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Critical Theory at a Crossroad: Adorno, Marcuse, and the Radical Sixties

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research article

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—**Jacob Skinner**

The so-called “radical 1960s” are largely remembered for massive global protests, civil rights activism, and counter-cultural movements, all of which gave the appearance of genuinely threatening the predominating social order. Today, we recognize this description as a bit more idealistic than realistic. As one famous activist, Tom Hayden, quipped, “We ended a war, toppled two Presidents, desegregated the South, broke other barriers of discrimination... How could we accomplish so much and have so little in the end?”(1) The generation that once loudly marched in the streets, rejected the dream of material consumption, and abided by the rule of everything homemade, now seems to occupy those streets in SUVs and drools over the latest styles from GAP. One could even say, perhaps with some accuracy, that these rebellions of the youth had more to do with hedonistic pleasure than with social reform.

As much as this may be true for a number of the activists, many had serious, urgent concerns about the U.S. and the world. The mission statement of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), an organization influential during the sixties, expressed their unease: “We are the people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit” (2). Discomfort stemmed from the belief that modern economic and technological achievements were betraying their initial utopian promises, that goals of social and economic equality and individual fulfillment were being replaced with those of material consumption and individual accumulation. Like other disenchanting groups across the globe, the SDS saw no way in the established capitalistic structure to correct this: “We ourselves are imbued with urgency, yet the message of our society is that there is no viable alternative” (2). So, through radical ideas joined with radical protest and dissent, the 1960s took on the job of transforming the economic and political progress of society.

The social and political theories of the activists were strongly influenced by a small group of neo-Marxists working at the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany. The Marxist tradition is important for understanding the 1960s for two reasons: Marx predicted the inevitability of a social revolution directed against capitalism; and the protest movements targeted the social ills Marx criticizes in his discussion of capitalism. But as social conditions in the early twentieth century deteriorated without the predicted revolution, intellectuals joined at the Frankfurt School to re-examine the foundations of Marxist theory under these changed conditions. Their goals were to determine why the masses were still tolerating exploitation, and to find how to reopen the utopian social possibilities blocked by capitalism (3).

Marcuse and Adorno were arguably the most influential figures to emerge from the Frankfurt School, yet they had diametrically opposed reactions to the protest movements of the ‘60s. While Marcuse traveled the world promoting liberation politics to the millions of revolutionary spirits he believed were finally ushering in radical social change, Adorno remained as distant from them as possible, convinced these protests would only strengthen the system they and he opposed. Why? Each believed that modern society was irrational and that a

truly rational society was possible. However—and this seems to be key to understanding their differences—each had a different concept of rationality. Although their philosophies are complex, their different definitions of rationality seem central to their decisions to endorse or not endorse the political action of the 1960s. To understand this, we must begin with a brief summary of Marxist theory.

Karl Marx (1818-1883)

Marx's critique of capitalism is based on his theory that the economic system—the human arrangement for procuring basic survival needs—determines all social conditions; and that history is the working out of class conflicts and is, therefore, rational progress towards social justice and equality. Capitalism, for Marx, is the final, oppressive social arrangement which history will overcome because it structures society according to power relations, where the few dominate the many, and hence isn't fully rational.

According to Marx, the economic organization of production in every society depends on two factors: the forces of production (labor, tools, natural resources, etc) and the social relations of production (the way resources and production are distributed). Since all survival is fastened to finite land and resources, privatizing the social relations of production creates class divisions between the few bosses (bourgeois) owning the modes of production and the many workers (proletariat) who must rent their bodies to the owners in exchange for the necessities of survival. Social class exploitation is, therefore, only possible within this unique governing relationship. Marx predicts that, like all other historically unjust and irrational social systems, living conditions under capitalism will deteriorate to the point where the masses realize their disadvantage and revolt, overthrowing the oppressive rulers and creating economic equality in the form of a communist state.

Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979)

Marcuse's support for the social movements is a commitment to Marxism under changed circumstances. Many intellectuals believed capitalism's uninterrupted growth during the twentieth century was an indication that Marx's historical economic theory was flawed. Marcuse, however, argued that modern capitalism was simply forestalling the revolution by controlling how people think and ultimately rationalize. The proletariat remained complacent and even supportive of their own oppression because modern industrial society psychologically suppresses and controls the inner nature of individuals to a much larger extent than Marx could have ever predicted. The development of a revolutionary consciousness depends on the ability to distance oneself from social forces. One can then make rational distinctions between real inner needs and false, imposed needs. Only as rational beings do we critically examine the existing social order and reform it according to the best interests of humanity.

Under advanced forms of capitalism, Marcuse believes, commodities, consumerism, and marketing behave as a psychological economy, which produces and administers the needs demanded by the system—even the instinctive needs. Individuals are subjected to the production and marketing of objects, fashions and lifestyles—all of which create in the general population a form of mass ideology. We learn to value and relate to life through these material possessions: The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split level home, kitchen equipment (4).

Each person's genuine needs and interests, or "true class consciousness," are, explains Marcuse, homogenized when the proletariat enjoy the same television program and visit the same resort places as the bosses. The proletariat forget that society is built on unequal social relations, that mass exploitation is a prerequisite for the existence of the truly affluent few. The needs and satisfactions that serve the preservation of the Establishment are acquiesced to by all members of society, thus becoming their false class consciousness, which blind the masses to the possibilities of a better life (3).

So exactly what possibilities are the masses blinded to? According to Marcuse, repression and utopia have been historically intertwined. That is, the tremendous technical capacity currently enslaving subjects in a meaningless

cycle of work and consumerism originally developed to meet genuine human needs. In response to Freud's utterly pessimistic view of civilization and repression, Marcuse understands the repressive forces within civilization to be a rationalized bi-product of a survival agreement made in humankind's quest to overcome the scarcity and compulsions of nature for the procurement and augmentation of the necessities of life (5). Marcuse thus revises Freud's pleasure principle to include the prospect of creating an automated production apparatus under which all vital needs can be satisfied while necessary labor time is reduced to marginal time (4). Marcuse believes the current productive apparatus, *with a proper change in application*, is finally capable of providing this ultimate emancipation. This is perhaps the most crucial connection between Marcuse, rationality, and the social movements. If the social movements could successfully unfetter the modes of production, a utopian society could emerge with individuals free from the aggressive and repressive needs and aspirations and attitudes of class society, who live without the stress of work and according to their own creative and instinctual energies...in solidarity...on their own initiative (6).

Capitalism, however, creates not only an irrational society but also, according to Marcuse, irrational individuals. The perversion of utopia is a function of capitalism's stranglehold over consciousness; a change in the economic system, however difficult it may be to imagine, could therefore signify an improved rationality and society. The radical movements of the '60s therefore emerge in realization of extant possibilities.

Theodore Adorno (1903-1969)

Theodore Adorno, on the other hand, doesn't think history is laden with the same possibilities his colleague Marcuse does. For Adorno, not only has history never followed a rational blueprint leading to human emancipation, but the reverse is, in fact, the case: world history is a regression of rationality, a regression that conceals and strengthens the very domination that rationality once promised to overcome. History is the movement from humanity into inhumanity (7). The capitalist economic system is merely the conclusion of this process, and not, as Marcuse argues, the ultimate enemy standing in the way of utopia. Adorno is convinced that all social movements inevitably mimic some feature of this historical process and will not only fail to make qualitative changes but often will strengthen the system. For him, therefore, refraining from revolutionary movements is a superior form of resisting.

Adorno's central claim is that enlightened rationality—the thinking which purports to have lifted mankind above barbaric animals, overcome ancient mythical superstitions, and which today structures our economic, political, legal, and cultural practices—is really a kind of instrumental rationality. As such, it remains tied to primitive self-preservation and operates on the naïve assumption that it overcame mythology; instead it has been blindly guiding history toward, not away from, barbarity.

Understanding the argument that enlightened rationality is still mythological first requires us to imagine ourselves as the first conscious humans facing a completely unknown world. Adorno claims this is an “experienceless experience,” where the material in cognition is a stream of “non-conceptuality” demanding our constant interpretation. But experiencing nature as an unknown of infinite complexity had fearful moments, e.g. the surprise of something like lightning or animals. Anthropomorphic mythology, that is, the projection of human qualities onto the non-human world, developed as a cognitive way of warding off these fears by explaining frightful experiences of the unknown as occurrences within a cyclical and ahistorical world. As a form of cognition, mythology provided causes, effects, and answers. Importantly, myth is static: it operates by subsuming unknown particular events under general explanations and concepts. Once something is thought to be known, it is no longer a source of fear. This is the basic rationality of the ancient world of mythology.

So how are myth and enlightened rationality linked? Adorno understands the term enlightenment to be the intellectual process that arose to debunk some really wild superstitions and myths governing the Ancient world. In place of these subjective understandings of the world, the new model of thought and action would be objective rational principles that treat objects as ends in themselves rather than creations of the human mind. Enlightened rationality is thus a vehicle for transcending the falsehoods of myth, breaking bondages with the

superstitions and social processes controlled by powerful men and gods, and ultimately creating world order based on truth, justice, and freedom. Adorno, however, argues that the rationality we developed in the course of freeing ourselves from Ancient mythology isn't fully rational but is instead a form of instrumental rationality blindly deploying a fundamental principle of myth while claiming to overcome myth and, as such, be fully rational.

According to Adorno, the *principle of immanence* is the instrumental link between enlightened rationality and Ancient mythology. Remember that in myth the ability to explain the constant experience of new events, i.e. the non-conceptual, was accomplished with the static use of old explanations that provided a matrix through which everything undifferentiated could be identified. During this process, the material of immediate cognition is stripped of its complex individuality in a way that it can then be classified according to a concept similar to it. The creation of concepts in mythic thought was the cognitive equating of unequal things. Equating unequal things is not an innocent function of the human mind, but again, an erroneous mental operation serving the impulse of self-preservation.

The ruin of enlightened rationality is its unrelenting use of these concepts, a dependence Adorno refers to as *identity thinking*: a thinking that classifies things according to what they come under or are examples of, and not, therefore, what they individually are (14). In subsuming objects of the world under common descriptive categories like furry, four-legged, happy, and man's best friend, we relate to particular things as mere instances of whatever general concept they represent, in this case dog. According to this model of thought an object is known once all correct classifications are exhausted. But when everything is understood merely as the sum of certain concepts, nothing is approached as truly individual. What are really concrete, particular objects, explains Adorno, thus come to be identified and treated as if they were fungible representations of something other than themselves. The process of identity thinking misidentifies the object of thought, treats it as a means for human use, and not as the individual it really is and betrays the very principles that the project of rationality was predicated on. Enlightened rationality is not, therefore, a truly rational practice, but is instead instrumental, that is, a kind of rationality which carries on the same regardless of its object (9).

Capitalism is the ultimate reflection of a society where instrumental rationality and identity thinking fully dominate thought and behavior. Just as rationality historically developed independent of its own object, modern society is guided by capitalism's principle of profit, a socially binding goal that has no consideration for, and often directly contradicts, the happiness of human beings. Furthermore, the function of the economic market itself depends on the exchange of commodities. This exchange process, according to Adorno, is identity thinking in its most egregious application. Everything quantitatively unequal and qualitatively incommensurable, e.g. a person's labor, as well as every natural and artificial object in the world is identified under the guise of universal scales of financial equivalence. Nothing escapes the market; everything is valued only insofar as it can be exchanged with something else. Nothing has worth in itself alone; everything is ultimately the value of its price, a commodity. Even as individuals we're completely replaceable, devalued by a system that, Adorno argues, relates to everything in general just as the insurance company in particular, relates to life and death. Whoever dies is unimportant: it is a question of ratio between accidents and the company's liabilities (7).

Identity thinking and instrumental rationality have become, according to Adorno, inescapable functions of the modern thought process. Our minds have been physiologically altered to the point that consciousness alone cannot break from its own imprisonment because we can no longer think without identifying (8). Identity thinking and the instrumentalization of reason are not, therefore, features of the modern experience exclusive only to capitalist society, but are rather historical conditionings of thought not simply dismissed by a social revolution. The usefulness of radical action is, for Adorno, something he could never endorse, ultimately labeling it apologetic in principle: "Every attempt to break the natural thralldom, because nature is broken, enters all the more deeply into that natural enslavement" (7). The sixties, despite the good deal of change brought about by the decade's resistance, were ultimately a product bound to the system they so desperately wanted to transcend.

The only form of resistance Adorno does endorse is, strangely enough, found in authentic works of art. Authentic works of art have what Adorno calls a truth content because they retain a moment of qualitative thinking by escaping the socially established confines of thought and identification. As the social antithesis to society art protests the limits of identity thinking by providing the alternative conditions of cognition which free us to experience the work as a concrete object (10). Authentic works of art are glimpses, reminders of the non-conceptual world that has been concealed by an unrelenting instrumental rationality. Indeed the entire progress of enlightenment, Adorno explains, has only been resisted by authentic works of art, which always acted to avoid the mere imitation of that which already is (7). Whereas the precision in classical works of art once attempted to change the world, modern works of art in the avant-garde movement, stand principally in abstract protest against the possible closure of all qualitative thinking. Modern art defies our conceptual limitations, reminding us that all that is isn't really all there is. Because Adorno's work is primarily concerned with bringing a stop to our instrumental rationality, and because attempts to otherwise change the system inevitably strengthen it, works of art thus offer a better foundation than social movements for such practice to begin.

Conclusion

The aforementioned differences between Marcuse and Adorno's interpretation of rationality and its relationship with world history are essential to understanding their reactions to the '60s. For, on the one hand, Marcuse adopts something similar to a religious doctrine where life [history] is understood as a period of suffering and sacrifice [labor, social domination, and delay of gratification] with ultimate justification in attaining the kingdom of God [the sociopolitical utopia accomplished by reorganizing society's industrial apparatus so as to make life a blissful experience free from work, needs, and postponement of happiness]. Adorno, however, is skeptical about the prospect of salvaging anything worthy of reconciliation from an historical movement that has led toward inhumanity: Universal history must be construed and denied. After the catastrophes that have happened, and in view of the catastrophes to come, it would be cynical to say that a plan for a better world is manifested in history and unites it (8). Perhaps the Hayden paradox that 1960s radicalism, while having tremendous effects on so many different things from civil rights to political activism to cultural liberation, did not, in the end, have an effect on the one meaningful target, structural change, is evidence that Adorno's theoretical model is, in the final analysis, more enlightened than Marcuse's. But whether one truly believes the museum to be a more progressive arena than revolution in the streets is a matter that I don't dare address here.

I thank Professor Aline Kuntz for introducing me to real political topics and patiently handling my awkward first attempt at independent research. And, of course, I thank my educator, Nick Smith, for being hard.

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Jacob Skinner, a Massachusetts native, graduated from UNH in 2004 with a double major in Political Science and Philosophy. During his courses, he read and compared the works of Marx, Marcuse and Adorno. Curiosity, aided by a Summer Undergraduate Research Fellowship in 2003, began what grew into a 200-page research project. Research, Skinner says, "is the perfect opposite of heavy drinking: you know nothing but the hangover and then maybe, with enough persistence, a little of its sweet intoxication." The fun of research, he found, was finally putting together the big concept you thought you had known from the beginning. The difficult part was the many revisions required for his report and Inquiry article. As for the future...? He wants to be a professional basketball player.

Jacob's mentor, Nick Smith, is assistant professor of philosophy, in his third year at UNH. He specializes in the philosophy of law, politics, and society. Before Jacob, he mentored three philosophy students with grants from the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program office.