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Laura Arese
Universidad Nacional de Córdoba, arese.laura@gmail.com

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Doing Justice to the Past: Memory and Criticism in Herbert Marcuse

Laura Arese
Universidad Nacional de Córdoba

Abstract

In his inaugural lecture as director of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt (1933), Horkheimer points out the need for a new understanding of history that avoids the contemporary versions of the Hegelian *Verklärung*. He synthesizes this challenge with an imperative: to do justice to past suffering. The result of this appeal can be found in the works of the members of the Frankfurt School in the form of multiple, even divergent, trains of thought that reach with unlike intensities the current debates on memory and its link with history. This paper focuses on three of these trains, which can be traced back to different periods of the work of Herbert Marcuse. It intends to systematize and present what can be considered alternative—although not necessarily contradictory—approaches aroused from the same concern over the critical power of nonreconciliatory memory: first, a genealogy inquiry that deconstructs the reified character of the given; second, a recollection of past images of happiness; and finally, a memory of the limits of all attainable freedom. Exploring these three moments, their shortcomings and tensions, may shed light on the complexity and present importance of the challenge they intend to face.

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Correspondence: arese.laura@gmail.com

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In his inaugural lecture as director of the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt,[1] Horkheimer summarizes at its central points a train of thought that runs through the research of several members of the Institute: a reflection on the possibility of a relation with the past that avoids the conciliatory perspective prevalent in modern philosophies of history. According to such philosophies, the subject of history is not individual actors but an abstract totality, historical time is an upward movement, and confronting the past cannot but be equal to justifying what happened for the sake of the present development. Justifying the past means rationalizing the existence of each singularity as a necessary moment of a process of which singularities are only one part. Therefore, the rationality of the total process leaves "the demise of the individual . . . without philosophical significance."[2] In the third decade of the twentieth century, Horkheimer's criticism may sound anachronistic. However, he asserts that the fall of the nineteenth century's principal modern philosophies of history did not give way to a better, more productive or critical link to the past. On the contrary, after the First World War,

> abandoned by the philosophical conviction of having its true reality in the divine Idea intrinsic to the whole, the individual experienced the world as a "medley of arbitrariness" and itself as "the tribute which existence and the transient world exact." A sober look at the individual and the other [Nächste] no longer revealed . . . the cunning of which Reason was said to avail itself. . . . The suffering and death of individuals threatened to appear in their naked senselessness.[3]

In this way, the *Verklärung* returns, although in new forms. Horkheimer's polemic targets contemporary theories and discourses, such as vitalism and nationalist rhetoric, which, despite their differences, proved to be authentic and dangerous heirs of Hegel. Just like him, they support interpretations of history that "submerge hopeless individual existence into the bosom or—to speak with Sombarthe—the "'gilded background' [Goldgrund] of meaningful totalities."[4]

More than the answer it offers, the interesting aspect of this text is how it poses the ques-

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[1] Max Horkheimer, "The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Task for an Institute for Social Research" (1931), in *Between Philosophy and Social Science: Selected Writings* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993).

[2] Ibid., 4.

[3] Ibid., 5. Horkheimer is quoting Hegel. See Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 89.

[4] Horkheimer, "The Present Situation of Social Philosophy," 9.

tion of a "social philosophy" that is up to the challenge of a nonreconciliatory approach to the past. Such an approach should make it possible to reckon with the factuality of history without resorting to transcendental instances that endow it with meaning. It should also be capable of considering social phenomena from a global point of view that takes in to account macro structures and processes, but without hiding the "suffering and death, stupidity and baseness"[5] inherent in individual existence. In other words, it must account for the nonrationality of what happened without renouncing it to understand and preserve it in its singularity. Horkheimer synthesizes this challenge with an imperative: to do justice to the past. This motto, which can be understood as the positive formulation of the rejection of the *Verklärung*, takes on a different meaning in the thinking of the different members of the Institute (and other authors linked to critical theory as well). Yet for almost all of them, the starting point is the insight already presented in the inaugural conference of 1933, which can be described as an inversion of the Hegelian philosophy of history. While in Hegel the identification between the real and the rational allows the justification of everything that happened, in critical theory's approach the assumption of the nonidentity of both terms gives rise to the opposite result: criticism. In the same way, while the *Verklärung* reaches the present as an affirmation of what it is, the critical recollection of the past, inversely, introduces in the present a gap through which the rebellion against the injustice of the given could begin.

Now, the result of this dispute with the new forms of Hegelianism is not a "counter philosophy of history," as systematic and encompassing as its adversary. Quite the opposite, the result of the controversy can be found in the works of the members of the Frankfurt School in the form of multiple, even divergent, trains of thought that reach with different intensities the current debates. This paper focuses on some of these trains, which can be traced back to three different periods of the work of Herbert Marcuse. Rather than establishing systematic links between them, I intend to collect and present what can be consider three different paths aroused from the same concern on the critical power of a nonreconciliatory memory.

I. The 1930s: Genealogy and Unreification.

The first explicit reference to the link between recovery of the past and criticism can be found in a text of 1932, "The Foundation of Historical Materialism."[6] In this writing, Marcuse draws from the recently published *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* a conception that would be central to his work during the 1930s: the "historicity of hu-

[5] Ibid., 4.

[6] Herbert Marcuse, "The Foundation of Historical Materialism," in *Studies in Critical Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), 1–48.

man essence."[7] He points out that, in the *Manuscript*, Marx argues that this historicity lies in the ability of the human being to constitute itself freely through work. Work is a process in which man recognizes himself as such thanks to the free production of objects external to him, as well as the relationships he establishes with others in the development of that activity. The totality of the relations and objects thus constituted is the objective world that each nascent generation finds as a given objectivity. This world, insofar as it is understood as the result of work, that is, of a process of objectification, contains "the reality of a past human life, which, although it belongs to the past, is still present in the form it has given to the objective world."[8]

Then, reification, understood in a diachronic sense, may be defined as the process by which that "past contained in the present" is concealed. The reified world is revealed as something fixed, *a res* already and forever defined in its essential features, abstracted from the work-process that made it possible. So, work becomes alienated work. When this happens, man becomes unable to recognize his action in his own product, which is

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[7] The present analysis excludes what has been called Marcuse's "Heideggerian period." According to interpreters like Colomer, this period begins with the reading of *Being and Time* (in 1927), and finishes in 1933–34, as three important events occurred: Heidegger's "Rektoratsrede," Marcuse's entry in the Institute of Social Research of the University of Frankfurt, and the publication of his articles "Philosophy of Failure: the Work of Karl Jaspers," "German Philosophy in the Twentieth Century," and "The Struggle against Liberalism in the Totalitarian Conception of the State." Colomer claims that in these articles Marcuse clearly formulates a strong critique of Heidegger's conception of historicity and opts definitively for Marxism, giving up the project of merging it with Heidegger's "concrete philosophy" (see Jordi Magnet Colomer, "El joven Marcuse y su camino de Heidegger a Horkheimer," *Eikasia: Revista de filosofía* 49 (May 2013): 225–40). Following this interpretation, the present analysis focuses on the writings after this turning point in Marcuse's work. Although his writings of the twenties are significant and should be considered in a larger study, they will not be taken into account here because it is from the thirties on that Marcuse's reflection on history and memory is formulated in the terms proposed by Horkheimer in the inaugural conference of 1933. On the other hand, one text analysed here is dated before the turn pointed out by Colomer: "The Foundation of historical materialism," of 1932, written as *The Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, were published for the first time. I suggest that the role of this text in the within Marcuse's work must be reconsidered. Marcuse himself considers it as the precise place of his post-Heideggerian turn when, in a dialogue with Habermas, he says that the publication of the *Manuscripts* was was probably the turn and henceforth "from that moment the problem Heidegger versus Marx stopped being a problem for me" (see Jürgen Habermas, "Diálogo con Herbert Marcuse," in *Perfiles Filosófico-políticos* (Madrid: Taurus, 1975), 239, translation is mine. Colomer, however, agrees with Habermas who, in this same interview, insists that in "The Foundation," the attempt to "appropriate Marx in the terms of the (Heideggerian) fundamental ontology" persists (Ibid., 250). I think that, as I shall show in what follows, both the text's attempt to analyze the process of reification and its proposal of an articulation between social theory, historical understanding, and praxis indicate an important theoretical affinity with the works after 1933, which definitively abandon the initial enthusiasm for Heidegger.

[8] Marcuse, "The Foundation of Historical Materialism," 4.

to say, to recognize his ability to transcend the given in order to transform it according to his free self-determination. Marcuse comes to the conclusion that the overcoming of alienation depends on (although not only on) the recognition of the historicity of the objective world. On the basis of this idea, he claims that the development of a historical perspective is crucial, for both the critique of bourgeois political economy and the foundation of a new social theory.

In fact, the trap of classical political economy is that it "dismisses the essence of man and his history." By abstracting what is of the process by which it came to be, political economy becomes a science about "non-people and an inhuman world of objects and commodities," whose historical facticity can then be poured into immutable laws.[9] Thus, a social theory that allows for understanding the human world qua human and tends to its transformation must recover the historical process by which this world was forged through work and human praxis. Historiographical genealogy, collective memory, and political consciousness go hand in hand. Marcuse thinks he is just being consistent with Marx's thought[10] as he states that "Marx is fundamentally convinced that when man is conscious of his history he cannot fall into a situation which he has not himself created, and that only he himself can liberate himself from any situation."[11] On this point, it may well be asked how this historical deconstruction of the given can be a normative horizon for praxis. Certainly, genealogical history and memory can dilute the reified character of the world by tracing it back to its origins. But how does the normative dimension inherent in all political criticism arise from this? To answer this question, we must follow Marcuse one step further in his reflec-

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[9] Ibid., 9.

[10] An important source of this reading of Marx is Georg Lukács. Martin Jay shows that although the Marxian theory of value already contains the thesis of the presence of the coagulated work of past generations in the present, it was Lukács and not Marx who, through his notion of reification, explicitly established the emancipating value of the recovery of the past from a materialist perspective. This notion of reification is central to Marcuse's reading of Marx, although he does not explicitly quote him in this respect. It is also worth mentioning Jay's observation that only in the 1940s did Adorno, Benjamin, and Horkheimer begin to echo this idea of "reification as forgetting," which was very important for their own theoretical developments. On the other hand, Jay identifies another Lukácsean influence on Marcuse that may be discussed. He asserts that Marcuse's reflections on memory during the 1950s present affinities with the pre-Marxist Lukács of *The Theory of the Novel*, who defends a Platonic conception of memory. See Martin Jay, "Anamnestic Totalization: Memory in the Thought of Herbert Marcuse," in *Marxism and Totality: The Adventures of a Concept from Lukács to Habermas* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 228. Leaving aside the question of the link between the philosophers, the next section addresses this characterization of the Marcusean thought in the 1950s as metaphysical, focusing specifically on *Eros and Civilization*.

[11] Marcuse, "The Foundation of Historical Materialism," 35.

tion on what he calls the "historicity of human essence." This step, however, is an interesting suggestion that is not further developed and remains unexplored in his later writings.

Also in "The Foundation," Marcuse asserts that since Marx "we are no longer dealing with an abstract human essence, which remains equally valid at every stage of concrete history, but with an essence which can be *defined* in history and *only* in history."[12] It should be noted that this does not mean that the essence of man can be totally identified with his factual history. It is significant that Marcuse identifies the essence's "being defined" in history whit its "appearing" in history. The human essence "appears" (that is, "is defined") in history in the form of what "could be": *as possibility*. The possibilities to which Marcuse refers here derive in principle from certain objective conditions of the given social structure, such as the development of the productive forces, the level of the collective organization of work, and the balance between the social needs so far generated and the available cultural and technological resources. In other words, these are possibilities of what man could be according to the objective material development of society. Yet, such objective conditions only reveal the "essence of man" if they are recognized as potentialities of the human. And this recognition occurs in those historical moments when men and women draw from the mere factual possibility—that is, what could merely be—an "idea of what the practice should do."[13] This pretension of praxis about what should be is not limited to a verification of what can actually be transformed in society given the available resources. On the contrary, such pretention, which arises only through collective and recollecting organization, translates the mere factual possibilities in a claim of freedom that necessarily transcends them. Taking this into account, the "transcendence" regarding factual possibility should not be confused with a "transcendental" nature. Rather, the "idea of what should be done in practice" is a concrete formulation of a singular aspiration of freedom born of historical rebellions and revolutions.[14] More than as an "idea" in the classical sense, the "human essence" appears in

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[12] Ibid., 28. First italics are mine, the second are Marcuse's.

[13] Ibid., 53.

[14] Marcuse recovers a strange expression of Hegel to underline the singularity of his own materialist conception of essence. Hegel defines the essence of man as "a timeless past": "Past, because it is an image of being-in-itself that no longer corresponds to immediate existence; timeless, because recollection has preserved it and kept it from disappearing into the past" (Herbert Marcuse, "The Concept of Essence," in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* [London: MyFlyBooks, 2009], 55). Idealism asserts the idea that essence is a past that will be recovered in the developing of history by force of a metaphysical necessity, and therefore the human memory of it does not have any practical meaning. A materialistic perspective of the concept of essence, conversely, claims that the memory that preserves those images of the past has a central practical importance because it orients praxis in the fight for a better future, which is no longer understood as a metaphysical destiny, but as an open possibility: "The recollection of what can

history as an aspiration, inseparable from the praxis that has carried it forward, that is, as an image of freedom that guides the particular action.

In these passages Marcuse uses the English words "recollection" or "remember" to refer to the recovery of such historical struggles. The Latin root of "recollection," *recollectus*—the past participle of *recolligere*—means to reunite. Similarly, "remember" alludes to the restitution of members, scattered strokes or fragments of a bigger whole. The link with the past that this line of thought proposes is no longer the sole "deconstruction" of what appears to be *res*. From a different perspective, it consists of the search for certain moments that serve as normative references, moments that may be separated by large periods of time and have an indefinite connection between them. Therefore, they must be "recollected" in the sense of being put together under an encompassing image of freedom. These moments and the constructive operation of collecting them together constitute the milestones of social criticism.

In another text of the thirties, "The Concept of Essence" [1936],[15] Marcuse returns briefly to this idea. Following some insights of "The Foundation," he defines "criticism" as the discovery of the nonidentity between the "essence" (which, as pointed out, appears in history in the form of unrealized latent possibilities of emancipation), and the "appearance," that is, the facticity of the reified world. So he repeats with other words his thesis of a close link between historical consciousness and memory, on the one hand, and criticism and emancipation, on the other. Yet, he identifies now more clearly the element that makes it possible for historical memory to be more than a mere descriptive genealogy. This element is concrete historical past struggles; without them, no genealogy could be really critical. Only the memory of concrete struggles "reveals" the "historical essence" concealed under the "appearance" of the given, since such episodes are concrete indictments of the repressed possibilities on which the process of reification depends. Crucial is the assertion that it is this transcendence of the given (historical, not transcendental) that allows us "to sustain faith in the face of failure." That is to say, only this remembrance keeps alive the expectation of new rebellion attempts. As Marcuse would say some years later, "But the Reason to which Marx was indebted was also, in its day, not 'there': it appeared only in its negativity and in the struggles of those who revolted against the existent, who protested and who were beaten. With them, Marx's thought has kept faith—in the face of defeat and against the dominating Reason."[16]

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authentically be becomes a power that shapes the future. The demonstration and preservation of essence become the motive idea of practice aimed at transformation" (Ibid.).

[15] Ibid.

[16] Herbert Marcuse, "Epilogue: The New German Edition of Marx's 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon," *Radical America* (July–August 1969): 59.

In short, in the Marcusian reflection of the thirties two aspects or dimensions of memory as criticism can be identified. On the one hand, Marcuse reflects on the process of "un-reification" of the alienated world that may be reached through genealogical analysis. The systematic development of such analysis would be nothing other than a critical historiography, which should be an essential part of all critical social theory. On the other hand, Marcuse suggests the need to search within the history of praxis for certain images of the potentialities of human freedom that could serve as normative references for the present. With this second reflection, Marcuse identifies the normative source of praxis in links established by the political imagination between past and present. Consequently, he suggests a kind of link with the past that is not restricted to scientific social theory, but implies an active exercise of memory of the political actors, who recollect old struggles in order to be able to undertake new ones. Marcuse did not systematically develop or explain how these two dimensions, which could provisionally be called "genealogical-destructive" and "fragmentary-normative," articulate. All the same, he seems to indicate that both the genealogical historiography of social theory and the exercise of memory that unfolds in the field of praxis are necessary for social criticism to arise.

II. A Moment before the Turn

A second important moment in Marcuse's reflection on memory is found in *Eros and Civilization* [1955].[17] Nevertheless, the roots of this turn can be traced already in two short texts of the thirties: "The Affirmative Character of Culture" [1937][18] and in "The Struggle against Liberalism in the Totalitarian Conception of the State" [1934].[19] These writings allow us not only to better understand the articulation between the reflection on memory of the thirties and of *Eros and Civilization*, but also to shed light on the way in which Marcuse confronts those new philosophies of history that the Frankfurt program, presented by Horkheimer in 1933, identified as its main opponents. For this reason, it is worth recovering very briefly and schematically the most important points of both writings, before turning to *Eros*.

In "The Affirmative Character," Marcuse analyses the ideological form that capitalism created to neutralize the emancipatory potential of bourgeois ideology. The "affirmative culture" is the spiritualization of freedom and pleasure, that is, its confinement to the inner space of the individual soul. The "soul" became in this context the object of cultiva-

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[17] Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966).

[18] Herbert Marcuse, "The Affirmative Character of Culture," in *Negations*.

[19] Herbert Marcuse, "The Struggle against Liberalism in the Totalitarian View of the State" (1934), in *Negations*.

tion of the educated man, his refuge from the social and sensitive world, that is, from the reified world of production. Beauty, truth, and freedom were only reached by those capable of creating in themselves a space of aesthetic contemplation, rational thinking, and moral reflection. Marcuse interprets this as a distortion and privatization of the great promise of early modernity: the development of man's capacity for self-determination. Although this promise is no longer projected to a divine transcendence (as happened with the prevailing religious *Weltanschauung* in the Middle Ages), it is still restrained to a limited sphere, where no real emancipation can occur. When man is led to that sphere it is possible for him to ignore his own embodiment in the common world and remain indifferent to the praxis that can be deployed in it. A conciliatory effect is thus produced: the affirmative culture allows men to achieve in the individual sphere an experience of freedom and happiness that makes the reified reality of everyday life bearable. But this spiritual outflow is effective only thanks to certain ideological strategies to avoid the material and historical world. Among these strategies, an important role is played by a link to the past especially akin to the Hegelian *Verklärung*: a secularized ideology of progress.

Broadly speaking, it could be said that the ideology of progress is for Marcuse an anti-metaphysical, positivist, and secularized version of the *Verklärung*. It implies an understanding of history as an ascending path toward the fullest development. However, the guarantee of this ascension is not the cunning of Reason, but the spontaneous harmony derived from the interaction between rational individuals. "Rational" is understood here in instrumental terms; it supposes that obtaining individual benefit is the universal motivation of human action. According to this representation, history is ruled by certain "natural laws" capable of reconciling individual antagonisms (that is, the multiple and opposing interests of men) in a positive development. Therefore, the singularity of each historical experience and the atrocity or greatness of singular past events are dismissed by the consideration of history as a harmonious whole. Thus, all critical distance with the past is eliminated. The best thing that human initiative can do for the sake of the common good is to keep procuring the individual good. From this perspective, the return to the past is conceived as an idle activity or a mere storytelling of how present greatness has come to be.

Now, in the Germany of the thirties, Marcuse considers that modernity threatens not just to distort but to consummate the suppression of its early promise of freedom as self-determination. This suppression is linked to a transformation of the affirmative culture, through which the "philosophy of progress" is replaced by a new mode of *Verklärung*: history as "natural force."

In the irrationalist and vitalist discourses that prepared and accompanied the rise of Nazism, the idea of a "natural historical legality" present in the bourgeois philosophy of prog-

ress reappears, but in a new and radicalized way. In "The Fight against Liberalism," Marcuse argues that, in the totalitarian conception, historical progress is no longer animated by the constant harmonization of rational individual actions, but by vital powers totally independent of free individual praxis and will. These powers initiate "organic" processes, which belong to "the vital sphere of nature, eternal and immutable."[20] It is this sphere that pushes each individual to act, demanding him or her to surrender to its necessary development. Marcuse points out that this totalitarian "man of action" is the opposite of the ideal individual of bourgeois culture who had the possibility of withdrawing from the common world to devote himself to the cultivation of his abstract freedoms in the fields of art and philosophy. On the contrary, now

> blood rises up against formal understanding, race against the rational pursuit of ends, honour against profit, bonds against the caprice that is called 'freedom,' organic totality against individualistic dissolution, valour against bourgeois security, politics against the primacy of the economy, state against society, folk against the individual and the mass.[21]

By abandoning the bourgeois possibility of withdrawal to the spiritual sphere, the heroic man ends up completely turning his back on the freedom ideals of early modernity. Marcuse understands this return from spiritual interiority to the "political arena," this totalitarian "call to action" and "to make history," as the consummation of the ahistorization of the human condition and its radical depolitization. That capitalist "affirmative culture," which in the nineteenth century impelled men to abandon the common and historical world and refuge in the soul, now invites them to abandon their soul to surrender to a world whose history no longer belongs to them.

Taking these reflections into account, we can better understand why in "The Affirmative Character" Marcuse goes to the heart of the early bourgeois culture, already in deep decadence, to find, beyond or within its ideological character, a critical dimension:

> Certainly, it [the affirmative culture] exonerated "external conditions" from responsibility for the "vocation of man," thus stabilizing their injustice. But it also held up to them as a task the image of a better order. The image is distorted, and the distortion falsified all cultural values of the bourgeoisie. Nevertheless it is an image of happiness. There is an element of earthly delight in the works of great bourgeois art,

[20] Ibid., 3.

[21] Ernst Krieck, *Nationalpolitische Erziehung*, 14th–16th impression (1933), 68; quoted by Marcuse in Ibid., 1.

> even when they portray heaven.[22]

Although bourgeois art, as a central part of the affirmative culture, is falsehood, distortion, and forgetting, it also has a negative dimension. It is not *mere* illusion because, insofar as it provides an experience of liberation, even if momentary and distorted, it harbors an image of freedom that is denied in current reality. This is, in a nutshell, one of the central theses of *Eros*. Marcuse turns to art to find answers to the problems posed by reconciliatory philosophies of history. It is within the realm of art that he will initiate, years later, a systematic inquiry into the link between memory and emancipation. But from the 1937 essay to the famous work of 1955, significant changes have taken place in his thinking. In *Eros* it is Freud and not Marx who provides the central theoretical framework, although the materialist perspective is not abandoned. More precisely, the novelty of the book lies in its attempt to recover Freud in order to understand the conditions of individual subjectivity in developed industrial societies. Here we can locate the second moment of the Marcusian reflection on possible links between memory and criticism.

III. *Eros and Civilization* (1955): Memory of Happiness.

Following Freud, Marcuse affirms that as soon as memory is conquered by the reality principle, it acquires a repressive and reactionary function, since it is through memory that the superego introjects the parental commands and restrictions experienced in the first phases of human life. However, memory can also have an inverse function:

> If memory moves into the center of psychoanalysis as a decisive mode of cognition, this is far more than a therapeutic device; the therapeutic role of memory derives from the truth value of memory. Its truth value lies in the specific function of memory to preserve promises and potentialities which are betrayed and even outlawed by the mature, civilized individual, but which had once been fulfilled in his dim past and which are never entirely forgotten. The reality principle restrains the cognitive function of memory —its commitment to the past experience of happiness which spurns the desire for its conscious re-creation. The psychoanalytic liberation of memory explodes the rationality of the repressed individual.[23]

Marcuse transfers the link established by Freud between memory of the repressed and psychic liberation from the field of analytic experience to the realm of aesthetic experience. Art, he claims, preserves the mnemonic traces of both an archaic past of the species

[22] Marcuse, "The Affirmative Character of Culture," 89.

[23] Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 33.

(before the constitution of civilization) and a primitive individual experience (before the constitution of the rational psyche). These mnemonic traces provide images that, when rediscovered, "yield critical standards which are tabooed by the present."[24] Through an imaginative exercise of memory, art is able to deny the prevailing principle of reality showing its incompatibility with past images of original joy and freedom. This denial has a positive aspiration: to realize in the future a nonrepressive configuration of the reality principle. It does not aim to realize in the present that archaic past in which the human organism was not different from any animal and society was not possible. On the contrary, the articulation between artistic imagination and memory produces an aspiration to transform mankind's present (already rational and socially organized) according to the ideal of satisfaction and harmony that that archaic past represents. More than a model to be reproduced, the past experience that art preserves and makes again present provides a clue to understanding the oppressive character of present reality and the denied possibilities of overcoming it.

Now, it is worth asking if this approach to memory is compatible with the perspective developed in the writings of the thirties. It is clear that the past experiences to which the author refers in each case are different. For one thing, the anamnestic operation produced by art in *Eros* seems to have little to do with the procedure of genealogical unreification. Besides, the content of what is remembered through art is not related to concrete historical struggles in which the self-determination of man's own conditions of life has been recognized as a possibility, desired and actively pursued. Insofar as it refers to a stage prior to the constitution either of the human group in a civilization or of the biological being in a rational individual, it could be said that the experience evoked by art is located in prehistory; it is not historical like the past events referred in the writings of the 1930s, even though it is a fact of human phylogenetic or ontogenetic evolution. This could suggest an ontological or platonic turn in the Marcusean reflection on memory.[25] According to this, in *Eros* Marcuse proposed to abandon the field of historical praxis in order to find a normative horizon within an instance that is outside of praxis, that is, an immemorial experience of indefinite status[26] rooted in the libidinal structure of man.

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[24] Ibid., 19.

[25] This reading has been suggested by Martin Jay (see "Anamnestic Totalization"). He states that, unlike the writings of the 1930s, in *Eros* an "ontological theory of anamnesis" predominates, presenting the same metaphysical character that Marcuse himself had criticized in Heidegger and Hegel, while at the same time recovering a certain heritage of German Romanticism (see notes 7 and 14 on these criticisms).

[26] Even the status of being just a "fact of evolution," which seems to be the more adequate description, is relativized by Marcuse. The author affirms the merely "symbolic" and not historical-factual value of Freud's anthropological speculations (Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 60) without explaining what should

In any case, this interpretation should be qualified. It is necessary to note that the libidinal structure is not an anthropological invariant, but must also be understood historically. This creates some continuity with the reflections of the 1930s, since, despite appearances, the genealogical procedure recovered from Marx in those years is also present in Marcuse's reading of Freud:

> Freud's theory here joins the great critical efforts to dissolve ossified sociological concepts into their historical content. His psychology does not focus on the concrete and complete personality as it exists in its private and public environment, because this existence conceals rather than reveals the essence and nature of the personality. It is the end result of long historical processes which are congealed in the network of human and institutional entities making up society, and these processes define the personality and its relationships. Consequently, to understand them for what they really are, psychology must unfreeze them by tracing their hidden origins.[27]

The genealogical procedure Marcuse proposed in the thirties for the analysis of social structures is now applied to the understanding of a dimension of human reality for which Marxism did not seem to provide appropriate categories: subjectivity. According to Marcuse, the analysis of the origins and development of our libidinal structure in light of the material conditions of present society reveals the presence of what he calls "surplus repression," that is, an unnecessary repression. This repression may once have been necessary to the process of rationalization of society and the individual, but now it goes beyond all "rational repression" and just serves to maintain relations of domination. Nevertheless, those actors, who, as claimed by the traditional Marxist theory, were destined to carry out a social revolution were attracted by the exactly inverse project, for as is well known, Nazism found important support in the working classes. On the other hand, during the fifties and sixties new political subjects appear in the theoretical field as possible alternative path of change. Although very different from each other in their scopes, they have in common the fact of being described as "social movements" with anti-system aspirations: the Civil Right Movement and anti-Vietnam-war protests in USA, student activism around the ´68 in Europe and USA, and the women's liberation and counterculture movements which spread in the developed countries are the

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that mean. This lack of precision and vagueness is found again in passages such as those in which the memory that art awakens is described as an "imaginary temps perdu" (Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* [Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 90. The way in which the status of being a "fact of evolutionary history," a symbolic value, and this "imaginary character" combine remains uncertain and obscures a central point of Marcuse's theory of memory.

[27] Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 57.

most important of them. Marcuse finds in them (such as many of them will find in Marcuse) new insights for understanding social transformation.[28] The central characteristic of these movements is not the critical position their protagonists occupy within the economic structure, but the way they resist and transform—through new relations with nature, others, and themselves—the libidinal constitution on which capitalism bases its mechanisms of domination. In this context, art becomes a privileged realm for the exercise of critical memory. Art emerges as a concrete practice, although not identifiable in any way with direct political action, which can produce a transformation in the world of praxis by accompanying and promoting the process of rejection of the given that is expressed in the new and various forms of rebellion. Its function is to help undermine the libidinal conformation of subjectivities tied to surplus repression, by releasing the repressed erotic impulses akin to the spirit—if not revolutionary, at least promisingly rebellious—of the different antisystem movements.

So, Marcuse discovers that it is the complexity of libidinal economy that provides the key to understanding the new political scenario. The "subjective turn" in his analysis responds to the need to account for novelty in the field of praxis. It is this theoretical urgency and sensitivity to what the author considered the central political experiences of his time—and not a sudden romantic, Heideggerian, or Hegelian distrust of concrete and singular history—that leads him to move from a critical historiography in the realm of theory and an emphasis on the memory of past struggles to a kind of therapeutic memory linked to a psychic and archaic past to be recovered through art.[29]

Given that regarding the sense of *Eros*'s theoretical turn and its relative continuity with respect to the project of the thirties, it is possible to return to the question of whether, all the same, a considerable loss has not taken place in this period. It is important to note that while the images of freedom that come to us from the recovery of past struggles (as stated in the thirties) must be recognized as singular, situated, and plural ways in which the meaning of freedom was once interpreted, the repressed images of freedom that return through art (in the line of *Eros*) have lost that singularity, situationality, and plurality. These attributes refer to a timeless image of a general and indefinite happiness, unmarked by any particular political or social condition—in other words, without historicity. Moreover, this consideration of the origin and timeless nature of the anamnestic image of art leads to a

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[28] For perspectives concerning this relationship from the point of view of the present see: Andrew Lamas, Todd Wolfson, y Peter Funke, The Great Refusal: Herbert Marcuse and Contemporary Social Movements (Philadephia Tokyo Rome: Temple University Press, 2017).

[29] John O'Neill highlighted the interesting articulation between social theory and praxis that this way of conceiving memory enables in Marcuse's thought. See John O'Neill, "Critique and Remembrance," in *On Critical Theory* (London: Heinmann Educational Books, 1976).

singular conception of the temporality of the liberated society. In a 1956 paper, Marcuse affirms that in a postrevolutionary society, "time would not seem linear, as a perpetual line or rising curve, but cyclical, as the return contained in Nietzsche's idea of the 'perpetuity of pleasure.'"[30] This statement is enigmatic. It seems to suggest that the only way that Marcuse finds to imagine an emancipated society that corresponds with the timeless image of freedom that his aesthetic theory postulates is to abstract human existence from the "whips and scorns of time" inherent in finite existence. That is to say, he must imagine the realization of the utopia as an overcoming of historical time as it is experienced by agents. Encouraged by a genuine historical concern and armed with his genealogical tools, Marcuse seems to end up turning his back on the exercise of memory authentically anchored in history, which was his original aim during the early years at the Institute.

But this is not Marcuse's last word on the topic. In the seventies, when the turmoil of the European antisystem movements of the sixties had subsided (and with them, perhaps also the theoretical urgency they aroused), he reflects again on memory and develops a new insight that in part attempts to solve this impasse of his thought. In the last years of his life he reformulates the aesthetic theory of the fifties, recovering in a renewed way his concern for the historicity of praxis and its normative references. A significant change of focus is the backdrop of this operation: while the main question of *Eros* was the possibility of radical transformation, in 1975 the central issue is the permanent self-critical movement of a free society. Hence, the inquiry into the critical link with the past is not directed to the path that can lead us to the abolition of the existing oppression, but to the moment when considerable levels of freedom have already been reached. The next section offers a review of this last theoretical shift, which can be located in Marcuse's last book, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Towards a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (1975).

IV. *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1975): Remembrance of a Irredeemable Past

Eros and Civilization, which contains some of the most enthusiastic passages of the author's work, ends with a reflection that discourages enthusiasm and introduces a consideration about the past that is not easy to integrate, but rather enters into tension with what has been sustained in the rest of the book:

> Men can die without anxiety if they know that what they love is protected from misery and oblivion. After a fulfilled life, they may take it upon themselves to die - at a moment of their own choosing. But even the ultimate advent of freedom cannot redeem those who died in pain. It is the remembrance of

[30] Herbert Marcuse, *Five Lectures on Psycho-analysis: Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Utopia* (Allen Lane, UK: Penguin, 1970), 41.

> them, and the accumulated guilt of mankind against its victims, that darken the prospect of a civilization without repression.[31]

Following this intuition, *The Aesthetic Dimension* leads to an approach that differs from the more decidedly utopian that predominates in *Eros*. In the work of 1975, the author returns to his aesthetic theory of the fifties, but he explores more deeply the meaning of the memory of past suffering barely alluded to in the final passage of *Eros*:

> While art bears witness to the necessity of liberation, it also testifies to its limits. What has been done cannot be undone; what has passed cannot be recaptured. History is guilt but not redemption. . . . Eros itself lives under the sign of finitude, of pain. The "eternity of joy" constitutes itself through the death of individuals. For them, this eternity is an abstract universal. . . . Inasmuch as art preserves, with the promise of happiness, the memory of the goals that failed, it can enter, as a "regulative idea," the desperate struggle for changing the world.[32]

The implicit dispute with Hegel proposed by Horkheimer in 1933 can be easily recognized in this passage. The artistic image of happiness presented in *Eros*, even though Marcuse admits that it is connected with the concrete experience of social movements and involved "in a desperate struggle," does not oppose the *Verklärung* in the same way as *The Aesthetic Dimension*. In *Eros*, the memory addresses not the "ends that failed," but the images of a mythical happiness. In that work, "to do justice to the past" seems to mean reviving the enthusiasm for the highest happiness ever dreamed, rather than bringing back to the present the bitter taste of past defeats. Quite the opposite, the anamnestic imperative of *The Aesthetic* is to remember the limits of all freedom that has been achieved. So the tragic moment in *Eros* that Marcuse only insinuated at the end and with a lugubrious tone—because it seemed destined to obscure the possibilities of a nonrepressive society—acquires in Marcuse's last work a critical sense.

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[31] Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 237. It is important to note that this perspective was already suggested in some passages of the thirties, although it was not developed there either. At the end of the "The Affirmative Character," Marcuse affirms that "even a nonaffirmative culture will be burdened with mutability and necessity" (98). Therefore, he seems to suggest that a nonaffirmative culture would be one that better helps us to carry this burden, the one that would make possible "dancing on the volcano, laughter in sorrow, flirtation with death" (Ibid.). In addition, "The Concept of Essence" mentions the permanence of irresolvable conflicts, even in an emancipated society, conflicts linked to our natural and finite condition and the impossibility of escaping death. However, in both texts, as in *Eros*, no positive consequences are drawn from such reflections. The insertion of the human and social condition in the finite temporality is still considered with a tone of resignation. This changes in the seventies, as is shown below.

[32] Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), 68–69.

> The institutions of a socialist society, even in their most democratic form, could never resolve all the conflicts between the universal and the particular, between human beings and nature, between individual and individual. Socialism does not and cannot liberate Eros from Thanatos. Here is the limit which drives the revolution beyond any accomplished stage of freedom: it is the struggle for the impossible, against the unconquerable whose domain can perhaps nevertheless be reduced.[33]

In *The Aesthetic Dimension*, a certain tragic element of art leads Marcuse's revolutionary vision to accept the inevitable persistence of the "unfinished" and, owing to this, the need of a permanent dynamic of self-revision and criticism. The central assertion of the book regarding memory is that, although not even the advent of a fully free society could "redeem those who died in pain," the memory of those "ends that failed" can become an impulse for the permanent self-reinvention of society. Hence, the memory of past suffering is not an irredeemable burden, but must serve as impulse toward the constant broadening of the limits of mankind's free self-determination. The decisive turn, in comparison with the approach of the fifties, is that this movement of social reinvention appears now for Marcuse not only as necessary (insofar as the final stage of freedom at which it aims will always remain distant), but also as desirable. At this point, a new reading of Freud, distinct from that of the fifties, becomes explicit. In a critical text on Norman Brown, of the end of the sixties, Marcuse expresses a consideration that is at the core of *The Aesthetic Dimension*: "Tension can be made nonaggressive, nondestructive, but it can never be eliminated, because (Freud knew it well) its elimination would be death—not in any symbolic but in a very real sense."[34] Marcuse agrees here with Freud in the paradoxical thesis that the ultimate realization of Eros would mean returning to a state of nirvana, that is, of absolute stillness, the inorganic state before the beginning of life—death. While this thesis was rejected in 1955, because, as Marcuse understood it at that time, it concealed the possibility of eliminating surplus repression, he now recovers it positively to rethink the conditions under which the erotic as such is possible. In order to avoid becoming its own opposite, Eros must be inserted in time. That means that it must be affirmed *within* the transience of what it is, and not only against it; *within* a mortal environment, and not only *against* death.[35] Thus, the dynamic of permanent social criticism is not only necessary because, after all, we have not been able to eliminate all

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33 Ibid., 71–72.

34 Herbert Marcuse, "Love Mystified: A Critique of Norman O. Brown," in *Negations*.

35 In the same text against Brown, he admits that there are "divisions and limits that are real and will continue to exist even with the advent of freedom, because all pleasure and all happiness and all humanity originates in life, in and with those divisions and limits" (Ibid.).

the suffering that the fact of being inserted in time infringes upon us (because we have not managed to enter into that mythical cyclical temporality); it is also necessary and desirable because Eros exists only in the finite condition, in the world of aspirations, in the movement of conquest. Finitude, nonrealization, and even destructiveness are understood now in positive terms: it is in them that praxis as such can arise, that is, where the freedom of finite beings may be realized. Two important conclusions can be draw from this. First: freedom consists in the movement of self-criticism and transcendence of the given, rather than in the definitive attainment of determined conditions or a certain state. Second: memory, insofar as it transmits images of happiness and its limits, is an intrinsic dimension of the exercise of freedom, since it is the impulse that gives praxis its opened character, its permanent disposition to recommence.[36]

So far, three different approaches to the link between memory, history, and criticism were identified. First, the genealogical deconstruction of what it is; second, the recollection of images of denied happiness (through the recovery of either historical struggles during the thirties, or repressed psychic experiences in the fifties); and finally, the memory of the limits of all attainable freedom. Although they pertained to different stages of the author's work as well as present tensions and contradictions, it is possible to revisit the texts to examine to what extent they do not cancel each other out, but overlap and complement each other, albeit without reaching a definitive solution. Tracing back the origins of the given discloses it as a product of the creative capacity of men and woman and destroys its reified character. But this destructive operation can be productive only if such creative capacity, discovered by the genealogical process, allows us to visualize new possibilities of realization of the human, images of happiness and freedom hitherto denied. Such images of the human, though, could become affirmative if they conceal the suffering that fissures all plenitude and, above all, if they are subtracted from the finite and historical condition of praxis. In other words, the emphasis on human creativity and self-constituting freedom must be qualified by the memory of its shortcomings, of what remains "unconquerable." Finally, given that theological redemption cannot be expected in the political realm, past suffering becomes an impossible moral imperative and an

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[36] At this point I do not agree with Jay's interpretation that only Adorno and not Marcuse understood the positive sense of nonreconciliation, of the nonidentity between subject and object (see Jay, "Anamnestic Totalization"). From my point of view, the old Marcuse did understand that, probably due to the influence of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* (London: A&C Black, 1997). In this regard, it is worth highlighting the way in which Marcuse ends the "Recognitions" of *The Aesthetic Dimension*: "My debt to the aesthetic theory of Theodor W. Adorno does not require any specific acknowledgment" (vii). On the influence of Adorno on Marcuse, see Douglas Kellner, "Introduction," and Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, "Afterword: Art as Cognition and Remembrance: Autonomy and Transformation of Art in Herbert Marcuse's Aesthetics," in *Art and Liberation*, vol. 4, ed. Douglas Kellner (London: Routledge, 2007).

unbearable guilt. That is, it becomes a way of perpetuating the pain, if it is not converted into a current critical operation, into a transformation impulse directed at the injustices of the present time. Marcuse's meditations on memory reached this point and were interrupted by his death.

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