

# *Introduction to Adorno/Marcuse Correspondence on the German Student Movement*

## Introduction

On 12 January 1969, Herbert Marcuse wrote to Theodor Adorno announcing a June visit to Frankfurt. He wanted to give a lecture. He requested that the meeting be small and intimate, and solicited an official invitation, so that he could get leave from the University of California. This was to be the beginning of a summer in Europe, lecturing in Italy, and all-importantly, swimming. That there were tensions between the two old acquaintances was evident from Adorno's hand-written comments on the letter. He suspected that the need for water, and hence the need to avoid Adorno's holiday home in Zermatt, was an excuse masking Inge Marcuse's concern that the Frankfurt theorists would be a bad influence on her husband. Adorno eagerly noted 'At least he is starting to notice it!' in the margin when Marcuse conceded that irrational tendencies plagued the student movement and that, because of the issues raised by black politics, the American situation was more complicated and dangerous.<sup>1</sup> An additional scribbling on the letter, for Horkheimer's eyes, echoed the idea that there should be no great fuss and 'official circus' around Marcuse's Frankfurt speech. Exposing his nervousness about the Institute providing a platform for the celebrated supporter of the revolutionary student movement, Adorno toyed with the idea of withdrawing the invitation.<sup>2</sup>

Marcuse, heralded in the blurb for the mass-circulation paperback *One Dimensional Man* as the prophet of the student revolutionary

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<sup>1</sup> 'What you say about the development of the student movement accords completely with my experiences. Rational and irrational, indeed counter-revolutionary demands are inextricably combined. Where do we stand? Here the situation is even more complicated and dangerous, because of the more than precarious relationship to the black movement. But all this must be discussed in person.' Letter from Marcuse to Adorno, 12 January 1969, reprinted in *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung; von der Flaschenpost zum Molotowcocktail 1946 bis 1995*, vol. II, Dokumente, edited by Wolfgang Kraushaar, Hamburg 1998, p. 541.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

movement ‘along with Mao Tse Tung, Che Guevara and Ho Chi Minh’, would be arriving in a volatile Frankfurt scene. Demonstrations and occupations of university buildings were a regular occurrence. Leaflets and pamphlets were issued daily. Seminars turned into political meetings and student strike committees demanded the self-organization of studies or co-control; a grouping called the ‘Spartakus department’ planned alternative courses on left radicalism, revolutionary theory—from Rosa Luxemburg to the use of cobblestones—critical economics, authority and communication, and work prospects. Students versed in critical theory were demanding that theoretical critique turn into practical political action. Theory was a brake on the movement, alleged some, as they denounced fellow students—mocked as Adornites and Habermices—for promoting theory for theory’s sake and disregarding their professors’ function as a left alibi for bourgeois society.<sup>3</sup> The Frankfurt *Schülers*, ‘left idiots of the authoritarian state’, had become ‘critical in theory, conformist in practice’, stated a leaflet put out by sociology students in December, and it quoted Horkheimer’s *Dämmerung* from 1934: ‘A revolutionary career does not lead to banquets and honorary titles, interesting research and professional wages. It leads to misery, disgrace, ingratitude, prison and into the unknown, illuminated by only an almost superhuman belief’.<sup>4</sup> In March 1969, a pirate edition of *Dämmerung* appeared, and on its back cover was a photograph of the sociology department under occupation, renamed Spartakus department and festooned with a banner that quoted words from the book: ‘If socialism appears unrealizable then it is necessary to make it a reality with an even more desperate determination.’<sup>5</sup> Discussions were heated in Frankfurt. Some activists had been going further, grasping at alarmist tactics. In April 1968, Andreas Baader, Thorwald Proll, Horst Söhnlein und Gudrun Ensslin set two Frankfurt department stores alight, ‘as a protest against the indifference to war in Vietnam’.<sup>6</sup> At the end of October 1968 they were sentenced to three years imprisonment each.

### Taking His Name in Vain

The tensions between the professors at the Institute for Social Research and student activists had been building since May 1964, when Adorno instituted legal proceedings against some pranksters, members of the situationist-inspired group Subversive Aktion. They had pinned up ‘Wanted’ notices in university areas, comprised of a montage of Adorno quotes—‘There can be no covenant with this world; we belong to it only to the extent that we rebel against it’, ‘All are unfree under the illusion of being free’, ‘Theft of free time is

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, the commentary on the ‘Active Strike’ by the SDS-Bundesvorstad, 18 December 1968, in *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, vol. II, p. 521.

<sup>4</sup> See *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung; von der Flaschenpost zum Molotoucocktail 1946 bis 1995*, vol. I, Chronik, edited by Wolfgang Kraushaar, Hamburg 1998, p. 374.

<sup>5</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 409.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 302.

presented as organized amusement', and so on—and the notice concluded that all those who agreed that the discrepancy between analysis and action is unbearable, should contact Th. W. Adorno, 6 Frankfurt am Main, Kettenhofweg 123, citing the reference 'Antithesis'.<sup>7</sup> Adorno was incensed by the unauthorized use of his name. Two men were prosecuted and fined for offences against the press law, after Ernst Bloch had persuaded one of his students to name those responsible. But the poster had other effects. In West Berlin the call was answered by two East German students, Bernd Rabehl and Rudi Dutschke. Dutschke was to become the theoretician of student activism in West Berlin, while his counterpart in Frankfurt was Hans-Jürgen Krahl, one of Adorno's doctoral students. In September 1967, at a German Socialist Student Alliance [Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund, SDS] conference in Frankfurt, a keynote paper on organization by Dutschke and Krahl asserted to need to act as 'urban *guerilleros*'. The university, they said, could act as the urban guerrilla's shelter, from where he could organize the struggle against institutions and state power. The university was to be the garrison of the Extra-Parliamentary Opposition [Außerparlamentarische Opposition, ApO].

A series of protests, involving the boycott of lessons, had been underway since early December 1968. Activists in the SDS were challenging an attempt to reduce the period of study and other university reforms. Sociology students, mainly SDS, formed the core of the protests. On 31 January 1969, Krahl and a group of students headed for the sociology department, intending to occupy. Finding it locked, the students transferred to the Institute for Social Research to co-ordinate their strike activities. Adorno and Friedeburg called the police and 76 students were arrested. As Krahl was forced through a cordon of police, he screamed at Adorno and Friedeburg 'Scheißkritische Theoretiker'. He was the only occupier not released that evening. That event and its repercussions dominate the letters that Marcuse and Adorno exchanged over the next eight months.

The next day, some of the students ran amok in Café Kranzler, demanding Krahl's release. Adorno did not have to resort to street tactics to put his points across. There were countless interviews on why critical theory did not lead directly to political practice, and the radio stations broadcast his lectures, such as 'Resignation' and 'Critique of Positivism', while *Stern* illustrated a photograph of the University rector raising a chair to defend himself against students with a quote from Adorno: 'I proposed a theoretical model for thought. How could I suspect that people would want to realize it with Molotov-cocktails?'. Marcuse, for his part, was more inclined to give interviews with headlines such as 'Student Protest is Non-Violent Next to the Society Itself'.

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<sup>7</sup> Poster reprinted in *Frankfurter Schule und Studentenbewegung*, vol. II, p. 176. The incident is discussed in vol. I, p. 26.

## Toleration of Repression

On 25 March 1969, Adorno informed Marcuse that the charges against seventy-five of the occupiers had been dropped. Only Krahl was to face trial. Adorno reported intense pressure to drop the charges, and, while Habermas felt inclined to do so, Adorno and Friedeburg, though still undecided, thought that they would not. Adorno admitted that he dreaded the recommencement of his teaching duties 'given some people reckon with bombs and shoot-outs'.<sup>8</sup> Propaganda and attacks on the Institute and its members continued. On 22 April 1969, Adorno had just begun his lecture 'Introduction to Dialectical Thought' when a student interrupted him from the back of the auditorium, and another wrote a rhyme on the blackboard: 'Wer nur den lieben Adorno läßt walten, der wird den Kapitalismus sein Leben lang bewalten' [Whoever gives dear Adorno control will preserve capitalism for the rest of his life]. Then three female students in leather jackets came forward, tossed tulips and roses at Adorno, exposed their breasts to him and tried to kiss his cheek. The seats were strewn with flyers declaring 'Adorno as institution is dead'.<sup>9</sup> The stunt split the student movement, for there were people who thought that, rather than disrupt lectures completely, they should be turned into venues for political discussion. The leather-jacket fraction of the SDS was indulging in action for action's sake. Anyway, Adorno had had enough, and cancelled his lecture series.

On 23 May 1969, Marcuse decided that he could not go to Frankfurt. He apologized to Adorno for not managing to reply till then to his letter from 5 May, because of events in California. Governor Ronald Reagan had attempted to clear occupying students from the People's Park using heavily armed police with bird shot, buck shot and rock salt, while helicopters released tear gas. One hundred and twenty-eight people were wounded. The National Guard was deployed and a curfew announced. The death of a student brought masses out for a vigil. This, too, was attacked from the air. After further repression, the Californian universities, including Marcuse's San Diego campus, began a strike on 26 May. Marcuse, however, had not stayed. He was in Europe, and about to be drawn into his own controversy. On 2 June, the magazine *Konkret* celebrated Marcuse as 'the only representative of the "Frankfurt School" who supports those who wish to realize the claims of Critical Theory: the students, young workers, persecuted minorities in the metropolises, and the oppressed in the Third World'.<sup>10</sup> Two days later, a left-wing Berlin newspaper claimed that Marcuse had worked for the US Secret Service until the 1950s and possibly into the 1960s.<sup>11</sup> The story stemmed from the historian L.L. Matthias. Conspiracy theories started to emerge, and the revelation led to disruption of Marcuse's lecture tour in Italy. On

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<sup>8</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 411.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 418.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 432.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 433.

17 June, Daniel Cohn-Bendit interrupted the Rome lecture in the Teatro Eliseo with some questions: 'Marcuse, why have you come to the theatre of the bourgeoisie? Herbert, tell us why the CIA pays you?'. Newspapers reported that Marcuse had to leave the theatre.<sup>12</sup>

### Canceling the Dialectic

Adorno attempted to resume his lectures in June but, once more, found it impossible to speak without interruption. On 18 June 1969, he cancelled his 'Introduction to Dialectical Thought' lecture series for the rest of the semester. The next day, a letter to Marcuse revealed that he was in a state of extreme depression. It was the time of Krahl's trial for the occupation of the Institute, as well as repeated violation of a ban on entering the University. Adorno and Friedeburg were called as witnesses to a room packed full of spectators and Krahl supporters. Krahl was the first to describe the events of the day. It was not an occupation, he insisted, but a legitimate meeting of sociology students, using an Institute room, as was their right. Adorno's testimony tried to hold fast simply to a description of events, avoiding value judgements, and he defended calling the police in order to prevent damage. Krahl cross-examined his supervisor, attempting to unpick his account of what was said and when. Outraged mutterings were heard when Adorno insisted that he could not give further evidence as he had to set off on holiday. Adorno left and, backed by roaring applause, Krahl denounced the University's joint-plaintiff lawyer Erich Schmidt-Leichner as a defender of war criminals and Nazis who was now taking to court revolutionaries whose parents had been murdered in the camps.<sup>13</sup> A few days later, the public prosecutor castigated Adorno as a sorcerer's apprentice who had conjured up spirits that he could not control, the ringleader being Krahl. The latter was sentenced to a suspended sentence of three months, with probation for his violations of the ban on entering the university, and a fine of 300DM for disturbing the peace at the Institute. The money was to go to an organization for parents of disabled children.

By now, Adorno was in Switzerland. He received a joyless letter from Marcuse, back from his Italian lecture tour. Marcuse was concerned to defend himself against press reports that claimed his lecture in Rome had been closed down by student protest. But, more importantly, he felt compelled to defend himself against attacks in the press from Horkheimer, who accused him of simplifying and coarsening 'Adorno's and my thought'. Adorno sent his response by telegram on 28 July: 'Telephoned Max. *Spiegel* quote ripped from context completely misleading. Positive passages cut. Before public altercation deem necessary face to face discussion with him Zurich mid-August. Cordially Teddie.'<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Later, however, Cohn-Bendit denied he had raised the question of the CIA and sought to make peace with Marcuse. See *ibid.*, p. 439.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 449.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 452.