

REPRESSIVE DEMOCRACY

Democracia represiva

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“(…) Nous massacrerons les révoltes logiques.

“Aux pays poivrés et détrempés! - au service des plus monstrueuses exploitations industrielles ou militaires.

“Au revoir ici, n’importe où. Conscrits du bon vouloir, nous aurons la philosophie féroce: ignorants pour la science, roués pour le confort; la crevaisson pour le monde qui va. C’est la vraie marche. En avant, route!”

Rimbaud¹

I.

“This democracy has become the most powerful obstacle to change – except change to the worse” (Marcuse, 2001:165), said Marcuse in *The Historical Fate of Bourgeois Democracy*, 1973.

Marcuse's concern was the election of Richard Nixon in 1972. Today Marcuse's remarks are still current and are tailored to comment on how the repressive structure of bourgeois-capitalist democracy was used in the elections of Donald Trump in the USA and Jair Bolsonaro in Brazil, for example.

Further on, Marcuse maintains:

“I have stressed the ambivalent function of civil rights in this democracy: they have to be defended with all available means, although they also serve the protofascist government which controls them over more openly. I refer to *Repressive Tolerance*: the situation has worsened since.” (Marcuse, 2001:177).

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¹ Rimbaud, 1964: 177: “(…) We'll massacre logical revolts. In spicy and drenched lands! At the service of the most monstrous exploitations, industrial or military. “Farewell here, no matter where. Conscrits of good will, ours will be a ferocious philosophy; ignorant as to science, rabid for comfort; and let the rest of the world croak. This is the real advance. Marching orders, let's go!”

In the context of the revolt of students against professors engaged in warlike research for the Vietnam War at Brandeis University, Marcuse wrote in 1965 the essay *Repressive Tolerance*. Faced with the protests, the university administration argued for academic freedom and the right of teachers to contribute to the armed conflict. The administration argued with academic freedom, guaranteed as a civil right in American society, whereby faculty members chose the objectives of their research. This is a classic case of the “ambivalent function of civil rights in this democracy”, as economic freedom – from the arms industry – outside the reach of public opinion and politics. In this case, for Marcuse, there was a social change in which the liberal function of tolerance – as non-violence – in the public sphere was obstructed in favor of individual liberty in economic interests. The university management argued with “the right of teachers to contribute to the armed conflict”. Would it then be a question of individual “subjectivity”, the right to freedom of choice for each one – or the right to freedom of expression for each one, as has been repeated to this day?

Marcuse's essay answers this question but it goes further: it is an analysis of the general process of reframing the practices linked to democracy as the liberal tradition proclaimed. This freedom apprehended at the individual – and particular – level is not a subjective issue, but an objective condition, its permanence is fundamental to the development of authoritarianism and totalitarianism. In the advanced industrial society of capitalism, as a one-dimensional society, a democracy provided with a totalitarian organization was formed where “objectivity performs the function of promoting postures that tend to dissolve the difference between truth and falsehood, information and propaganda, justice and injustice.” (Marcuse, 2007: 43)

Social objectivity, that is, the social organization of production imposes a certain relationship between effective reality and subject that determines what would be the “truth” of this relationship. Not only subjects change, adapting; the very experience of the relationship with reality also changes. In other words, there is an obstruction of the “truth” in this relationship, of its justice or injustice. There is a preservation of the imposition of the economic field over the social-political and the individual levels. And, most importantly: decisions do not result from dictatorial impositions, but “through the normal mentality course of administered events and the mentality shaped in this course.” (2007: 43) These impositions are not

outside the current democratic functioning, but they are developed within this configuration of society.

The similarity with Adorno's 1959 lecture *The meaning of working through the past*, when he warned about the perpetuity of Nazi-fascist dictatorial elements in contemporary bourgeois capitalist society is remarkable.

“I do not wish to go into the question of neo-Nazi organizations. I consider the survival of National Socialism within democracy to be potentially more menacing than the survival of fascist tendencies against democracy. Infiltration indicates something objective; ambiguous figures make their comeback and occupy positions of power for the sole reason that conditions please them.

(...)

That fascism lives on, that the often invoked working through the past has to this day been unsuccessful and has degenerated into its own caricature, an empty and cold forgetting, is due to the fact that the objective conditions of society that engendered fascism continue to exist. Fascism essentially cannot be derived from subjective dispositions”. (Adorno, 2005: 90, 93)

On that occasion, Adorno explained how this condition of possibility becomes effectively realized as an authoritarian organization of power within the scope of the liberal democratic experience. For him,

“(...) the dominant ideology today dictates that the more individuals are delivered over to objective constellations, over which they have, or believe they have, no power, the more they subjectivize this powerlessness. Starting from the phrase that everything depends on the person, they attribute to people everything that in fact is due to the external conditions, so that in turn the conditions remain undisturbed. Using the language of philosophy, one indeed could say that the people's alienation from democracy reflects the self-alienation of society.” (Adorno, 2005: 93)

Although individuals present themselves as political subjects, strictly speaking, in the current democracy they are objects insofar as they are subjected to the impositions of social and economic organization. Their position will thus be that of being subjects of their own impotence, of their “objectification”, forced to adapt, with the corresponding obstruction of any social dynamism of their own; condemned to the loss of their effective political subjectivity. As stated in *Aspects of the New Right-Wing Extremism*, a lecture of 1967, a “form of resignation whereby one

essentially eliminates ‘one self’ as a political subject; it expresses a harmfully spectator-like relationship with reality.” (Adorno, 2020: 22)

Adorno is aware that

“(...) right-wing extremism is not a psychological and ideological problem but a very real and political one. Yet the factually wrong, untrue nature of its own substance forces it to operate with ideological means, which in this case take the form of propagandist means.” (Adorno, 2020: 22)

In other words: there is an inadequacy between the actual reality of life in society and the political form of its organization. Ideological construction takes the place of society itself, corresponding to its political organization, the current democracy. For Adorno “The social conditions of fascism continue to exist (...) Despite the collapse of the fascism itself, the conditions for fascist movements are still socially, if not politically, present” (2020: 4). These conditions objectively imply that individuals

“(...) must deny precisely that autonomous subjectivity to which the idea of democracy appeals; they can preserve themselves only if they renounce their self. To see through the nexus of deception, they would need to make precisely that painful intellectual effort that the organization of everyday life, and not least of all a culture industry inflated to the point of totality, prevents. The necessity of such adaptation, of identification with the given, the status quo, with power as such, creates the potential for totalitarianism. This potential is reinforced by the dissatisfaction and the rage that very constraint to adapt produces and reproduces. Because reality does not deliver the autonomy or, ultimately, the potential happiness that the concept of democracy actually promises, people remain indifferent to democracy, if they do not in fact secretly hate it.” (Adorno, 2005: 99)

In order not to question its reproduction, in order not to question its reproduction it is necessary to impose on the subjects the experience of another nexus between reality and the form of democratic political and social organization. In these terms adaptation is not only subjective, but objective. To prevent its truth from being learned as “repressive tolerance”.

“(...) just as one must adapt, so would one like the forms of collective life also to adapt, all the more so since one expects from such adaptation the streamlining of the state as a gigantic business enterprise within a certainly less than friendly competition of all against all. Those whose real powerlessness shows no sign of

ceasing cannot tolerate even the semblance of what would be better; they would prefer to get rid of the obligation of autonomy, which they suspect cannot be a model for their lives and prefer to throw themselves into the melting pot of the collective ego.” (Adorno, 2005: 98)

II.

What has gotten worse over time is that we can now replace “repressive tolerance” with “repressive democracy”. We are not faced with a situation linked to the arms industry, as it was in the 60 th’s when there was a claim for freedom in the planning of an economy that should be preserved from political interference via the State. The question about tolerance is replaced with the problem of social and political authoritarian organization.

“At the stage of monopolistic state capitalism, politics gains precedence over the economy (...) this means focusing theory and practice on such targets as the war, the military establishment, the power structure's attack on education and welfare, government by conspiracy and undercover agents, the subjection of the legislative and the judicial to the executive branch, censorship and intimidation, the rule of the Big Lie. And also the mobilization on the ideological level (...)” (Marcuse, 2001: 184)

Nowadays we came to a situation of obstruction of politics in the totality of the organization of power that permeates the democratic system that transformed itself into a police and warfare state (Marcuse, 2001: 165). Politics is reshaped as propaganda and police. The goal here is to simultaneously avoid any dynamic of transformation in society and to silence any alternative by “naturalizing” the current mode of production and reproduction of life in society. Taking advantage of the plan of defense of civil rights and especially of freedom of opinion, “you promote aggressiveness, oppression, and crime to the extent to which it publicizes the most outrageous exhortation to violence.” (2001: 177) That is what is called repressive democracy here. It is a way of using democracy as an elaborate human rights trench strictly in defense of the economic relations of bourgeois society. In such a democracy, law and order are incapable of actually lessening the suffering of the oppressed. In repressive democracy, violence is not found in repression or in reaction to it. It is found in everyday life in society. Marcuse elaborates on this ques-

tion in the *Afterword* written in 1964 for the publication of *On the Critique of Violence* by Walter Benjamin.

“The violence criticized by Benjamin is the violence of the current, which preserves in the existing itself the monopoly of legality, truth, law and in which the violent character of law has disappeared, to appear in a terrible way in the so-called “states of exception”, which in fact they are not.” (Marcuse, 1971: 100)

Benjamin criticizes the violence hidden in a world presented as devoid of violence. This world is an ideological simulacrum, in which violence underwent an ideological inversion through which “oppression is disposed as a right” (Marcuse, 1971:101). For Marcuse, the “change from the liberal state to the total-authoritarian state takes place at the level of the same social order. (...) Liberalism ‘generates’ from itself the total-authoritarian State, as its full realization in an evolved stage of development”, as explained in *The Struggle against Liberalism in the Totalitarian Conception of the State*. (Marcuse, 1968: 19). The transition from democracy to authoritarianism occurs at the level of society, where, in both cases, capitalism imposes a structure of inequalities that results in growing repression against opposition parties, critical demonstrations, resistance, mobilizations, etc. The dispute at the level of state apparatuses of power needs to give way to the apprehension of the dynamics in society.

Neoliberal society is a new continuation of this dynamic that propelled the liberal society to the totalitarian society. “Violence” is, therefore, present in the day to day of bourgeois democracy, is linked to private appropriation. For Benjamin, there is an obstruction of politics in society as a whole, breaking with the obstruction to limited political action regarding the economic sphere, which had been the norm of liberal capitalist society. Politics is replaced by violence. In the democracy that corresponds to the monopoly capitalism and neoliberal social organization, the most relevant repressive component today is not the repression or suspension of rights, but its link to the normalization of a “private”, specific, and non-public component in the economy of appropriation and accumulation. It is a repression founded on the social organization of the daily reproduction process. Here there is a general obstruction of politics, an absence of interference. Repressive democracy maintains and reinforces the polarization between rulers and ruled, between capital and labor. It is the democracy of inequality, with violence disguised in the structure of social organization, beyond the economic plan in all dimensions of society. Repressive power is structured as an organization, but there is also “domi-

nation not as simple repressive power, but as fabrication of the subject” (Brown, 2009: 69), like the one-dimensional man that consolidates the existing structured domination. It is no longer a democracy in the sense that democracy is "an uncontrolled activity of anyone who wants to engage in common activities in society." (Rancière, 2009: 96) Today, we see its presence everywhere in the sense of consolidating the existing structure of domination and preventing any possibility of transformation. There is an emphasis on the repressive components, the elimination of criticism and any alternatives through violence, whether violence of physical repression by the police state, or violence due to the no less repressive character of the construction, through mass media, of a contingent of deteriorated and manipulated subjects.

A contemporary picture of this situation is drawn by Alain Badiou in his book *Trump*:

“Democracy massively represented the large-scale organization of colonialism, imperialism, world wars with millions of deaths. Everywhere this democracy is nourished by a generalized complicity with the development of monstrous inequalities, along with the idea that capitalism is the only possible strategic path.” (Badiou, 2020: 68)

Trump and Bolsonaro, according to Badiou, use attacks on democracy so that the existing (repressive) democracy appears as the only one possible (2020: 87). Both mention the threat of communism and socialism - “America will never be socialist; Brazil was on the verge of communism” - to deflect any criticism that would call capitalism into question (2020: 94). Repressive democracy is based on private property. Trump and Bolsonaro, just as "the fascists, never attacked the bourgeois function in the process of capitalist production." (Marcuse, 1969: 11).

It is not a crisis of democracy. We are faced with a de-democratized democracy, which grants rights only to a part to eternalize it as natural. It is a repression of democracy on the democratic plane itself. This democracy needs to be democratized. Marcuse reminds Benjamin: for this to occur, the first step is to break this repressive “continuum”. Repressive democracy imposes itself as the only one. Democratizing democracy therefore means the possibility of thinking about another democracy, that is, admitting a dynamic in the level of democracy in which a democratization process must be developed. Bringing politics to all dimensions of collective social life: Exposing hidden violence and re-configuring politics as an organization of collective, public, and universal practices of interaction,

opposed to violence, repression, and exploitation. It is necessary to develop new forms of social objectivity other than the capitalist ones. Alternative experiences must be possible in labor and the sphere of production. New institutional forms of collective appropriation of everything that give priority to the public good. There is no democracy without emancipated, autonomous people, men and women.

According to Oskar Negt's analysis, "subjective configurations, education, awareness, people's behavior, which build representations of the common good, are decisive for an alternative development of democracy." (Negt, 1999: 18)

Negt had in mind the relationship of reciprocal interaction between objective and subjective conditions within the scope of historical dynamics. For Marcuse, this is a fundamental question. There is an interaction driving from subjective conditions to objective ones.

"The economic categories contain in themselves the imperative of liberation: it is the precondition rather than the result of the analysis. This internal coincidence of imperative and scientific truth is itself grounded in an objective constellation, namely a historical situation where human labor (intellectual and manual) has created the conditions for the abolition of servitude and oppression – goals which are blocked only by the capitalist organization of society. The transcendent content of economic categories defines the concept of exploration: the fact of exploration persists even if the material and cultural workers needs are more or less satisfied, he is no longer the impoverished proletarian of the nineteenth century." (Marcuse, 2001: 183)

Marcuse seeks to show that the contradictions represented by the concentration of capital and consequent popular exclusion are no longer configured as dynamics of possible social transformation. This is contained by the effective substance of exploitation, which is

"(...) the denial of freedom, is to work (and to live) in order to maintain and enlarge the social system the growth and wealth of which depends on the degradation of the human being. The surplus value appropriated by the capitalist is time taken away from the workers, time taken out of his life, and this alienation of living time in turn reproduces the human existence in servitude. (Marcuse, 2001: 183)

For Marcuse, with the advances in productivity, this surplus work is no longer necessary for the reproduction of human society: it constitutes a surviving remnant of the liberal economy. However, this perception transcends the immediate every

day, which is a “repressive economic policy” (2001:185) within the scope of the totalitarian organization of society contained in the “repressive democracy”, which has the support of the “subject” of the work itself, its manipulated ideological configuration. In this way, there would be objective conditions for a non-imposing relationship between the economy and social subjects, releasing their autonomy. The experience of these new objective conditions would lead Marcuse to claim a “new sensitivity”, not limited to the presupposition of the current social order and organization. This would allow the experience of freedom not strictly as an objective, but to be understood as dynamism, a process of liberation. Thus, the conditions for overcoming repressive democracy would demand a political organization not necessarily attached to the concentrating and excluding economic order.

Historian Reinhart Koselleck and his historical conceptual analysis help to clarify this picture:

“The purpose and function of concepts of movement distinguish them from older topology. The Aristotelians usage (...) rendered finite the possibilities of human organization, one form being deducible from the previous form. Concepts of movement by contrast open up a new future. Instead of analyzing a limited number of possible constitutional forms, these should promote the construction of new constitutional situations. In terms of social history, these are expressions that react to the challenge of a society that changes itself technologically and industrially. They served to reorganize under new slogans the masses (Koselleck, 2004: 273)

The biggest challenge is to support this “future” in the current situation. The liberating tendencies must be pointed within the established society (Marcuse, 1991: 254). Koselleck approaches this issue with his analysis of the nexus between experience and the horizon of expectations.

“All concepts of movement share a compensatory effect, which they produce. The lesser the experimental substance, the greater the expectations joined to it. The lesser the experience, the greater the expectation: this is a formula for the temporal structure of the modern, to the degree that it is rendered a concept by “progress.” This was plausible for as long as all previous experience was inadequate to the establishment of expectations derivable from the process of a world reforming itself technologically. If corresponding political designs were realized, then, once generated by a revolution, the old expectations worked themselves out on the basis of the new experiences.” (2004: 273)

We can understand why Marcuse had proposed a “new sensibility”, in *Essay on Liberation*. It would serve to provide a factual empirical basis, hidden to the present sensibility, for a new expectation, making it an effective possibility of realization. At the same time, the overcoming of repressive democracy and, thus, the suppression of the objective conditions for the development of extreme right-wing totalitarian movements has no real possibility of realization if the obstruction of the experience of manipulation, violence, the blurring between truth and lies, justice and injustice, is maintained.

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