The Critical Theory of Society: Present Situation and Future Tasks

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During the nineteen-thirties authors associated with Frankfurt's Institute for Social Research developed a framework for the analysis of contemporary society and its historical roots which they called "the critical theory of society." Among them it was Max Horkheimer, the first director of the Institute, and Herbert Marcuse who gave the most explicit accounts of the scope and intentions of this critical theory.[1] Since that time the work of the three best-known representatives of the Frankfurt Institute (Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Theodor Adorno) has become widely recognized in Europe; in the United States, however, Horkheimer's name is virtually unknown in the academic environment and Adorno is known almost exclusively in connection with *The Authoritarian Personality*. Of course Marcuse's recent public notoriety has called attention to

[1] Max Horkheimer, "Traditionelle und kritische Theorie," in Alfred Schmidt, ed., *Kritische Theorie II* (Frankfurt-Main: Fischer, 1968), 137–200. Hereafter this collection of essays is referred to as *KT*. Marcuse, "Philosophie und kritische Theorie," in English translation "Philosophy and Critical Theory," *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (Boston: Beacon, 1968), 134–158. These essays were originally published in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* in 1937.

his books and articles in the United States well outside of "New Left" circles, and the first signs of a wider official acknowledgment of his writings on the part of "serious" scholars in this country are appearing.

In Europe at present the activities of the Frankfurt Institute continue under Adorno's inspiration, and younger persons associated with it, especially Alfred Schmidt, have already produced an impressive number of articles and books. A full-scale study of critical theory has been published there recently.[2] But in this country the Institute's contribution—and indeed the contribution of the twentieth-century European Left in general—to radical social thought and action has been barely recognized, much less critically evaluated and applied, either by academic specialists or by non-academic radicals. A few doctoral dissertations along these lines are in progress or have been completed recently, and some of this material will undoubtedly be published in the coming years. But a concerted effort will be required in order to repair the damage done to both social science and radical politics by this lengthy neglect of the extensive effort undertaken in Europe throughout this century to revitalize the intellectual foundations of the modern revolutionary tradition.

Full studies of these materials and translations of the important sources are essential, then, for radical action in this country. In the meantime the general issue concerning the problems and purposes of the contemporary study of society—specifically, the study which attempts to contribute to the radical change necessary to bring about a truly human social order—must be always in the forefront of our work. In the present essay I propose to discuss that issue

[2] Gian Enrico Rusconi, *La teoria critica della società* (Bologna: il Mulino, 1968).

in relation to the very broad outlines of the critical theory of society. The specific purpose of this essay is to ask what is the present situation of the critical theory and what are its future tasks.

It is not only the needs of social science and radical politics, but also the internal development of critical theory itself, which necessitates this current evaluation of its situation and possibilities. In the opinion of those who developed the theory, changing historical circumstances from the nineteen-thirties to the present require important modifications in its basic approach to social problems. We shall discuss this problem below. In addition, the practical response of the theory's founders to some recent political issues has clearly shown that serious differences exist among them in terms of what guidelines for contemporary political action might be drawn from the theory. Whereas Marcuse undertook a strenuous public campaign against the war in Vietnam, Horkheimer has been sympathetic to the position of the United States and critical of the youthful West German antiwar protesters. Secondly, Marcuse and Adorno have responded quite differently to certain issues concerning the student movement within the universities. As a result of both theoretical and practical difficulties, the future of critical theory is in doubt.

I

The critical theory of society is the ongoing analysis of modern society which has as its basis the work of Marx. As it is used in this phrase, the term "critical" refers specifically to the critique of political economy which constitutes the core of Marx's efforts.[3] Yet the situation is not so simple,

[3] *KT II*, 155 fn., 192; *Negations*, 282, fn. 18.

for there is a great deal at stake in the matter of the way in which Marx's work is understood and applied. The contemporary critical theory of society attempts a creative recovery and development of its nineteenth-century inheritance, and its cardinal principles are: (1) the concrete social reality is always changing, even though the basic social form (such as bourgeois society) persists; (2) theoretical constructions are a part of that concrete social reality, and thus their modification is a response to an objective necessity. In Horkheimer's words (*KT I,* 49): "The theoretical activity of men, just like their practical activity, is not the independent recognition of a stable object, but a product of the changing reality." This theory implicitly reinforces the crucial point that dogmatism and uncreativity in the understanding of Marxism injures not the representatives of the established order, but rather the forces struggling for a better society.

The essential difference between the critical theory and the other predominant contemporary modes of theoretical analysis, however, is not that it defines itself as "Marxist" vis-à-vis "non-Marxist" attitudes. Since the theoretical and practical heritage of Marxism is itself an integral part of the ongoing historical dynamic, Marxism cannot hope to stand outside this dynamic as a completed and self-sufficient entity. Since its fate is bound up with the general fate of the bitter struggle for a rational human society, and since the outcome of that struggle will remain in the balance for a long time yet, Marxism necessarily undergoes modifications insofar as the specific content of its basic concepts is concerned. This is not by any means an opportunistic adaptation to current reality undertaken to "save" the theory, an ideological venture by the faithful, precisely because this theory played a profound role in the *creation* of the current historical reality: The changing reality within which it oper-

ates is itself partially a product of the theory, and in a sense the changing theory is responding to the conditions of its own success as a determinant of historical development.

What is then the essential difference between critical theory and the other major types, which Horkheimer groups under the name of "traditional" theory? For traditional theory, and all of the investigations of the modern social sciences that have been undertaken in accordance with its presuppositions, the actual social context of the theory and the ends served by it remain external—that is, formally extrinsic—to the theory itself. In fact this theory strives constantly to free itself from all "prejudices" and "interests," and in one of its late forms claims "value-free inquiry" for its rubric. The critical theory, on the other hand, incorporates a determinate goal in the structure of its analysis and explicitly sees itself as "an inseparable moment of the historical effort to create a world adequate for the needs and powers of men." Horkheimer maintains that

> . . . in the constitution of its categories and in all phases of its progress critical theory is guided by the interest in the rational organization of human activity, which also is concerned with clarifying and legitimizing the theory itself. For it is not only a matter of ends that have been already indicated in the present forms of life, but of men with all their possibilities.[4]

Is this commitment of the theory to the achievement of a rational form of human society merely an arbitrary act? Or worse, a deliberate distortion of the proper aims of social analysis? It is neither, for the following reasons. In an earlier stage of modern history the traditional theory (whose prototype for Horkheimer is Descartes' *Discourse on Method*) played a vital role in undermining stulti-

[4] For this and the immediately preceding passage see *KT II*, 193–194; see *KT I*, 168; and *Negations*, 141–142.

fied modes of thought and in opening up new possibilities for the human mastery of nature. Although philosophers such as Bacon and Descartes clearly expressed their hopes that social progress would result from the new foundations of knowledge, they could not show how these hopes were intrinsically related to the new methods, and thus the former remained extrinsic vis-à-vis the latter. But this fact is an objective condition of the prevailing social reality, not a theoretical lacuna, for the actual circumstances under which the satisfaction of essential needs for all men might be possible were not yet apparent. By the nineteenth century, however, the real basis for this possibility had been established, and it was then that the critical theory (and the social program of the oppressed) demanded that this possibility be realized through a rational form of production. The commitment to this demand is thus not arbitrary, but rather is based upon real historical possibilities.

Although it may now be conceded that the commitment itself is not arbitrary, it may yet be objected that such a commitment is extraneous as far as social analysis is concerned and that, while salutory in itself, it might serve to distort the analysis. Certainly it may do so in particular cases: The theory is not a magic wand in any sense. But can it really be extraneous? Any adequate study of present-day society should be able to delineate three aspects of the social reality. Represented schematically, these are: (1) the precise way in which the established set of institutions functions; (2) the present possibilities for a transition to a more rational set of institutions (one which would bring an end to war, injustice, poverty, and oppression); (3) the present possibilities for increased barbarism, intensified oppression, and thermonuclear annihilation. Obviously the elementary common interest of the human race is embodied in the second of these three aspects, and thus it represents

what we most need to know as a result of our analysis of society. But since the established set of institutions *already contains* the possibilities listed under (2) and (3), in fact one cannot even fully comprehend what "is" without also delineating what "can be" (and what ought to be). The actual incorporates the potential as part of its own structure. The prevailing reality always represents the realization of certain potentialities and the suppression of others, but the tension between the two sets is a permanent feature of the reality and is the driving force of historical change.

Far from being formally extraneous, then, an interest in (and *a fortiori* a commitment to, I should think) the possible rational organization of society is a necessary ingredient in the study of contemporary society. The results of any such study can be and should be examined from the point of view of what conclusions may be drawn regarding this possibility. The concepts and methodology employed in the study must be scrutinized in order to determine whether they are adequate for the complex task of uncovering the dynamic tension which unites the established order and the underlying conditions which form the basis for transcending it. Critical theory defines itself as the theory explicitly focussed on this task.

Marcuse's essay, "Philosophy and Critical Theory," describes in concrete terms what has been outlined above. The theory is oriented toward both the past and the future. With respect to the former, "critical theory concerns itself with preventing the loss of the truths which past knowledge labored to attain." And this is a necessary undertaking: "Reason, mind, morality, knowledge, and happiness are not only categories of bourgeois philosophy, but concerns of mankind. As such they must be preserved, if not derived anew." Under historical conditions which seemed hopelessly at variance with its assertions, earlier thought had

advanced the revolutionary propositions that (to take a few examples) rationality was a universal characteristic of men, that society ought to be reformed according to the potentialities of human rationality, and that freedom and rationality must necessarily be united. Yet the meaning of these earlier achievements is subject to great controversy, as is shown very clearly in the currently fashionable treatment of Plato, Rousseau, and Hegel—all of whom advanced one or more of these propositions—as "totalitarian" theorists.

Precisely in order to preserve the achievements of the past, theory must continually reinterpret and concretize them in the light of present possibilities. This is the second aspect of the twofold orientation of critical theory: "In the theoretical reconstruction of the social process, the critique of current conditions and the analysis of their tendencies necessarily include future-oriented components."[5] Specifically, the theory seeks to identify factors in the social organization of production, in technological developments, and in the consciousness of the majority which constitute a possible basis for a radically different society. At that point in history when the ancient design of freedom and happiness for the first time can be linked with a productive process adequate for the realization of this design on a universal scale, the theory of society must develop a schema that delineates the conditions under which the transition to the desired goal might be accomplished. The acceptance of this task determines the choice and significance of the basic concepts employed in the theory: "The Marxian categories class, exploitation, surplus value, profit, impoverishment, and breakdown are moments of a conceptual whole whose meaning is to be sought not in the reproduction of the

[5] This and the two preceding quotations are from *Negations,* 152, 147, 145.

present society, but in its transformation toward a just society" (*KT II*, 167).

This is the orientation of critical theory. And if it has one outstanding principle that is characteristic of its approach, it is that the concepts employed in theoretical analysis are an integral part of the reality which they seek to grasp—and thus that these concepts both help to change the reality and are themselves modified in the course of this change. This is the nature of dialectical thought, according to Horkheimer, as it is expressed in critical theory. "Dialectic . . . has incorporated in itself the fact that it is integrated in history. It knows its own concepts as moments of the historical constellation as well as the expression of that striving toward a just society that manifests itself differently both theoretically and practically in different historical situations and that at the same time preserves its identity" (*ibid.*, xi). In my own view nothing more clearly distinguishes critical theory from the predominant modes of social-science research than this principle, namely, that the theoretical analysis of the social process and the concepts employed therein, as an integral part of that process, are "self-reflexive." In other words, the theoretical analysis, inasmuch as it describes its "object" (the social process) accurately, thereby effects a change in the prevailing situation by uncovering and clarifying the possibilities for a transition to a just society; and simultaneously this change transforms the basis of the theoretical analysis itself by specifying more concretely the content of the concepts, such as freedom and happiness, with which it works.

Writing in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* for 1932, Horkheimer indicated specifically what tasks he hoped would be undertaken in the journal which he edited: an attempt to unify into a coherent whole the contributions

of the various sections of the modern social sciences; the development of an adequate theoretical and empirical framework for social psychology; and the demonstration of the necessity for a thorough connection between the investigation of present society and the prospects for a radically different society in the future.[6] In the essay on critical theory which he wrote for the *Zeitschrift* in 1937, Marcuse suggested three reasons why the theory had to be newly applied and developed in the contemporary period. First, bourgeois society had entered a new phase in the twentieth century, that of authoritarianism and totalitarianism, and it was necessary to comprehend this phenomenon on the basis of the earlier history of bourgeois society. Second, the beginnings of the deliberate construction of socialism in parts of the world and the rising standard of living in Western capitalist society required a re-investigation of the goals of the struggle for liberation. And third, the specific content of those goals had to undergo modification in the process of "bringing to consciousness potentialities that have emerged within the maturing historical situation" (*Negations,* 158).

An example of the treatment of a specific problem will illustrate how Horkheimer, Marcuse, and their co-workers utilized the conception of critical theory outlined above. Perhaps the best example of all is the analysis of "materialism" found in two of Horkheimer's essays, "Materialismus und Metaphysik" and "Materialismus und Moral" (both published in 1933), and in Marcuse's "Philosophy and Critical Theory" and "On Hedonism." Historically, materialism had been opposed to "idealism" in two respects: (1) in asserting irreconcilable claims about the fundamental nature of reality (that is, Being); (2) in attitudes toward pleasure and happiness. Horkheimer and

[6] Passage quoted in Alfred Schmidt, "Nachwort des Herausgebers: Zur Idee der kritischen Theorie," *KT II,* 341–342.

Marcuse point out that both materialism and idealism share a common fault with respect to the first point, in that both hypostasize a particular principle and both invest "Being" with ethical overtones, identifying the highest reality with perfection. They argue that critical theory is a materialist theory not in this traditional sense, but only in its thoroughgoing concern with human happiness, its conviction that the achievement of happiness requires a transformation of the relations of production, and its opposition to the persistent attempts to identify the "essence" of man with some supra-historical "spiritual" qualities. Horkheimer emphatically contends that Marx's materialist theory is no "metaphysics of history."[7]

For them the tradition of idealism was correct in opposing the hedonistic aspect of earlier materialism in the name of human progress: the discipline of labor and the disciplining of the human appetitive functions were necessary stages in human liberation. But idealism's hidden side was a kind of "bad materialism," in the sense that empirical reality was consigned to a lower order of Being while contradictions were resolved in the realm of *Geist*. As a result, its own principles forced it beyond the scheme it sought to establish. Horkheimer uses the example of Kant's categorical imperative (*KT I*, 82): Since the isolated individual who is the subject of the categorical imperative cannot realize his demands in the empirical reality, he is driven to change that reality (the social order) in order to establish the possibility for its realization. The materialism of critical theory preserves this element of idealism, namely, that its practice must be guided by concepts which retain an aspect of abstractness so long as the desired goal has not yet been reached (*Negations*, 153).

[7] *KT I*, 105; see 19, 46; and Schmidt, 347–350.

II

The limitations of critical theory had been indicated at the outset. The fact that this theory is an integral part of the ongoing historical struggle for a rational set of social institutions means that the dispute over its correct conception and application has an objective basis in the changing social situation and that this dispute will persist as long as the struggle itself (*KT II*, 189). Thus there is no way in which the theory can provide a definitive and permanent portrait of the social process; and its claim that this shortcoming reflects an objective condition, rather than a failure stemming from a distorted conceptual framework, cannot be conclusively demonstrated in the theory. The theory insists that the concepts employed in the analysis of the social process must embody a determinate possibility—namely, that men can organize their social relations in such a way as to eliminate war, poverty, injustice, and oppression—as a *real* possibility of the present; but it cannot prove that this possibility *must* be realized. In this sense only the realization of this possibility can demonstrate the "correctness" of the theory.

This internal limitation within the theory, the fact that it is necessarily bound at every particular point to the concrete historical situation, affects the way in which not only the nineteenth-century heritage, but even the relatively recent contributions of the Frankfurt group in the nineteen-thirties, must be approached today. Both Horkheimer and Marcuse have emphasized this principle in the last few years upon the occasion of the republication of their earlier essays.[8] They insist that these essays no longer have the

[8] References for this discussion are: *Negations*, xi–xx; *KT I*, ix–xiv; and *II*, vii–xi. Since these are brief pieces, no page references will be given for the quotations drawn from them.

same significance as before. With reference to these essays Marcuse notes that "no revision could bridge the chasm that separates the period in which they were written from the present one," and of the perspective which unites them he says: "What was correct in it has since become, perhaps not false, but a thing of the past." Horkheimer maintains that "thoughtless and dogmatic application of critical theory to practice in the changed historical reality would only serve to hasten the process which it had denounced," and he makes it clear that he is referring also to the present meaning of his own earlier work. In assisting the relevance of critical theory for the present tasks of social change and social science, therefore, we must try to understand precisely what has happened in the interim.

The explanation seems to be quite simple. The assumption of power by the proletariat in important sectors of the highly developed capitalist society seemed to be a reasonable expectation throughout the first half of the twentieth century. To this traditional vision of Marxian theory had been added the special urgency of immediately transcending the barbaric phase of capitalism which had revealed itself in European fascism. It appeared that the oppositional forces had sufficiently matured so that the struggle against fascism could be carried over directly into the construction of democratic socialism in some of the technically advanced nations. Not only was their expectation disappointed: the prevailing social situation changed dramatically with the "integration" of the proletariat in bourgeois society. That this may be a "temporary" phenomenon is quite possible; but, as Horkheimer remarks elsewhere, what is involved is the agony of generations of human beings (is it necessary to refer to the fate of the Vietnamese and other peoples?). The new phase of bourgeois society is characterized above

all by the management and control of behavior in all aspects of social existence exercised through a myriad of manipulative techniques.

What is the impact of this new phase on the situation of critical theory? In Horkheimer's words, "thought and will, theoretical and practical reason, are no longer united." For Marcuse it means that the theory cannot now hope to "take hold of the masses." These statements strongly imply that the expectation outlined in the preceding paragraph exerted a determining influence upon the conception and structure of the essays written in the nineteen-thirties. And indeed they show such an influence clearly. The contradictions of bourgeois society, as they are expressed both in the productive process and in cultural forms, are analyzed in these essays not abstractly, not in the light of a fully elaborated ideal of socialism, but rather from the perspective of the then-existing possibilities for the initiation of the transition to socialism, most importantly the possibility of bringing the productive process under the control of a rational plan through the activity of the organized proletariat.

At that time a formidable new obstacle blocking the path of this transition had arisen: the terrorism and barbarism of the fascist movement. Theory could aid in the struggle against fascism by understanding its relationship to the earlier stages of bourgeois society, the factors responsible for its popular success, and the inner contradictions peculiar to it. The Frankfurt group, following the lead of Lukács' *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (especially the analysis of the "antinomies of bourgeois thought"), concentrated on tracing the contradictions expressed in cultural forms—particularly the history of philosophy—in order to discover to what extent intellectual culture had assisted the rise of fascism by preparing "its own liquidation." In other words,

they sought to uncover the factors in the cultural inheritance of the present which had pre-formed the consciousness of large segments of the developed bourgeois society in such a way that the society as a whole could fall victim to the depravities of totalitarian barbarism.

I think it will now be clear what Marcuse means in saying that what was correct in the theory is "a thing of the past." A reading of the essays will disclose that they contain many profound insights into the problems to which they were addressed; these insights unquestionably possess enduring value. They succeed—often brilliantly—in partially explaining the preparation for the fascist stage of bourgeois society. But the overriding problems have changed, and thus the correctness of the earlier theory cannot suffice for the present. Since the theory cannot at the moment work within the framework of an expectation of the assumption of power by the proletariat in the traditional sense, and since this group remains the only *social class* appropriate for the task of radical social change (as the *Essay on Liberation* clearly affirms), theory at present will necessarily appear more "abstract" than before. In accordance with changes in the objective social situation, it must confront precisely those tendencies which have blunted the sources of radical political action, namely, the growing apparatus of manipulation and control.

But this is not the whole story. The recent activities of the Frankfurt group reveal differences among them which find expression both theoretically and practically, and these differences reflect alternative ways of applying the heritage of critical theory now. Those presently identified with the Institute's affairs in Frankfurt (Jürgen Habermas and, until recently, Theodor Adorno) have repeatedly requested police protection for the Institute in response to threats and pressures from radical students; among other

things, the students have painted slogans on the walls of the Institute's building drawn from the radical pamphlets which Horkheimer authored during the nineteen-thirties under the pseudonym "Heinrich Regius." In general Marcuse has been much more in sympathy with the radical student movement, although certainly he has not adopted an uncritical attitude toward it. More significantly, opposition to the American actions in Vietnam became an important part of Marcuse's work during the last few years, and he has affirmed that the spirit of those social forces with whose fate the critical theory was intertwined, the spirit which experienced its last great moment on the European continent in the Spanish Civil War, is now expressed in the anti-imperialist struggle in the Third World.[9] By way of contrast, even allowing for the fact that they live outside the United States (for so do Jean-Paul Sartre and Bertrand Russell), Marcuse's colleagues among the Frankfurt group have been remarkably reticent and supercilious with respect to Vietnam.[10]

In 1968 Horkheimer described thusly the situation and tasks of critical theory (*KT I*, xiii):

To measure the so-called free world according to its own concept, to treat it critically and nevertheless to take up the defense of its ideas against Hitlerian, Stalinist or other variations of fascism, is the right and duty of everyone who thinks. In spite of its ominous potential and of all injustice both internal and external, the free world still constitutes at the moment an island in space and time whose end in the ocean of despotism would also signify the end of the culture to which the critical theory still belongs.

[9] *Negations*, xv, 269.

[10] There is much more that could be detailed concerning these practical differences. In addition, Habermas and Schmidt have published critiques of Marcuse's work. An independent exploration of this subject would be valuable for contemporary radicalism.

What are we to gather from this, apart from a feeling of gratitude that we do not all have to practice critical theory under conditions similar to those which the Vietnamese must endure? Horkheimer also warns the left (*ibid.*, xii) that it is "pseudo-revolutionary" to encourage the constant possibility of a breakdown of democracy into totalitarianism, and presumably he is referring to attacks on the universities, the press, the courts, and so forth. Are we to conclude from this that only liberal reform activity will be blessed with the sanction of a chastened critical theory?

It seems, then, we are to carry on the analyses begun by the earlier critical theory after having excised the element of active involvement with the forces of radical social change which permeated the conception of this theory in the nineteen-thirties. Alfred Schmidt even suggests a program for us: problems explored in the earlier period which represent fruitful areas of investigation for the present are the structure of history, the contradiction between idealism and materialism, and the contrast between critical and traditional theory (*op. cit.*, 343). Schmidt has published an impressive number of books and essays in the last decade which, together with the writings of Adorno, illustrate the orientation of critical theory in Frankfurt during recent times. In addition, we have the examples of Horkheimer's later work which are collected in the volume entitled *Zur Kritik der instrumentellen Vernunft.*

They remain exceedingly competent writings, to be sure, and not at all unimportant; yet in so many of these recent contributions the cutting edge of the earlier theory is missing. The explanation is to be found, I think, in the fact that the contemporary theory has not been related concretely to its social situation; it is this circumstance, rather than the fact that the theory and its practitioners have become academically respectable, which decisively

separates it from its preceding stage in the nineteen-thirties and -forties. Horkheimer has described the changed conditions of bourgeois society and has explained that the earlier essays are permeated with economic and political conceptions that are no longer "immediately valid," but his explanation is incomplete in at least two respects: (1) it does not indicate what shortcomings in the earlier theory itself, apart from the altered social situation, were responsible for this loss of validity; and (2) it does not even attempt to ask whether there are any contemporary forms of radical political action which are linked with the concerns of critical theory.

Marcuse has confronted both of these issues, and to a great extent this explains the differences between him and other members of the Frankfurt group over the contemporary orientation of critical theory. In the Preface to *Negations* and in the essay "The Obsolescence of Marxism?"[11] he argues that the conceptions of the earlier theory, both in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, were "not radical enough." These conceptions did not comprehend the possibility that a late stage of capitalism could stabilize itself for an extended period during which (within the small circle of technically advanced nations) a comparatively high standard of living for the population as a whole, and the concomitant management of opinion and behavior, could suppress the contradictions inherent in the productive process. Likewise there were defects in the representation of socialism arising out of the fact that the tasks of socialism had been outlined with regard to a stage of capitalism that had been transcended. Finally, the especially complex problem of the transition from capitalism to socialism has to be re-thought in light of these factors. In sum, the theory

[11] In Nicholas Lobkowicz, ed., *Marx and the Western World* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1967), 409–417.

was not utopian enough on the one hand, in that it did not foresee the possibilities opened up by high productivity and shortened labor-time within an advanced stage of capitalism; on the other hand, it had not been broad enough to encompass the difficulties involved in building socialism in economically backward areas under the constant threat of war.

As far as the second issue is concerned, it seems to me that among the contributions to critical theory only Marcuse's recent writings have attempted to connect the heritage of the theory with the immensely difficult task of discovering modes of radical political action appropriate to the latest configurations of bourgeois society. This is true especially of the article "Repressive Tolerance" and the book *An Essay on Liberation*. The proponents of critical theory unanimously agree that the present stage of capitalism is marked by these two distinctive features, among others: (1) the gradual integration of all facets of social and cultural life (for example, sexuality) as instruments of control over individual behavior; and (2) the development of increasingly sophisticated techniques for the management and manipulation of behavior. Under such circumstances opposition to the system, cut off from a mass base in the working class and presented to the public consciousness by the "communications" media in thoroughly distorted forms, must employ strategies which necessarily have little in common with those of the past.

"Repressive Tolerance" and *An Essay on Liberation* examine some of those strategies and the social context in which they have been developed. The former explores the underlying basis for the transformation of the social function of the traditional civil liberties: In a society characterized by pervasive manipulation from above, the preformation of consciousness and the control of mass communications

severely limit the extent to which the "free exchange of ideas" and "rational discourse" can serve as elements of the decision-making process. This essay has been a vital factor, for example, in widespread discussions concerning attitudes toward campus recruitment by the military services and by corporations conspicuously involved in war production. The remarks on the uses of obscenity and on the novel aspects of the French uprising in May 1968 in *An Essay on Liberation* are also indicative of the way in which Marcuse has continually striven to relate the comprehensive picture of the social process offered by critical theory to currently existing and emerging forms of opposition, no matter how fragmented, disorganized, or hopeless they may seem at the moment.

The lesson appears obvious: Divorced from an intense concern with the ongoing active forms of opposition, critical theory loses its distinctive characteristic and assumes a regular position within the academic (and social) division of labor. Its progress is not assured solely by virtue of the fact that homage is rendered to it in an increasing number of elegant philosophical and sociological exercises. Its only unique value consists in whatever ability it possesses at any moment to sharpen the existing social contradictions by depicting the conditions constituting the gap between the prevailing situation and the possible rational organization of humane society.

III

Within the established academic ranks one must expect to meet with gallant resistance to the notions that the intellectual's task is to sharpen social contradictions and that the analytical concepts of social science must be able to

reveal the hidden potentialities and trends of the present. One cannot hope that an essay on critical theory or any other merely ratiocinative devices would prompt many defections. Yet the critical theory claims no monopoly of truth and disdains no insights that may be gleaned even from the remains of respectable scholarship. The "scientific study of society" which has as its objective radical social change begins its contemporary theoretical and practical work with the knowledge of its inability to limn the co-ordinates of action that would bridge the gap between what is and what should be. An element of abstractness is thus imposed upon it, but its central question is fully concrete: What are the connections between the existing oppositional forces and the internal social contradictions peculiar to the present stage of capitalism?

The value and potential of any particular oppositional movement depends upon the degree to which its programs and tendencies confront the system at its "leading edges," that is, in terms of the newest features of the system's struggle for survival. In fact the failure to do so can be not only unfortunate, but disastrous: the best illustration is the European Left's blindness—until it was much too late—to the real danger of fascism. Despite its ostensible defeat, fascism served capitalist society by destroying the militant European proletariat precisely at the time when economic crises might have paved the way for an assumption of power by the proletariat in the traditional sense. A return to the forms of struggle of the pre-fascist era is extremely unlikely, and in order to avoid tilting at windmills the opposition must continually search for new ground upon which to make its stand. The apparently undisciplined and amorphous character of the radical opposition in the advanced capitalist nations at present is good evidence of this "testing" phase of its development.

The pressure of events in the years since the Second World War has forced a recognition (in both the theory and practice of the radical opposition) of the fact that the domestic and the international arenas of conflict are interconnected. To a certain extent class conflict has been internationalized; the "wretched of the earth" in the Third World have taken up the struggle formerly waged by the domestic European and North American proletariat. The response of the ruling interests has been perfectly true to form: the barbarism and terror which fascism unleashed both internally and externally in the earlier period now operates exclusively against the underdeveloped world, as in Algeria and Vietnam. Moreover, this campaign against the non-white, pre-industrialized peoples strengthens the hegemony of the ruling interests in the developed nations by keeping the terrifying visage of the *Untermenschen* in the popular consciousness. And yet, despite the most ruthless attempts at suppression from without, various forms of socialism have become the authentic instrument of social progress in the Third World.

Until now the critical theory has not come to terms adequately with these trends. As far as the developed nations are concerned, the full impact of the anti-imperialist struggle on the stabilized position of the domestic proletariat (and vice versa) is not yet clear. It is possible that the remoteness of the actual conflicts and other factors such as racism will prevent the anti-imperialist uprising from becoming a decisive element of social conflict in the advanced capitalist nations for a long time; but there can be no doubt that the increasing pressure on the empire's frontiers is a crucial feature of its over-all dilemma. With reference to the development of socialism in the economically backward areas,

. . . there is the possibility of skipping the stage of repressive capitalist industrialization, an industrialization that has led to increasingly more powerful domination of the productive and distributive apparatus over the underlying population. Instead the backward countries may have the chance for a technological development which keeps the industrial apparatus in line with the vital needs and freely developing faculties of human beings.[12]

Should this possibility be realized even in the smallest measure, there would be profound consequences for the future of socialism in the advanced nations. Thus the critical theory must regularly review the concepts with which it approaches present-day society in the light of events in the new socialist countries, especially China and Cuba.

The overriding obstacle to the development of a radical opposition on a mass basis in contemporary capitalist society is, according to the analysis of critical theory, the pervasive manipulation of consciousness. This fact pertains to the material basis of the society, and not merely to the "superstructure," because the management of needs is an essential feature of the productive process itself. The manipulation of behavior and of the expression of needs is the determinate framework within which the integration of the traditional working class as full members of the capitalist consumer system has taken place. This is the second major problematic (the first, as described above, is the interaction of internal and external opposition) confronting critical theory today: It must uncover the dialectic of this integration, the process by which new contradictions arise as some of the old are repressed. Some aspects of this dialectic are already apparent, for example the fact that, as the whole population is drawn fully into the complex network of commodities and as the range of available

[12] "The Obsolescence of Marxism," 415. See the "Political Preface 1966" to *Eros and Civilization* (2nd ed.; Boston: Beacon, 1966).

products expands to immense proportions, the character of the expected benefits and satisfactions to be derived from the use of these products changes decisively. First, the products are increasingly tailored for psychologically based wants; and second, the promised satisfactions are progressively inflated beyond all possibility of realization. The average consumer is led to believe that these seemingly commonplace items will satiate his wildest fantasies. The overt cynicism toward these messages is only one aspect of the reaction to them, for there is sufficient evidence to show that an increasing range of unfulfilled expectations is developed, mostly on the subconscious level.

The products supplied cannot, under any circumstances, really gratify these expectations. Thus a fund of suppressed resentment accumulates which finds an outlet in diffused aggressiveness: behavior in the driving of automobiles is only the most obvious example of this. There is, therefore, an inherent instability built into the expanding consumer society that must—according to the necessities of the system itself—increase, and probably at an increasing rate. (There may also be a concomitant "natural" limit to the manipulation of wants, although this has not yet been worked out.) The growing dissatisfaction with the false gratifications embodied in consumer products *could,* in connection with other factors, provide the basis, among the majority of the population, for the transition to a system of unmanipulated and "real" gratification. It provides the possibility of linking up broad strata of the population with those aspects of the current opposition directed against the perversion of needs and gratification in the consumer society. Free distribution of necessities ("free stores," public food kitchens, and so forth), collective activity which lowers the level of individual material needs, and sheer indifference to the garish wares hawked in the marketplace

are some of the present practices which show every sign of spreading rapidly.

This activity of the opposition is not merely opposition, but also the affirmation of a qualitatively different mode of social arrangements. It affirms, as against the system's postponement of real leisure and gratification, as against the system's perpetuation of inhuman labor in the service of endlessly expanding false needs, the right to enjoy a rational set of material necessities on the basis of the minimum labor possible in light of present technological capabilities. The tyranny of false needs and unnecessary labor must be overthrown *in the individuals,* as a precondition for liberation. Marcuse's *Essay on Liberation* amplifies the apparently paradoxical thesis that was stated in *One-Dimensional Man,* namely, that individuals must be free for their liberation, that is, that a decisive break with the "continuum of domination" must occur in the course of the struggle against the present forms of domination. Technological capabilities have already made possible the abolition of material scarcity, and thus the opposition to the manipulation of needs is critical: For the attempt to shape the innermost drives of the individual threatens to preserve the continuum of domination just as the possibility for the real gratification of basic needs has emerged.

The attempted manipulation of the individual's psychological dynamic (on a mass basis), which has been intensified steadily since the First World War, is directly related to the dramatic technological innovations occurring in the same period. The means for overcoming the traditional material obstacles to human happiness, and the means for perpetuating misery and unhappiness through a prodigious waste of human and natural resources, have increased in the same proportions; more correctly, these seemingly contradictory tendencies have been gradually

intermingling. This syndrome presents critical theory with a third important problematic. It is not enough to say that the process of mastering nature through technological innovation must itself be mastered, that a turn from quantitative to qualitative technical progress is required: One should not underestimate the immensity of the effort which will be required in order to relieve modern technology of the burden of its attachment to the structure of domination. *How* this technology is to be liberated is the decisive question.

The structure of manipulation in advanced capitalism is displayed in the division of internal and external opposition (the apparent conflict of interest between the working class in the West and in the Third World), in the more "democratic" access to a fraudulent consumer market, and in the inability of the society to control an increasingly more destructive and wasteful technological apparatus. To analyze this structure concretely we must ask: (1) What is the actual state of manipulation at present? For example, has the distinction between "real" needs and "false" needs been eliminated or effectively suppressed? (2) What prospects now exist for the refinement and intensification of the manipulative framework? (3) What actual counter-tendencies are evident which might encourage the hope that a breakdown of this framework would have positive consequences? In other words, what features of the internal contradictions in the manipulative apparatus could pave the way for the emergence of free individuals—individuals who determine their own needs?

The very intensity of the process of management and manipulation, the necessity for the constant supervision in the realm of consciousness, is the best evidence of the essential fragility of the social structure which requires it. It is not the potential breakdown of that structure in an

abstract sense that is of interest to the radical opposition, however, but rather the specific conditions of breakdown. The extension of terror and barbarism from the foreign lands, where it is presently confined, to the domestic front is a permanent possibility. Already there is abundant evidence that the sustained effort at suppressing insurgency abroad will profoundly affect the political process at home. The radical opposition and critical theory have the twofold task of confronting the renewed threat of terror and of laying the basis for liberation.