

POSTSCRIPT TO HORKHEIMER'S "AUTHORITARIAN STATE"

by

Russell Jacoby

The rediscovery of Horkheimer's "Authoritarian State" coincided with, and partly informed, the theory and the hope of the 'anti-authoritarian' phase of the German SDS—a phase analogous to the student movement of the 1960s in the U.S. and elsewhere. That the text is just now available in English when this phase in the U.S. as well as in Germany is fast receding, if not long gone, inspires a second hope: what is past is not merely sloughed off, but retained and rethought. The very real danger is a political and social amnesia that spurs the recrudescence of forms of political activity and thought proved repressive long ago. For the U.S. the absence of a significant bureaucratic party officially communist or socialist, which was always considered an asset, may yet be a disadvantage; its absence lends credence to the idea that the anti-authoritarian phase lacks credence—because it has no object. During a period when confusion seems objective, and not merely subjective, the formulas and answers of the bad old days look better and better. The spectre of a left without a memory haunts the class struggle.

To avert or at least resist this development entails recalling and reexamining the past. The Horkheimer critique of the German Social Democrats in fact turns exactly on this point; they capitulated to a positivist scheme of progress that liquidated the past in the name of a better future. The critique of positivist progress is vital to the Horkheimer text, and to critical theory in general. Walter Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History," which accompanied this text in the memorial volume, pursued a similar theme. "Nothing has corrupted the German working class so much as the notion that it was moving with the current." Benjamin cited Dietzgen: "Everyday our cause becomes clearer and people get smarter."¹ Marcuse has commented on Benjamin's theses that the intervening events have confirmed their truth; "from the glimpse of the past," writes Marcuse, "not of the future, the struggle for liberation draws its strength."²

Horkheimer's essay has not gone unanswered or unexamined; especially with the decline of the student movement, its anarchist element has been subject to criticism. Aside from this, there are a whole series of related analyses that the essay suggests which have been alternatively explored or criticized: nature of fascism and the fascist state, councils, role of intellectuals, spontaneity, vanguardism, and so on. It should be recalled before attacking the failings of Horkheimer and critical theory what Abendroth has remarked, and Lukács grudgingly conceded: for a whole generation of socialist students critical theory has been an irreplaceable "starting point."³ Or as the late Hans-Jürgen Krahl, one of the best students and

1. "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations* (New York, 1968, 1969), pp. 258, 260.

2. H. Marcuse, "Nachwort," in W. Benjamin, *Zur Kritik der Gewalt und andere Aufsätze* (Frankfurt, 1965), p. 106.

3. *Gespräche mit Georg Lukács*, hrsg. T. Pinkus (Reinbek bei Hamburg, 1967), p. 80.

critics of the Frankfurt School, has said: "In the 50s and beginning of the 60s the critical theory of the Frankfurt School was the only form of revolutionary praxis in West Germany."⁴ For these students, and for others, the Frankfurt School has been the living vehicle conveying Marxism in its non-Stalinist and non-Social Democratic forms.

The various charges against the "Authoritarian State" and critical theory in general cannot be pursued here; suffice it to note that with mixed elements of justice and injustice, the dangers of pessimism, anarchism, spontaneity, intellectuals, and so on, have been warned against. For those who have forgotten the style and content of the quasi-official Communist critique it has recently been renewed at a conference solely concerned with the Frankfurt School.⁵ Discussing the "Authoritarian State" it was said that "in the place of exact science enters bourgeois cultural pessimism," "false spontaneity," "petty-bourgeois idealist utopianism." Or stated more generally: "Marxism-Leninism—this must be said constantly—has nothing in common with, or nothing to do with critical theory."⁶ Another neo-Communist critique attempts to show the deadly anarchist logic of the "Authoritarian State." Hans Helms finds that the thesis of the Horkheimer text, in foregoing the fine analysis of class relations, issues into a blind anti-authoritarian movement which turns revolution into a 'fetish.'⁷

An articulate and furious critique emanates from a younger Marxist-Leninist with Maoist leanings, Joscha Schmierer;⁸ focusing on the "Authoritarian State," he argues that Horkheimer and critical theory enthroned a "scepticism toward the organizational forms of the working class" and sanctified the individual theorist; for that reason it attracted left-wing students without forcing them to break with bourgeois society. Critical theory "was the specific ideology of intellectuals who were tired of bourgeois society, and doubted the ability of the proletariat to overthrow it. . . ." Or it is "gossip-turned-resignation over a fascism which is supposed to have under control the sphere of circulation and the crisis, as well as the working class. . . . Capitalism does not end with its collapse, rather it vegetates on in the 'authoritarian State'." To Schmierer the failure to penetrate the mythic 'authoritarian' state or to distinguish various forms of it, leads to mystifying the revolutionary action of the outsider and the individual. Yet he indirectly admits the nub of the matter; the revolutionary elan of the German working class under fascism was, to say the least, impaired. He makes the unfair statement which is half-true: "Critical theory is the ideology of intellectuals in a period of the impotence of the working class."

The specific political issue here for Schmierer and others is less a critique of Horkheimer than the relationship between a student movement and the working class. In recent years this has been examined under various aspects

4. Cited by E.T. Mohl in his rejoinder in *Die Frankfurter Schule im Licht des Marxismus* (Frankfurt, 1970), p. 126.

5. Some of the papers and discussion are collected in the volume cited above: *Die Frankfurter Schule im Licht des Marxismus*.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 51 ff, 31.

7. Hans G. Helms, *Fetish Revolution* (Neuwied u. Berlin, 1969), pp. 77 f.

8. J. Schmierer, "Kritische Theorie und Studentenbewegung," *Rotes Forum*, 1/70 (2.2.1970), pp. 29 f.

and levels of abstractions, be it the question of intellectuals, intellectual work, productive and unproductive intelligence, and so on. For some of the "Marxist-Leninist" groups the "hitherto anti-authoritarian and adolescent phase" must be completed; now it is incumbent for students, states one Marxist-Leninist text commenting on the "Authoritarian State," to "integrate themselves into the specific strata and groups of apprentices and younger workers and acclimate themselves to the latter's working milieu."⁹ With this, the principles of proletarian class struggle, cadre formation, discipline, and so on, should be renewed.

Another commentary on the "Authoritarian State," more sympathetic to critical theory and responding to the "M-L" critique,¹⁰ notes that most of this is found—of course—in Lukács. Lukács tended to adopt the class 'betrayal' position; the intellectuals in order to become revolutionary should leave their class for that of the proletariat. As he wrote in "Zur Organisationsfrage der Intellektuellen" (1920), "intellectuals can only as individuals become revolutionary; they must leave their class in order to participate in the class struggle of the proletariat."¹¹ Yet as this response to the "M-L" critique notes, it was still possible for Lukács in the early 1920s to hope what Horkheimer in the "Authoritarian State" deems crucial: that the revolutionary movement—for Lukács, the Leninist party—concretely incorporates and anticipates the freedom of a free society. Such hope, no matter how contrived or impossible, can be found in *History and Class Consciousness* as well as elsewhere. "The Communist Party must be the primary incarnation of the realm of freedom; above all, the spirit of comradeship, of true solidarity, and of self-sacrifice must govern everything it does."¹²

The blank repetition of the class betrayal position 50 years after Lukács, aside from ignoring the important question of whether the relationship between intellect and production has altered in the interim, can no longer even promise the freedom that perhaps was once possible in the Leninist party. In its most vulgar form this critique of intellectuals and students was summed up in the slogan "liquidation of the anti-authoritarian phase." While the terms are different, there is no difficulty discerning the parallel to the situation in the U.S. Krahl replied that the slogan smacked of "an ahistorical and anachronistic regression to the specific class constellation of the Leninist party—which robbed of its historical content, results in the

9. "Aktuelles Vorwort (1969)" in M. Horkheimer, *Autoritärer Staat* (Amsterdam, 1968), pp. 4-5.

10. "Aktuelles Vorwort: Die ML-Kritik am Intellektuellen ist eine logische Unmöglichkeit," in M. Horkheimer, *Kritische Theorie der Gesellschaft*, IV (n.p., n.d.). The subtitle of this forward, the M-L critique of intellectuals is a logical impossibility, is a variant of the quotation used in the M-L forward: "Bürgerliche Kritik am proletarischen Kampf ist einer logische Unmöglichkeit." This sentence is from *Dämmerung*, by H. Regius (Horkheimer).

11. G. Lukács, "Zur Organisationsfrage der Intellektuellen," in Lukács, *Organisation und Partei* (n.p., n.d.). This small essay seems to have been omitted from the recent English edition of Lukács' *Political Writings*.

12. G. Lukács, "The Moral Mission of the Communist Party," in Lukács, *Political Writings 1919-1929* (London, 1972). p. 69.

mechanical construction of formal organizational models.”¹³ Krahl has argued elsewhere that the partially industrialized conditions of Lenin’s Russia entered into his conception of the party and class consciousness; this, then, cannot be simply transferred to the very different conditions of the advanced industrialized countries of the west.

The favorite objection to Horkheimer and critical theory, its failure to explore the question of praxis or organization in any concrete manner, succumbs to Marxism as magic. Such objections are indifferent to the specific socio-economic and political context in which intellectuals and theoretical work proceeds; and further they fail to make any distinction between concept and object, method and thing supposing that praxis and organization are to be attained by invocation and endless repetition. The point is simply that in certain contexts a discussion of organization and praxis would be scholastic and academic, not revolutionary and proletarian. Depending on where and what, an analysis of praxis can be shop-talk for the conventioners at the conference of Marxist sects, while theory distant from praxis can be impregnated with revolution. None of this can be determined a priori, but it can be suggested that in 1940 for a group of German intellectuals exiled in New York and California to discuss party-formation and working class organization would be escapist and obscurist, while a theoretical discussion of reason and revolution would be radical and political.¹⁴

In the 30 odd years since it was written, the “Authoritarian State” has not fallen prey to irrelevance nor its critics; this is not to say it is timeless. Rather the fragments of analyses of fascism, the state, intellectuals, and so on are uncompleted for our time. The danger is only that in the anxiety to transcend the vagaries of the student and anti-authoritarian movement, in Germany and in the U.S. as well as elsewhere, there will be anxiety but no transcendence. The curt critique of critical theory as shy of praxis or organization curtails the depth confrontation; it risks caving in to the prevailing social amnesia, forgetting what it never knew in the name of a future which is the past.

Horkheimer’s “Authoritarian State” needs no defense; it speaks for itself at a time when Marxism could not talk. It is vulnerable because it is openly powerless; it does not ally itself with heavy industry or the guaranteed victory of a rising proletariat. Yesterday’s slogans ‘we are winning,’ ‘the war is over’ were wrong yesterday, wrong today, and were wrong for Horkheimer. History is not a one-way street. “Not only freedom, but future forms of oppression are possible.” Yet the contradictions do not disappear, nor the hope. Recalling Marx’s words that a revolution is only as certain as the next crisis—which is certain—Horkheimer states: “The eternal system of the authoritarian state, as terrible as the threat may seem, is no more real than the eternal harmony of the market economy.”

13. “Zur Ideologiekritik des antiautoritären Bewusstseins,” in H-J Krahl, *Konstitution und Klassenkampf* (Frankfurt, 1971), p. 283.

14. First edition of *Reason and Revolution*: 1941.