RECOLLECTIONS OF THE BRAZILIAN RECEPTION OF HERBERT MARCUSE *

Recuerdos de la recepción brasileña de Herbert Marcuse

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1

I first heard of Marcuse in 1965, and even then, only indirectly. I should clarify, however, that I am not a reliable indicator. I have studied and taught philosophy for thirty-four years at the University of São Paulo, which is hardly a strong recommendation in matters of Critical Theory. Firstly, because the Department of Philosophy was founded half a century ago by a French cultural mission that renewed its dominance at least until the mid-1980s, and, as is well known, Marcuse did not exist strictly speaking in France before '68 and afterwards, he was cheapened as an ideologue of the student movement while the *gauchiste* period lasted, and thus overshadowed by the local star system. In a country of reflected culture – as was, and still is, the norm in peripheral nations like ours – the acquisition of philosophical taste was expected to follow the fluctuations of the precepts and prejudices of the metropolis of the day in matters of literate culture. Therefore, there was really no room for Frankfurtian hybridism in the French philosophical canon of that period, to which only historians of philosophy and epistemologists were admitted, along with other subsidiary variants of professional philosophy. Secondly, because the university environment of that time, despite being oppositional (first anti-oligarchic; after '64, anti-military dictatorship, obviously) and predominantly left-wing and, what is more, Marx-oriented, was constructive in such a manner – this was another imperative typical of the periphery, condemned to overcome underdevelopment so as not to be reduced to a pariah nation – that it became paradoxically impermeable to the negativity characteristic of Critical Theory; to the few who had any knowledge of it, it was merely a sentimental critique of capitalism.

* Testimony gathered by Isabel Maria Loureiro and Carlos Eduardo Jordão Machado, with an eye to a potential German reader, on the celebrations of the centenary of Brecht and Marcuse that took place at the Goethe Institute in São Paulo (June 1998). The original version of this text was published in Paulo Eduardo Arantes, *Zero à Esquerda* (São Paulo: Conrad Editora / Editora Brasiliense, 2004)

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As elsewhere in the world, the student agitation and its cultural developments opened the doors to Marcuse after '68. They opened the wrong doors, however. It is true that they did not open the professors' doors, who continued to look askance at that pop philosophy. Yet even the correct door of the students' radicalism, rebelling against the military regime, opened onto a misunderstanding, which, moreover, was not a distinct trait of ours. Again, as elsewhere in the world, Marcuse – or what passed for him – had been reincorporated into the Leninist tradition, whose historical limits the Frankfurt School had been the first to point out as early as 1937, not to mention the definitive verdict in the immediate postwar period. Highlighting even more sharply the misalignment to which I am referring, it so happened that the Brazilian New Left, on its way to the Castroist-inspired armed struggle, only broke with the compromising stageism of communist orthodoxy in order to better reconnect with what it took to be the theory and practice of an upcoming Proletarian Revolution, further heralded by the likely collapse of Imperialism in Vietnam. This last episode aside – the brutal externalization of the violence typical of a consumer society at its highest stage –, nothing could have been more enthusiastically contrary to the letter and spirit of *One-Dimensional Man*, a book that, for that very reason, was obscured by the speculations of someone like Régis Debray, let alone the Hispano-American vulgate of Althusser.

3

More than a few saw in such a profound misalignment – twenty-odd years later, it is clear – an unexpected convergence, namely, between the moderate or realist version of Dependency Theory (not by chance the version that eventually prevailed) and Marcuse's more sober verdict regarding the enduring capacity of advanced capitalism, whose afterlife seemed assured so long as it "delivered the goods." The dependency theorists of the aforementioned hegemonic line, in turn, showed that the domestic markets of peripheral countries were being internationalized, and that, while dependent, peripheral capitalism possessed its own dynamic, which was still far from done, directly contradicting the stagnationist theses of the New Left, which, convinced of the inexorable polarization of the world economy – summed up in Gunder

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Frank's formulation about the "development of underdevelopment" – decided to take up the struggle (including the armed one) in order to cut the dilemma's Gordian knot: either socialism or sub-capitalist regression, that is, market fascism, as the economist Paul Samuelson would later define Pinochet's Chile. With due caution, one could say that Marcuse and the Brazilian dependency theorists were scoring points by dispelling illusions on the left. That said, it was a convergence that no one saw, and a purely negative one, centered on historical mirages to be avoided. For in truth, Dependency Theory was never properly a Critical Theory, but rather a Traditional Theory (in the Frankfurtian sense of the term), and hence devoid of any emancipatory impulse – so much so that it has even been said that dependency analyses not only lost interest in a radical critique of capitalist civilization but also, at the more immediate level of their organic connection to practice, that they were solely incompatible with the neoclassical conceptions of international trade as a neutral field of reciprocal comparative advantages, and could be combined, apart from that case, with virtually any policy to the left or the right, provided it was modernizing and industrializing. Indeed, the very people who would become the theorists of the New Dependency (not by chance, the intellectual constellation that, for two decades, ossified the Brazilian critical tradition) were the ones who referred to the Frankfurt School as a remote metaphysical lamentation before the antinomies of Modernity.

3

Still in the catalogue of misunderstandings – let the reader not forget that we began with the absurdity of a Franco-Brazilian reception [of Marcuse] –, is it worth recalling that also in Brazil, clearly driven by second-hand readings, one also committed the **folly** of associating Marcuse – whom a French professor in Brazil once described as "an enraged Apollonian" – with the local manifestations of the Counterculture? So much so that he was mistaken – and not only in these parts – for the characters of Edgar Morin's California. In any case, there is a certain charm (one that, I suspect, only a Brazilian would fully appreciate) to see Marcuse (a reader of Plato and Hegel, the final philosopher of Objective Reason) gravitating in the orbit of the tropicalist "new sensibility," the Brazilian variant of pop. And this applied precisely to the author of one of the most comprehensive critiques of American cap-

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italism as a closed society entirely colonized by the repressive sheen of the generalized commodity form, beginning with the ever-identical pop.

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In any case, this misappropriation (and moreover a superficial one, as I have noted) ended up reinforcing a stereotype by which, for some time now, it has become customary to periodize the Brazilian reception of Critical Theory. It became established that Marcuse had been, at most, a closed chapter in the first phase of that convoluted reception; that is, a mentor of a vague romantic anti-capitalism, understandable during the *anos de chumbo*[*] of resistance to the conservative modernization driven by the military, yet plainly out of place in light of the country's reunion with its destiny. I am referring, of course, to a periodization sponsored by the sudden and extensive diffusion among us of the Habermasian version of the evolution (towards nowhere) of the Frankfurt School. Although Marcuse did not merit a special chapter in *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, there is no doubt that he too despaired of finding a spark of non-instrumental rationality in the disastrous course of the world and, as such, he was filed away here (even before being read) as a precursor of "irrationalism," a generic label used, in the case of the Brazilian borrowings from Habermas, for national pathologies, among them populism, nationalism, and an alleged innate multiculturalism. Since he never actually shone in the Brazilian firmament (except during the '68 fever, and even then...), one cannot speak either of an eclipse of Marcuse or of a renaissance of interest in him. Or rather: I believe he will soon be read for the first time, at last.

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With this harmonious adjustment between the *Theory of Communicative Action* and the current stage of the modernization anxiety in Brazilian ideological life, one may claim that the chronic misalignment between Critical Theory and the national experience comes to an end – a misalignment that, as we have seen, has victimized the reception of Marcuse among us. The world economy has swung to the right, a colossal jolt that knocked us over, a reversal that is hardly the first in our

[*] The so-called "years of lead" refer to the most repressive period of the Brazilian military dictatorship, roughly between 1968 and 1974, during the government of General Emílio Médici.

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history and has always counted on the enthusiastic support of the local elites, who now prepare once again to sacrifice yet another generation to the myth of the country's ascent to the upper levels of modern life. This is a recurrent syndrome: the somewhat subaltern feeling of living in the wrong country, one that needs to eradicate its social fixations, leave the path of deviation, and finally enter the rails of capitalist normality as defined by the central countries. Which, in turn, ceases to be criticized and to be regarded as a threat to the survival of humanity *per se*. One comes to understand that, under such conditions, paradigm shifts are always welcome, especially when intended to unblock spirits toward our perpetually unfinished modernity. Therefore, the Great Refusal is not really our concern – except on the day we discover that the future has already arrived and is precisely what we are witnessing: social disintegration driven by the suicidal program of the globalized economy. Once this unprecedented experience crystallizes once and for all, Marcuse will at last be understood in his true dimension.

Translated by Bruna Della Torre and Eduardo Altheman