on the other hand, Adorno is a young man, who at the beginning, is undecided about whether to go into philosophy or music, and thus whether or not to study for a year in Vienna with Alban Berg and Eduard Steuermann.

Once back in Frankfurt, he quickly obtains his teacher's license and then throws himself headlong into an almost infinite series of study and interests (between theoretical sociology and musical studies, psychology and psychoanalysis, literature and cinema).

Unlike Horkheimer, Adorno does not yet feel the need to produce a dizzying amount of books and articles, like he will in 1949 upon return into West Germany and over the following twenty years.

Berliner Herbert Marcuse stands out thanks to two aspects: historical

and political. We allude, respectively, to his participation in the revolutionary days in the capital, as a twenty-year-old follower of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht's Spartacist group in the winter of 1918-1919; and to his studies, some years later, concerning perhaps the most talented philosopher of the 20<sup>th</sup>-century: Martin Heidegger. Even with the distance, that over time will become unbridgeable between the two, the young Marcuse will show evidence of the influence of the philosopher from Messkirch. After all, it is like what happens to Hannah Arendt (even considering the different kind of relationship they had).

Interest in topics like happiness and Epicureanism, the recovery of the Hegelian System and the discovery of Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* are well documented in an intense collection of essays dating back to the delicate turning point of the 1920s and 1930<sup>s</sup>.<sup>3</sup>

In Marcuse the idea of a Critical Theory as an analysis of thought is already present, at the same moment in which it becomes intervention in praxis, even with all the historical difficulties of that period (especially in those two difficult decades between the World Wars and the *Shoah*).

The philosopher from Berlin shows the real system of industrial and warmonger capitalism as a generator of unhappiness; but at the same time, he denies the eternity of such a model, siding with the change

with a clearness that will never decrease over the subsequent forty years. Being conscious means reflecting on evil in the world (recalling Hegel's "unhappy consciousness"); but humanity needs a push coming from the outside. And in this difference between theory and praxis (that, according to the author of *Reason and Revolution*, must always be in Marxian interaction) lies, in our opinion, the point of maximum distance between Marcuse and Adorno, also comparing to the risk of recurrent paralysis in the theory thought up by the latter. It is testified also by the following quotation from 1937, in which Marcuse, by this time in exile in the USA, marks with great clarity the diversity between philosophy and Critical Theory:

The truth, not being able to be realized within the existing social order, has in any case because of the latter the character of a simple utopia. This transcendence does not speak against, but in favour of truth. The utopian element has been the only progressive element of philosophy: such were the constructions of a better State, of supreme pleasure, of perfect happiness, of perpetual peace. The obstinacy, derived from remaining loyal to the truth against all appearances, has today given up its place in philosophy to lavishness and wild opportunism. Critical Theory remains loyal to obstinacy as the authentic quality of philosophical thought.<sup>4</sup>

### **To join the fight or sceptical caution: May 1968**

The analogy of views between the director, Horkheimer, and the musicologist, Adorno, of the Institute is maintained during almost fifty years of friendship.

Synthesizing, we can identify some differences between Adorno and Marcuse. The latter soon decides to stay in the United States (from exile in 1934 to his death in 1979), while Adorno returns to Germany in 1949 (despite keeping an academic engagement in the USA in 1953-1954).

We have already talked about Marcuse's adhesion to the aborted revolution of workers and military member Councils in 1918-1919; not to speak of the complicated and alternating relationship between Adorno and the protesting students (albeit far from justifying the squalid legend of his death caused by these relationships) in 1966-1969; while the author of *One-Dimensional Man* rises to the role of prophet of the juvenile revolution (pseudo-myth of which he himself is the first to laugh with amused scepticism). Moreover, he keeps far from embedded sociology (except for his participation in some research in the early 1930<sup>s</sup> on the work of labourers and then on authority and family); while the influential role played by "Teddie" in most sociological research between the 1940<sup>s</sup> and 1960<sup>s</sup> (from *The Authoritarian Personality* to the studies about company

atmosphere in Germany of the 1950<sup>s</sup>) is well known.

As far as the students are concerned, both are great professors. If Adorno is deeply respected and feared but rarely loved (think about the clashes with the most brilliant among his pupils, Hans-Jürgen Krahl, student leader in 1966-1968, or the squalid “erotic provocations” of some fanatical female protesters), Marcuse is perfectly comfortable, amidst ironical glances and cigar drags, in the informal atmospheres of big American campuses, being very outspoken when it comes to political positions (the unconditional support of his good pupil Angela Davis, persecuted by the FBI and the para-fascist California governor and future president, Ronald Reagan).

It is question of aspects that deeply influence the links between theory and praxis in the elaboration of the two German scholars’ philosophy.

On the level of style, before a very subtle and at times twisted inquirer of dialectic, lost in the ravines of post-dodecaphonic music or in rational insanities of American capitalism, we find instead a language of great clarity that does not renounce the irony or the strength of political denunciation. If Adorno is deeply pessimistic and marked by irresolution in comparing himself with a world he indignantly rejects, Marcuse frequently shines thanks to the “optimism of the unconscious”, at least in the phase of social movements around 1968. He confesses,

for example, to Habermas, who comes to meet him in San Diego (where the author of *Eros and Civilisation* has taught since the end of the Sixties), that it is impossible not to think, while admiring the sea, that the world has got within itself a critical hope – a phrase we find hard to imagine in Adorno’s mouth. Only he, in fact, can subhead the collection of aphorisms *Minima Moralia* with the irremediable *Reflections from Damaged Life*.

### **Closure of the circle or irresolution of thought**

The importance of a life horizon illuminated by a liberated unconscious is that it ends up building a theory that could be a productive Utopia.

The study of psychoanalysis shows itself to be different through the two associates of the IfS: while in the Frankfurter, Freud appears as a ruthless inquirer of the false bourgeois conscious (pure ‘master of suspicion’ as in Ricoeur); in the Berliner, he is seen instead as a bridge that helps build a horizon of strong thought, in view of a possible ‘other’ society (together with Hegel and Marx).

The game, the creativity, the *eros* liberated from the constraint of the ‘administrated world’ becomes the core condition of feeding and growing the ‘Great Refusal’ generation (refusal of exploitation, injustice and war). Only Herbert Marcuse could write that there is more creativity in

throwing a ball when children play than in a scientific/industrial invention.

Consider what he wrote as a young man already in his doctoral dissertation entitled *Der deutsche Künstlerroman (The German Artist-Novel)*:

*It is precisely the steady glance on human essence that becomes an inexorable impulse to keep the basis of radical revolution: that in the real situation of capitalism, it is not only a question of an economic or political crisis, but of a catastrophe of human essence; indeed, this awareness condemns 'a priori' to failure any reform that is purely economic or political, and unconditionally demands the catastrophic suppression of the existing state of things through total revolution.*<sup>5</sup>

We compare this passage with one of the Adorno's aphorisms:

The mission of the dialectic is to trip healthy opinions about the impossibility of changing the world, which are cultivated by powerful men who have taken their place, and of deciphering in their *proportions* the loyal and reduced image of the differences that have grown beyond any proportion. The dialectical reason is unreasonableness facing dominant reason: just because as it refutes and overcomes it, it becomes rational.<sup>6</sup>

For Marcuse, putting into play the act of thinking not only does not constitute a problem, but it is the only gesture to begin to build up the concrete Utopia of which we spoke before.

Adorno, instead, is struck as if by a Gorgon (consciously, in our

opinion, and thus with lucid pain) in the following trick: if theory does not open itself to reality like an intervention for an "other" praxis, it risks death by starvation; but if it mixes with practice like change, it is altered, losing afflatus and purity, as well as coherence and intensity.

Superficially, we can say: Marcuse runs the risk of facing the sea and throwing himself into it, without knowing if he will be able to swim or if he will drown; while Adorno remains on the beach frozen by the same doubt.

### **'Between the police and the students, I choose the latter'**

Considering that it is a question of documents that have only recently emerged and due to the light that they throw on Critical Theory's protagonists, it seems valuable to us to link to some content from the Adorno-Marcuse correspondence. The collection of letters dates back to 1969, or the last 7 months of the author of *Minima Moralia's* life.

As Raffaele Laudani explains very well, the beginning of the correspondence is constituted by the notorious phone call the Institute's director makes to the police because of the students' occupation. 'Teddie' writes to "dear Herbert" on 14 February 1969:

*Here the situation has again become dramatic. An SDS group led by Krahl has occupied an Institute room refusing to leave, in spite of three requests. We have had to call*

*the police who have arrested all those who were in the room. The situation is terrible in itself, but Friedeburg, Habermas and I were present when it happened and we could check that violence was not employed [...] The propaganda is presenting the events in a completely twisted way, as if it were us who took repressive dispositions, and not the students who screamed at us to keep quiet and not to tell anything that had happened.*<sup>7</sup>

We find on this occasion a scared and disappointed Theodor Wiesengrund Adorno because of the severing of a very close relationship that had been established with the progressive student body in 1966-1967, and thus in the first phase of the protest in universities in West Germany.

We have to say, too, that, unfortunately for his scorned master, Krahl shows himself to be more resolute and less ready to dialogue in comparison with the analogous and better-known Rudi Dutschke in West Berlin (one of the Ernst Bloch's pupils).

Marcuse answers from San Diego on 5 April, with his usual frankness; he does not want to accept the invitation from *IfS* if a meeting with the protesting students is not foreseen too. It is clearly the German-American sociologist's way of siding with the students instead of with the police (besides, he himself writes, "If I have to choose [...] I am with the students"). In a similar situation, he would not call the police in the absence of violent

episodes because "our cause (that is not only ours)" is surely "better protected by rebel students than by police". A declaration regarding which Marcuse gets daily confirmation "here in California".

In conclusion, another meaningful passage is a long one from the same 5 April letter in which Marcuse comments on the significant distance with Adorno, Friedeburg and Habermas (not to mention the by then almost reactionary Horkheimer) regarding themes such as the relationship between theory and praxis, the building of dissent, the struggle against the late capitalist system:

*I consider there are situations, moments, in which theory is urged forward by the praxis – situations in which, if theory keeps itself far from praxis, it becomes unloyal. We cannot delete from the world the fact that these students are influenced by us (and surely not least by you), I am proud of this and I am ready to count on patricide, even if it hurts sometimes [...] We know (and they do too) that the situation is not revolutionary [...] But the situation is so terrible, oppressive and humiliating that the rebellion against it requires a biological and physiological reaction [...] this fresh air is not that of 'left-wing fascism' (a contradiction in terms). Is the air that we too (or at least me) one day or other would like to breathe and surely is not that of the establishment. I discuss different problems with students and I attack them if, from my point of view, they*

are doing silly things, playing others' game; but against their bad weapons, I would not make use of worse and more terrible weapons. And I would be very sorry for myself (for us) if it would seem that I (we) are on the world's side, sustaining the mass murder in Vietnam.<sup>8</sup>

### **Appendix. Which 1968?: Marcuse, Foucault, Deleuze**

It is a well-known article which one of the world's most prestigious newspaper uses to comment on the situation in France at the beginning of the spring of 1968. As early as March, in fact, *Le Monde* irresponsibly (in hindsight) entitles a piece *La France s'ennuie* ("France is bored"), which talks of wellness and youth with neither problems nor great interests.

In a few weeks, the facts disprove this short-sighted analysis with which a good amount of intellectuals side while they are engaged on a different role. Among these are two Frenchmen and a German scholar who constitute three examples that might be interesting to briefly compare.

We have already referred to the vanity of the presumed role of Herbert Marcuse as "the 1968 prophet". It is sufficient to consider that in more than one inquiry (made by the same protesting students) the fact emerges that his books are many times barely read or merely quoted. Besides, in a famous interview by Giovanni Lisi for the former first channel of Italian public

television in the summer of that decisive year, it is the philosopher from Berlin himself, from whom Lisi requested a comment on the famous triad "Marx, Mao, Marcuse", who smiled and answered that those who mistake him for the master of the student movements in the West are fools.

Moreover, we have before us the case of one member of the old Frankfurt *Institute for Social Research* who frequently (not always) sides with the radical youth – in this respect analogous to literary critic and culture sociologist Leo Löwenthal, and differently from Adorno and even more so from Horkheimer, as we have already seen.

We have the passage from a radical pessimism expressed by his most famous text (dating back to 1964, *One-Dimensional Man*) to the beginning of a certain hope with *Essay on Liberation*, written precisely just before Parisian days in May. Marcuse is present in the French capital for the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Marx's birth.

Then in the 1970<sup>s</sup>, the philosopher dilutes that relative optimism under the weight of the repression, the end of the Vietnam War and the petrol-financial crisis, the withdrawal into private life of many young former protesters and the bloody defeat of experiences such as that of the *Black Panthers* or *Weathermen*.

The analysis comparing the USA to France is interesting; it is a recognition that Marcuse gives on the occasion of his speech on 23

May at the same university where he has taught since 1965, the University of California, San Diego:

*If we ask ourselves why in France the student movement has found the support and sympathy of the population and the strategic support of the working class [...] while in this country it has been the exact opposite, the answer cannot but be two-fold.*

*Firstly, France is not a wealthy society anymore, in the sense that the living conditions of most of the population are far beneath the American standard of living. This, obviously, provokes a lesser identification with the system [...]*

*Secondly, the political tradition of the French workers movement still survives and in large measure [...] Besides, France in just a century has experienced four revolutions and then there is a sort of revolutionary tradition that can be provoked, rediscovered and renewed in case of need.<sup>9</sup>*

For almost all of May and June, Michel Foucault lives in Tunis, where he has tenure; he stops by Paris only for a few days to discuss whether or not to accept the position of director of the Institute of philosophy in the new *Paris VIII-Vincennes* University (nowadays Saint-Denis). Thus he has got time to be less conscious of the police/student struggle, while he faces the much harder Tunisian reality. Not a few of his students are condemned to years and years of the most severe prison for political reasons; he

himself is arrested because of public sympathies shown toward the student movement. The author of *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique* will be engaged in France during the 1970s. In that decade, Foucault divides his time among Vincennes (where he is arrested several times by police for his support of the protesters), the foundation of *GIP-Groupe d'information sur les prisons* (together with Deleuze, Genet and others), the struggle for migrants (as in the example of *Goutte d'Or*) and the foundation of the extreme left wing newspaper *Libération* (together with Sartre and Deleuze once again).

Furthermore, Foucault reasons starting from a different image of substance of the philosopher:

*The militant intellectual now tries to exploit his position of academic prestige in order to communicate through the mass media directly with public opinion – an opinion that is surely not the same as that of some years before, because the 1968 movement did not happen in vain.<sup>10</sup>*

Regarding Gilles Deleuze, there are no particulars to add, beyond his aforementioned and passionate participation in the same initiatives as his friend Foucault. It is interesting the part during the long 1989 interview with Claire Parnet in which he tells the exhilarating scene of his *soutenance de theses* (the defence of his thesis for his PhD, which, at that time, included two theses to present and discuss), precisely in May 1968.



The commission wasted time on the argument regarding where to hold the long examination of PhD candidate Deleuze: if on the ground floor or the first floor of Sorbonne. In the first case, it would be easier for

potentially violent students to reach the room, but also easier for professors to honourably escape; in the second case, it would be harder both for the former to create disorder and for the latter to escape!

## Note

- <sup>1</sup> His best essays are collected in: M. Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, Continuum International Publishing Group, New York, 1975.
- <sup>2</sup> Id., *Dawn and Decline: Notes 1926-1931 and 1950-1969*, Continuum International Publishing Group, New York, 1978.
- <sup>3</sup> H. Marcuse, *Marxismo e rivoluzione. Studi 1929-32*, Einaudi, Torino, 1975.
- <sup>4</sup> Id., *Filosofia e teoria critica* (1937), in Id., *Cultura e società. Saggi di teoria critica 1933-1965*, Einaudi, Torino, 1969, p. 95 (my trans.).
- <sup>5</sup> Idem, *Der deutsche Künstlerroman. Frühe Aufsätze. Schriften I*, 1978, p. 536 (my trans.).
- <sup>6</sup> Th. W. Adorno, "E par malato tutto ciò che esiste" (1944), in Id., *Minima moralia. Meditazioni della vita offesa*, Einaudi, Torino, 1979, p. 76 (my trans.).
- <sup>7</sup> H. Marcuse, *Corrispondenza con Adorno sul movimento studentesco tedesco* (1969), in Id., *Oltre l'uomo a una dimensione. Movimenti e controrivoluzione preventiva – Scritti e interventi*, R. Laudani (ed.), Manifestolibri, Roma, 2005, vol. 1, pp. 307-08 (my trans.). The reference is to Friedeburg and Habermas regards two colleagues and full-time

- professors, present with Adorno on that dramatic day; Hans-Jürgen Krahl is the quoted pupil of the director contested in 1969. The SDS is the student movement gathered around the Socialist Student League, expelled from the SPD (the *Social Democratic Party*) in 1966.
- <sup>8</sup> Id., *Corrispondenza con Adorno sul movimento studentesco tedesco* (1969), in Id., *Oltre l'uomo a una dimensione*, cit., p. 309 (my trans.). The reference to 'leftist fascism' is connected to the accusation in 1968 by Habermas against the student movement (later retracted by the philosopher twenty years later): we consider, moreover, that Horkheimer critiques the strong student protests due to the visit in Germany of American Vice President Humphrey in 1967, thus siding with the United States warmongers in Vietnam.
  - <sup>9</sup> Id., *Impressioni sul maggio francese e il movimento tedesco* (1968), in Id., *Oltre l'uomo a una dimensione*, cit., p. 89 (my trans.).
  - <sup>10</sup> R. D'Alessandro, *La teoria e l'immaginazione. Sartre, Foucault, Deleuze e l'impegno politico 1968-1978*, Manifestolibri, Roma, 2010, p. 68 (my trans.).

**Bibliography**

- ADORNO W. Th., "E par malato tutto ciò che esiste" (1944), in Id., *Minima moralia. Meditazioni della vita offesa*, Einaudi, Torino, 1979, p. 76.
- HORKHEIMER M., *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, Continuum International Publishing Group, New York, 1975.
- IDEM, *Dawn and Decline: Notes 1926-1931 and 1950-1969*, Continuum International Publishing Group, New York, 1978.
- MARCUSE H., *Marxismo e rivoluzione. Studi 1929-32*, Einaudi, Torino, 1975.
- IDEM, „Filosofia e teoria critica” (1937), in Id., *Cultura e società. Saggi di teoria critica 1933-1965*, Einaudi, Torino, 1969.
- IDEM, *Der deutsche Künstlerroman. Frühe Aufsätze*. Schriften I, 1978.
- IDEM, „Corrispondenza con Adorno sul movimento studentesco tedesco (1969)”, in Id., *Oltre l'uomo a una dimensione. Movimenti e controrivoluzione preventiva – Scritti e interventi*, R. Laudani (ed.), Manifestolibri, Roma, 2005, vol. 1, pp. 307-08.
- D'ALESSANDRO R., *La teoria e l'immaginazione. Sartre, Foucault, Deleuze e l'impegno politico 1968-1978*, Manifestolibri, Roma, 2010.