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# Trotsky and the Frankfurt School

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*Platypus Review #80* | October 2015

Disrespect for a reality that demands adoration as if it were a god is the religion of those, who in today's Europe under the 'Iron Heel' risk their life in order to prepare a future better one.

Max Horkheimer, September 1939<sup>1</sup>

LOOKING THROUGH THE REGISTER of names in the writings and letters of the circle of friends around Max Horkheimer we find only rare references to Leon Trotsky. Theodor Adorno, for instance, who claims in his *Aesthetic Theory* (1969) that the ambitious art has been bourgeois art, remarks approvingly that Trotsky also had said in his book *Literature and Revolution* (1923/24) that (after the revolution) there would be no possibility for the development of any "proletarian" art, and that there would be produced a post-bourgeois art only in the future, after an international socialist society will have been established. Erich Fromm, who belonged to Horkheimer's Institute of Social Research until 1939, wrote a sympathetic, but unpublished review in 1958, when Trotsky's *Diary in Exile* (1935) was translated and published. Horkheimer also mentioned Trotsky (together with Lenin) in conversations with Adorno and other members of his circle concerning the Bolshevik Revolution, remarking that it had changed its character by answering white terror with red terror during the civil war. Horkheimer quoted Rosa Luxemburg's early criticism of the Bolshevik rule, praising Luxemburg as "one of the most important political figures of the 20th century." Walter Benjamin is the only member of Horkheimer's circle of social philosophers of whom we know that he not only read (in 1926) Trotsky's essay *Where is Britain Going?* but later, in 1932-33, Trotsky's most important books, *My Life* and *The History of the Russian Revolution*, with great enthusiasm: "I think it is the most interesting book I have read in many years," he wrote to Adorno's wife, Gretel Karplus<sup>2</sup>. We can find traces of this reading in Benjamin's notes on Blanqui (in *The Arcades Project*) and in his famous "Theses on the Philosophy of History" from 1940.



**Trotsky in exile, with American Trotskyists including Harry De Boer and James H. Bartlett. Print autographed by Trotsky, April 5, 1940.**

In Horkheimer and Adorno's writings on fascism we find, in spite of many similarities of description and analysis, no indication that they had knowledge of Trotsky's commentaries concerning the agony of the Weimar Republic, the failure of the German Communist Party and the rise of the fascist movement. Trotsky's theory of fascism is not even mentioned in Horkheimer's essay "Lehren aus dem Faschismus" ["What fascism did teach us" 1950]<sup>3</sup>. The main contributions to a theory of fascism, that were written and published by the scholars around Max Horkheimer were those of Franz Neumann<sup>4</sup> and Adorno<sup>5</sup>. The pioneer work of Neumann on the political economy of German fascism owes a lot to Trotsky's analyses but doesn't mention him. Both authors were analyzing the victory of Hitler's fascist party in 1933 as the result of the struggle between the three German classes:

the bourgeoisie, intermediate strata (petit bourgeois) and the proletariat. The majority of the electorate and the troops supporting the fascist mass movement were recruited from the expropriated and disorientated old and new middle classes and from the reservoir of six million unemployed. The fascist programme combined the conservative, anti-modern ideology with anti-capitalist and nationalist slogans in order to recruit as many followers out of the middle and working class as possible. In the November 1932 election, the fascist NSDAP got 11.7 million votes, the proletarian parties KPD and SPD together 13.2 million votes. The main promoters and beneficiaries of the fascist movement and of the fascist regime were finance capital and large landed property ownership. But millions of fellow travellers also made their profit, when the German and European Jews were expropriated and the countries under German rule were plundered (between 1938 and 1945). Trotsky had demanded the formation of an armed united front of all working-class organizations in order to attract the majority of the middle-classes, to destroy the fascist movement and to complete the social revolution of November 1918. The study of Adorno and the Frankfurt School attempted the first analysis to explain why certain people choose to give up their personal autonomy and to become blind followers of this or that charismatic false messiah.<sup>6</sup> The Frankfurt School's Marxism (or "Critical Theory") was an exploration of the social totality from two sides: from the side of the institutionalized politico-economical relationships and from the side of the individuals that are stretched into the frame of these class relations. In a latent rebellion against this Procrustean bed, they often do not know how to realize their own interests. The analysis of the fascist economy and the analysis of the fascist mentality (*Behemoth* and *Authoritarian Personality*) were combined in order to gain a realistic picture of the terrible totality, whose reproduction our generation must prevent.<sup>7</sup>

Trotsky had denounced Stalin as the "gravedigger of the revolution" as early as 1926. We cannot be sure if Horkheimer knew his fragmentary biography of Stalin published in 1941, the year after Trotsky was killed by the GPU-agent Ramón Mercader; but Horkheimer's reaction when he learned in early March 1953 that the tyrant of the Kremlin had died sounds like an echo of Trotsky's damnation of ("Cain") Stalin. Here is the report by Monika Plessner:

Horkheimer was in high spirits, jubilated, rubbed his hands in glee: 'The monster is dead. Call the students together. We have to do something immediately.' (Half an hour later the students were sent into the city of Frankfurt in order to ask passengers what their opinion was concerning the main news of the day).<sup>8</sup>

Much more important than these direct (or indirect) references to Trotsky and his writings is the political and cultural constellation: On the one side we find the tiny informal group of Marxist philosophers around Horkheimer driven into exile by the German fascists; on the other, the group of international revolutionaries around Trotsky—the so-called "Left Opposition," later known as the "Fourth International," organized in the form of a new party, one that the Stalinists hunted down from the Soviet Union to Turkey, then to France, from France to Norway, from Norway to Mexico. Between 1929 and 1942 both the Trotskyists and the Frankfurt School published their own journals, the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* [*Journal for Social Research*] and the *Бюллетен оппозиции* [*Bulletin of the Opposition*]. We could say that in different ways both journals met Hegel's demand to grasp the specific historical situation and to give it a theoretical reconstruction.<sup>9</sup> We don't know if Horkheimer and his friends took note of Trotsky's *Bulletin*, whose main articles were published simultaneously in German, French and English, but in July 1939 a review of Horkheimer's journal and its programme was published in *Unser Wort*, the journal of the German Trotskyist group (IKD) written by Trotsky's brilliant secretary Walter Held (Heinz Epe) whom the Stalinists killed three years later. Its title was "Kritische Theorie ohne politische Praxis?" ("Critical Theory without Political Practice?").

The Marxists of Horkheimer's circle were (like Freud) critics of the Hegelian idealism in succession of Ludwig Feuerbach. But they knew—like Marx himself—that the concepts of their sociological theory originally had been developed by Hegel. So we can say that they were Hegelian (or "Western") Marxists like Antonio Labriola, the Italian philosopher whose "nonorthodox" interpretation was decisive for Trotsky's understanding of Marx's critical theory.<sup>10</sup>

They were convinced that, in order to understand and to criticize the actual form and functioning of society, it was not only necessary to analyze the economic development but to understand and to criticize the philosophical and artistic productions that were typical for the actual stage of societal evolution and that determined the consciousness of their contemporaries. In order to change society it was necessary to understand it in its totality. This orientation enabled the social philosophers around Horkheimer as well as Trotsky (and in contrast to the majority of the Marxists, who didn't understand that Marx had developed a criticism of society, not a "weltanschauung") to welcome Freud's new (therapeutic) psychology of the unconscious. They realized that the Viennese physician had developed a new criticism of psychological and cultural institutions, one that complemented their own sociological criticism. Horkheimer and Benjamin were Marxist historians (of philosophy or literature). Adorno updated and radicalized the criticism of idealistic philosophy (not only that of Hegel but also that of Edmund Husserl) and became classic and modern music and literature's most important Marxist interpreter. Trotsky the revolutionary was also a man of letters, and his very original interpretations of the literature of the 19th and the early 20th century written between 1900 and 1940 will be published soon in German in two large volumes.

The conception of "political practice" as we find it in the letters and essays of Horkheimer, Marcuse, and Adorno during the thirties was (more implicitly than explicitly) the same as that of the revolutionary Marxists Lenin, Trotsky, and Luxemburg. Yet, they were anxious to omit any public mention of Trotsky. After the Second World War, Adorno and Horkheimer saw no possibility of any revolutionary practice, for they saw no revolutionary subject (class). With the notable exception of Marcuse, they didn't think that the German (and international) protest movement of the students had any chance to change capitalist society.

Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse, Walter Benjamin (and the philosophers and literary scholars around them like Günther Stern-Anders or Hans Mayer) were, like Trotsky and Rosa Luxemburg, what Isaac Deutscher termed "non-Jewish Jews" or what Sigmund Freud termed (in characterizing himself) "godless Jews." All of them were "outsiders," and all of them were persecuted as socialists and Jews, expelled from their countries and in danger of being killed. Belonging to the Jewish minorities of Russia or Germany, their sensitivity to social inequality and injustice was highly developed, and they were looking for a way out of the labyrinth of the existing class society. Assimilation within the Christian imperial states had failed. The exodus to Palestine in order to construct a Jewish national state by expelling the Palestinians looked like another dead end. So they adopted the Marxian theory of the origin, structure, and potential transcending of capitalist society. In this specific society the relationship of man to nature, himself, and his fellow men is governed by constant calculations of the labor time necessary to produce and to reproduce goods and the normal capacity to work in form of commodities—in short, a market society. In this society the shrinking class of private owners of the means of production control the whole societal

production. But increasing productivity of labor creates the possibility of a new society without classes and without a repressive state. Troubled by disastrous wars and crises the working class would eventually discover this hidden possibility, abolish private control over the economy, and transform society into a worldwide society of affluence and freedom.

There were two important points of difference between the theorists of the Frankfurt School and Trotsky. In the autumn of 1918, Rosa Luxemburg (in those days imprisoned in Breslau) had formulated a verdict against the Bolshevik attempt to save their revolution by reducing democracy and organizing a "red" terror against the counterrevolutionary "white" one. Horkheimer, like Adorno, had read the famous "anarchistic" pamphlet *State and Revolution* that Lenin, the later defender of revolutionary terror, had written during his Finnish refuge in the late summer of 1917. (In my opinion what we find in Lenin's writings vacillates, according to and changing with the political situations, between more centralistic and more "anarcho-syndicalistic" positions. The main thesis of *State and Revolution* is the necessity to demolish the repressive bourgeois state apparatus and to transform it into a dying state, whose main task during a limited transformational period is the defence of the new, developing socialist system against inner and outer enemies). Maximilien Rubel was right when he characterized Karl Marx himself, the defender of the Paris Commune, as a "theoretician of Anarchism."<sup>11</sup> However, Horkheimer didn't realize that Trotsky—the same Trotsky who in 1920 justified the "red terror" under conditions of civil war and in 1921 took responsibility for the suppression of the Kronstadt uprising and eventually voted for the restriction of inner party democracy—was, like Luxemburg, a champion of workers' democracy from "Our Political Tasks" written in 1904, his early polemic against Lenin, to his attack on the Stalinist faction in *The New Course* of 1923, and, ultimately, to the struggle against fascism and Stalinism in the thirties. In contrast to Trotsky, the Frankfurt School thought that he, by defending the Russian Revolution even under Stalinist rule, was fighting for a cause that was already lost by 1918 or, at the latest, 1921.



**Photograph of several participants of a week-long Marxist conference organised by Felix Weil in 1923, whose attendees included Georg Lukacs, Karl Korsch, Karl August Wittfogel, Friedrich Pollock. The symposium contributed to the founding of the Institute of Social Research in Frankfurt, in 1924.**

Parallel to Trotsky's desperate endeavours since the disaster of 1933 (the victory by default of the German fascists) to create a new international party with a radically democratic inner regime, Horkheimer and Adorno, in resignation to the fact that the "true" party had been destroyed (or had never existed at all), tried to organize themselves in New York as a kind of a two-person-party, as we can see in the transcripts of their discussions in 1939 and, later, in 1956. They even toyed with the idea of writing an updated version of the *Communist Manifesto* at the same time that Trotsky, living in exile in Coyoacan, did just that in a series of documents: *The Death Agony of Capitalism and the Tasks of the Fourth International* written in May 1938; *Marxism in Our Time* written in April 1939; *Manifesto of the Fourth International: Imperialist War and Proletarian Revolution* from May 1940. On October 25, 1939, three weeks after the beginning of the Second World War, the two philosophers discussed the draft of a new "Manifesto." Horkheimer drafted a "political programme," in part similar to, in part different from, Trotsky's political slogans for the time of war, "revolutionary defeatism" and revolutionary "defense of the Soviet Union":

The German proletarians have the duty to overturn their government, and the French have the duty, to do the same with theirs, but the aims (of their uprisings) are different. The French are overturning their government in order to wage war with Germany, for the now existing French government is the secret ally of Germany. It's the task of all proletarians to abolish all the obstacles that are preventing a rational order of our world. The best way to do that is [now] the war against Germany. But if this slogan is reclaimed by the western countries it becomes a lie. Russia has to be put aside, till in the western countries rational relationships are established; then the better society could be realized in Russia, perhaps by force. These things are really very simple. It should be said: 'During the last twenty years people tried to convince you, that our social world is still not ripe for socialism. In 1918 you didn't want to believe that, and today it's even less true.' Now or in 100 years.<sup>12</sup>

17 years later, in Spring 1956, the two-man party organized a follow-up discussion, starting once more with the fantasy of updating the *Communist Manifesto*.

Horkheimer: "Our question is: why should we write, since no [real socialist] party exists any more and since the revolution has become improbable? Our criticism has to demonstrate clearly, that nothing will be changed, if no one will struggle for change. [...] We should write in the manner of a

possible opposition within the CP. But doesn't practical activity mean either reformism or quietism? [...] For us the real meaning of practice is, that the world has to be changed fundamentally."

Adorno: "I have always tried to conceive a theory, that remains true to Marx, Engels and Lenin, but doesn't fall behind the most advanced culture."<sup>13</sup>

Like Trotsky, Horkheimer denounced the two competing internationals that existed in the time between the wars, the reform-oriented one of the social democrats and the Communist one dominated by the despot at the top of the post-revolutionary Russian bureaucracy. He saw both as worldwide mechanisms whose main function was "the paralyzation of spontaneity." Trotsky's small international party, some anarcho-sindicalist groups, some artists, and Horkheimer's circle formed a minority which realized in the thirties that a new world war was coming, that the Spanish civil war was its prelude, and that the extermination of every sort of internal opposition practiced by the two competing, man-eating totalitarian regimes were perpetuating the era of exploitation only with barbarian techniques of repression and mass-murder. These were hard-won insights. Their precarious situation, their political experience, and their theoretical background enabled them to look further and to grasp other possibilities of future development. This rational kind of clairvoyance was Adorno's as well as Trotsky's special gift. If we speak about the relationship between the German philosophers and the Russian revolutionary, what must be remarked upon is that on the eve of the Second World War they predicted what nobody dared to think, the possible extermination of the European Jews. On February 15, 1938 Adorno (situated in London) wrote to his friend Horkheimer: "There is scarcely any doubt, that the Jews, still living in Germany, will be exterminated; since as they have been expropriated, no country in the world will take them in."<sup>14</sup> Ten months later, on the 22th December 1938, Trotsky addressed the "progressive and clear-sighted elements of the Jewish people," exposing the danger of a holocaust and appealing to them to give financial support to the revolutionary antifascist groups as long as they still had the time to do that:

We have seen that Palestine is a tragic phantom, and Birobidjan is a bureaucratic farce... The Jews are expelled from more and more states and the number of countries that are able to take them in is diminishing. So the struggle becomes more and more violent. It is not difficult to imagine, what will be the fate of the Jews even at the beginning of the war to come. But also without war it is practically certain, that the next wave of the worldwide reaction will involve the physical annihilation of the Jews.<sup>15</sup> |P

1. Horkheimer, Max [1939]: "Die Juden und Europa" ["The Jews and Europe"] in Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* [Collected writings], vol. 4, (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1988): 331. [↗](#)
2. Letter from Walter Benjamin to Gretel Karplus, May 1932, written from Ibiza, published in Benjamin, Walter, *Gesammelte Briefe*. [Collected Letters.] Bd. IV (1931-1934). (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1998), S. 97. [↗](#)
3. Horkheimer, M. [1950], "Lehren aus dem Faschismus [*Lessons from fascism.*]" in, Horkheimer (1985), *Gesammelte Schriften*, Bd. vol. 8, loc. it., p. (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1985): 9-37. [↗](#)
4. Neumann, Franz L. [1942; 1944]: *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism 1933-1944* (New York: Octagon Books, 1963) [↗](#)
5. Adorno, Theodor W., et al., *The Authoritarian Personality* (New York, London : Harper & Row, 1950) [↗](#)
6. Trotzki, Leo D., *Schriften über Deutschland* [*Writings on Germany*] 1929-1940, vol. 1 & 2, ed. Helmut Dahmer (Frankfurt: Europäische Verlagsanstalt, 1971) [↗](#)
7. See also my article on "Faschismustheorie(n) der "Frankfurt Schule" [Theories of fascism developed by the Frankfurt School] in, M. Christ and M. Suderland (ed), *Soziologie und Nationalsozialismus* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014): 76-118. [↗](#)
8. Plessner, Monika, *Die Argonauten auf Long Island* [*The Argonauts at Long Island.*] (Berlin: Rowohlt, 1995): 66. [↗](#)
9. Hegel wrote in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* [1820], "As far as the individual is concerned, each individual is in any case a *child of his time*; thus, philosophy, too, is *its own time comprehended in thoughts.*" [↗](#)
10. The term "Western Marxism" by which I refer to Marxists such as Lukács, Korsch, Adorno, etc. is opposed to the Stalinist (or "Orthodox") conception of "dialectical and historical Marxism" and was introduced by Perry Anderson in his *Considerations on Western Marxism* (London: New Left Books, 1976). [↗](#)
11. Maximilien Rubel, "Marx, Theoretician of Anarchism," available online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/rubel/1973/marx-anarchism.htm>. [↗](#)
12. Horkheimer, Max, and Theodor Adorno [25. 10. 1939], "Diskussionen über Sprache und Erkenntnis, Naturbeherrschung am Menschen, politische Aspekte des Marxismus" [Discussions on language and knowledge, technological domination of man, political aspects of Marxism], in Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* [Collected writings], vol. 12 (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1985): 513 f. [↗](#)
13. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Towards a New Manifesto* (London: Verso Books, 2011), 49, 61, 78, 103. Translation altered by the author. [↗](#)
14. Adorno and Horkheimer, *Briefwechsel* [*Correspondence*], vol. 2, (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2004), S. 29. [↗](#)
15. Trotsky, L. D. [1938]: "Die Gefahr der Ausrottung des jüdischen Volkes." [The danger of the extermination of the Jewish people.] in Trotzki, *Sozialismus oder Barbarei!* [*Socialism or barbarism!*] (Vienna: Promedia, 2005):124 [↗](#)

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