

# The Frankfurt School's 'Nietzschean Moment'

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In 1942 in Los Angeles, Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Friedrich Pollock, Herbert Marcuse, Ludwig Marcuse, Günther Anders, and Rolf Nürnberg discussed a paper by Ludwig Marcuse on the relationship between need and culture in Nietzsche. It was a discussion among European emigrants whose country of origin a year earlier had attacked (after Poland and despite the Hitler-Stalin Pact) the Soviet Union, and against which the US, their country of exile, had declared war following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. It was a discussion among leftist intellectuals who were observing from the US – now on the path to superpower status – the defensive struggle of the alliance of capitalist countries and the Soviet Union against the fascist aggressors.

At first glance, attention to the historical context makes the discussion appear distinctly dated. Judging from the transcript, the dominant and most interested participant, Adorno, seeks to correct or supplement Marx through the use of Nietzsche as a thinker concerned with the “totality of happiness [*Glück*] incarnate.” Horkheimer ultimately supported him, seeing in Nietzsche a critic of the “entire [bourgeois] culture of satiety [*Genügsamkeitskultur*].”

This impression of anachronism disappears when one remembers that this discussion of the theory of needs paralleled Horkheimer and Adorno's collaboration on the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* as well as the Institute for Social Research's collective work on anti-Semitism. The discussion documents one of their many attempts at self-clarification.

Horkheimer, as ever, was torn between self-consciousness and self-criticism. On the one hand, he saw himself as a late bourgeois who had experienced a foretaste of the good life, whose enjoyment in a reasonable society would be shared by all; someone who, from this privileged vantage point, had at his disposal a benchmark for the evaluation of more desirable future developments. “The masters of big capital,” he wrote in 1935, “devalue desire because they are barbarians: slaves of their business and ideology; the poor disdain desire in order to better resign themselves to their impotence. But the late bourgeois are revolutionary precisely because they know what happiness [*Glück*] means, and that human capacities suffocate and degenerate without favorable conditions.”<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, he diagnosed his own stubbornness through its bourgeois origin. “Lack of pride,” reads a version of the principles for sociability (revised in the 1930s with Pollock),

lack of joy in oneself and others, lack of self-consciousness, avoidance behavior, feelings of guilt (despite a once-held resolve to lead a specific life for specific reasons), share a bourgeois instinctual basis cemented by upbringing (prevention of doing that which gives one pleasure). Only a conscious pride that opposes the authority and value of our community to a hostile environment can help to overcome this instinctual basis which also puts into question continually the maxims *gaité et courage*.<sup>2</sup>

Horkheimer shares Nietzsche's (as opposed to Marx's) "distrust of the bourgeoisie" (Adorno); he also shares their detachment from the proletariat and social democracy, and merely avoids speaking of the superman (Nietzsche's "aristocracy"), since there are those who would allege that, without class-rule and mass-domination, the characteristics and higher culture of the superman would be impossible. Horkheimer sees in this only a problem of release from stultifying toil. He concludes that if Nietzsche had realized that an extremely advanced domination of nature would make stultifying toil superfluous, he would have realized that his conviction that "all excellence [develops] . . . only among those of equal rank" means that either all or none would become supermen. Thus, in a sharp criticism of Jaspers's book on Nietzsche, Horkheimer could write: "Beneath [Nietzsche's] seemingly misanthropic formulations lies . . . not so much this [elitist] error but the hatred of the patient, self-avoiding, passive and conformist character at peace with the present."<sup>3</sup>

Adorno says expressly that he does not want to adopt as positive correctives Nietzschean concepts like "love" and "longing." Indeed, he and Horkheimer valued Nietzsche above all for his frankness concerning the instinctual nature of cruelty, for his attentiveness to the stirring of repressed instincts without minimizing rationalization. No philosopher had brought such anti-Christian, anti-humanistic furor to his age as the pastor's son Nietzsche, who interacted almost exclusively with the educated, patricians, and petty nobility. Almost no philosopher had attempted so resolutely, without regard for socio-historical trends, to negate and destroy his own origins and training. Almost no philosopher so uncompromisingly and aggressively placed self-unfolding and enhanced life above considerations of personal gain and social success.

In the 1942 discussion, Adorno and Horkheimer insist that Nietzsche must be rescued from fascist and racist appropriations. They find in him, as in no other philosopher, their own desires confirmed and accentuated. They insist on what Horkheimer formulated at the end of "Egoism and the Freedom Movements" – the 1936 essay which, next to "Traditional and Critical Theory," would become the most important reference point of his circle. There he writes: "One has interpreted the superman, the most problematic concept left by the psychologist to the analytical realm he commanded, in terms of the petty bourgeois's pipe dream and confused it with Nietzsche himself." Yet Nietzsche does not glorify nobility [*Größe*], blood, and danger, but divests

them of those ideological embellishments that makes them serviceable for ideological purposes.

Insofar as the will to make suffer ceases to function ‘in the name of’ God, ‘in the name of’ justice, morality, honor, the nation, etc., it loses, through self-awareness, the dreadful power it exercises as long as it conceals itself from its own bearers on the basis of ideological disavowal. It enters into the economy of life [*Ökonomie der Lebensführung*] as that which it is and thus becomes rationally controllable.<sup>4</sup>

At that time, Horkheimer still proceeded according to the assumption that, sooner or later, the proletariat would bring about a higher form of human existence and that, in such a higher, more rational form of existence, egotism would become productive in a new sense. This emphasis on the “freer spiritual condition” of a “humanity changed” through revolution in “Egoism and the Freedom Movements” no longer exists in the discussion of 1942. Instead, the language suggests “that humans, despite the apparent satisfaction of their material needs, have the feeling that something is not quite right.” The new emphasis – designated by the keyword “satiety,” implying that capitalism now prepares itself to satisfy almost all material needs – is only intimated. Horkheimer feels our way of thinking would then appear radically different. In “A Word for Moral Standards,” an aphorism from Adorno’s *Minima Moralia* that dates from the early 1940s, this means, analogously, that in light of the immediate prospects for material abundance, the meaning of the masters’ morality [*Herrenmoral*] propounded by Nietzsche has changed. “The virtue of ‘superiority’ [*Vornehmheit*] has for a long time now no longer meant to take the better for oneself in front of the others, but to become weary of taking and really practice the virtue of giving that appears in Nietzsche as the only spiritualizing virtue.”

A few years later, Adorno and Horkheimer’s emphasis changed again. In a radio broadcast on the fiftieth anniversary of Nietzsche’s death, they and Gadamer carried on a conversation in which Adorno declared ideology critique, self-knowledge, and fidelity to one’s nature irrespective of social change as the path to a freer society:

If [Nietzsche] glorified brutality, then he meant by this that if humans at some point have freed themselves of all conventional morality, all restraint of the instinct through rationalization. . . , the right thing [*das Richtige*] would establish itself, i.e., that the instant humans acknowledge their destructive instincts, then they will lose their power; in place of the man filled with *ressentiment*, who is angry because he is not allowed to follow his instincts, steps the man who is neither evil nor good in the narrow sense precisely because he no longer has anything to repress.<sup>5</sup>

No longer do they expect anything of a proletariat with a world-historical mission. Yet what type of destruction – through which people, via which means, and under what circumstances – is it even possible to imagine? After all,

Horkheimer and Adorno could only imagine combatants and martyrs for the general transformation among non-bourgeoisie. But what becomes of bourgeois intellectuals with “distaste for the bourgeoisie” who no longer count on a revolutionary proletariat whose world-historical mission annuls the mechanisms of bourgeois psychology?

Adorno provided an answer in 1965, in an open letter on the occasion of Horkheimer’s seventieth birthday: “I have learned from you that the possibility of wanting the Other [*das Andere zu wollen*] need not be purchased with the renunciation of one’s own happiness. This has cured the theoretical considerations oriented toward the social totality of that rancor that ordinarily poisons them, and has brought them back in the thrall of the always-the-same [*Immergleichen*].”<sup>6</sup> By happiness Adorno could not have meant the “totality of happiness incarnate,” since he did not admit the possibility of an authentic life amid the inauthentic. But he also did not mean the joy of making others happy, that portion of happiness corresponding to the “superiority” [*Vornehmheit*] mentioned in the aphorism cited from *Minima Moralia*. Therefore, a more modest happiness was simply meant. This probably means: happiness in light of the unhappiness of others. With this, egocentrism becomes the price for freedom from rancor, from *ressentiment* in an unchanged humanity.

This, then, remains the limit of Nietzsche’s rehabilitation as a corrective or rather a supplement to Marxist theory: the antidote for *ressentiment* is expected from the acceptance of the destructive instincts. But this means the *spiritualization* of those instincts. Then, however, the leftwing understanding of Nietzsche’s glorification of power and lack of compassion becomes radical only in appearance – a *Scheinradikalität*. This already approaches the megalomania of Nietzsche, who saw himself as the reevaluator of all values, although in reality he only pursued the interpretation of his own suffering.

(Translated by Gerd Appelhans)

#### NOTES

1. Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1985), 12:229, 231.
2. *Ibid.*, 15:385.
3. *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 6 (1937): 408f.
4. *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 5 (1936): 230.
5. Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 13:115.
6. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp Verlag 1986), 20:158.