

# The Rise and Fall of Weak Thought

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*“Where utopia is rejected, thought itself dies.” (Adorno)*

In 1848 the cycle of bourgeois revolutions reached its conclusion and the predominance of Hegelian thought came to an end. Nation-states, now equipped with parliaments and constitutions, were adapting to the new times, although not without having to devote some effort to the attempt to maintain an equilibrium between the opposed interests of the ruling classes. The bourgeoisie was no longer concerned with anything but accumulating wealth, which was more important than political power itself. It became conservative and was therefore hardly interested in history or in the connection between reality and philosophy, *“its own time comprehended in thoughts”*, according to Hegel. Philosophical praxis was separated from politics and science, losing its unity and consistency. Numerous systems emerged, among which one could make one’s choice: neo-Kantianism, phenomenology, utilitarianism, positivism, vitalism, Darwinism, existentialism, etc. According to G. Anders, post-Hegelian philosophical thought proved to be a return to the concept of a passive and featureless nature: man, morality, the State, society, were de-historicized and re-naturalized as concepts. In its contradictory transformations the new kind of philosophical reflection was the multifarious ideological expression of the conservative reaction within the bourgeoisie. Despite the degree of truth that some of its postulates may have possessed insofar as they revealed the limitations of German idealism, it was the manifestation in the arena of speculation of the radical change of course of the bourgeois class.

The development of the proletariat contributed a new kind of conflict, shifting the scene of the revolution to the workshops and the factories. The workers movement became interested in the social and natural sciences, the evolution of species and health, pedagogy and literature, but in none of its sectors did it feel the need for a specific kind of thought as a real component of the revolutionary process. The class conscious proletariat remained mired in a naturalist conception of the world. It was a quite widespread belief at the time that neither Marxism nor anarchism had anything to do with philosophy and that no one posed the need for a “working class” philosophy.<sup>1</sup> While anarchism was considered to be *“the most rational and practical conception of a*

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<sup>1</sup> This prejudice was, of course, not absolutely valid. Joseph Dietzgen (1828–1888), a German proletarian autodidact (he was a tanner), spent much of his life attempting to work out the basis for a socialist philosophy based on dialectical materialism, independently of Marx, who called him “the philosopher of socialism” and “one reader who really understood *Capital*”. His most famous book is *The Nature of Human Brain Work* (1869) (Translator’s note).

*harmonious and free social life*” (Berkman), and Marxism was seen more as a scientific theory of social evolution and a critical general sociology, with respect to philosophical principles the most outstanding thinkers of both camps did not proceed beyond a vulgar, naturalistic and scientific materialism. As for anarchism, the defeat of the Commune and the dissolution of the International played a major role in its subsequent evolution by highlighting the profound differences between its working class tendency, at first Bakuninist, and then communist and syndicalist, and its individualist, Stirnerite tendency, which rejected the internationalist working class character of the former tendency and defended private property. On the social democratic side, meanwhile, two main currents arose, the reformist and the revolutionary. Both considered themselves to be Marxist, but for the former, Marxism was a neutral theory of the knowledge of the laws that govern society, laws that are necessary for the rational development of the productive forces, while for the latter, Marxism was no less than “*the theoretical expression of the revolutionary movement of the proletarian class*” (Korsch). The First World War excavated an even deeper and wider abyss between the two camps, and, once the Russian Revolution broke out, the first revolution that was allegedly carried out in accordance with Marxist teachings, the relation between Marxism and philosophy was swept under the rug.

The philosophical dispute that took place in 1924 pitted the revolutionary Marxists, who championed a Hegelian-Marxist dialectical methodology, against the social democratic Marxists and the “Marxist-Leninists”. The latter, basing their arguments on the book, *Materialism and Empiro-Criticism*, sought to establish a party-centered Marxist philosophy on bourgeois philosophical foundations similar to those expounded by the social democratic ideologues. The defeat of the German proletariat in October and November of 1923 and the rapid development in Russia of a kind of State capitalism implacably led by a usurper bureaucracy speaking in the name of the revolution, decided this dispute in favor of Leninism. Thus, even before the Bolshevik dictatorship became a totalitarian hell and before the Soviet bureaucracy became an authentic exploiting class, “Marxism” itself was transformed, by way of Leninism, into a kind of bourgeois materialism, dualist and mechanistic, deterministic and positivist, a bizarre ideology at the service of a totalitarian State, just like its future Italian and German counterparts. The anarchists, too, had come out on the losing end of Russian and German revolutions, and their greatest concern at the time was to publicize their role in these revolutions, which was being portrayed in a distorted fashion by the communists of all tendencies, rather than to construct a philosophy that would reconstitute their legacy since Proudhon and the International in a coherent whole. To the contrary, the need for simple and systematic explanations of the “idea” became the most urgent task, and this is why Alexander Berkman himself wrote an *ABC of Libertarian Communism*.<sup>2</sup> The best formulations of Anarchosyndicalism were conceived between 1930 and 1938, in the reorganization of the workers movement on the Iberian Peninsula (Pierre Besnard’s *The Workers Trade Unions and the Social Revolution*) and during the Spanish Revolution (in Rudolf Rocker’s *Anarchosyndicalism: Theory and Practice*, for example). After that, nothing until Daniel Guérin’s *Anarchism: From Theory to Practice*, at the beginning of a new revolutionary cycle inscribed in the downfall of the Fordist model of development.

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<sup>2</sup> This is the title of the Spanish translation: *El ABC del comunismo libertario* (tr. Marcos Ponsa González-Vallarino, La Malatesta, Buenos Aires, 2009). Originally published in English under the title, *Now and After: the ABC of Communist Anarchism* (Vanguard Press, New York, 1929). The most recent edition is entitled *The ABC of Anarchism* (Freedom Press, London, 1977). (Translator’s note.)

In the wake of the First World War, the social crisis served as the spur for intellectual innovations not just for the Western bourgeoisie, but also for the Stalinist bureaucracy, which took two forms, or, rather, took the form of two idealisms, one subjective and the other objective. The bourgeoisie, always more tempted by providential saviors, dictatorships and Nazi adventures, had lost all of its initial liberal democratic optimism. It did not contemplate the world as its own world, but as something alien and neutral in the face of which the individual constituted himself as “being”, disinterested in politics, morality or social action. The category of action—praxis—was definitively abandoned by the revisionist philosophy of the period between the two World Wars, whether to entrench itself in a defeatist position, or to unconditionally praise the established power. Heidegger was the most representative philosopher of that era. The proletariat hardly stirred. As for the Soviet bureaucracy, it preserved the optimism of a rising class, even though it was just as incapable as its competitor and ally—the declining bourgeoisie—of understanding anything more about reality than what its class interests dictated that it must know. It considered itself to be the exclusive interpreter of the interests of the oppressed classes, and therefore the leader of the revolution and helmsman of history. Stalinist philosophy was therefore not limited to concealing the truth with legitimating fantasies—the essence of things expressed in ideas—but instead actually produced its own rituals, heroes and myths, dressed up in scientific and determinist verbiage. In this context, it was indistinguishable from religion. The Party, the Politburo, the State, the Supreme Leader, the Revolution, Socialism ... all comprised a litany of puffed-up, empty images—the elements of a concentrated spectacle, as Debord said—that were intended to consolidate its power with claims of its objectivity and universality. The attack on Reason was undertaken on two fronts and in two distinct ways: from the perspective of subjective irrationality, dissolving the concepts of alienation, subject, class, truth, ideology, history, memory, humanity, etc., in those of the isolated individual, the will, the life force, existence, nature, homeland, and so on; and from that of objective irrationality, with the same old rationalistic language, but vacated of all content. The idea of freedom was thus radically transformed, so that it no longer had anything to do with the untrammled self-determination of the community, but rather involved a being-there of the individual within an amoral and asocial chaos, in which the individual endured with indifference, when not with blind obedience, those who were the self-proclaimed representatives of fate or historical necessity.

Of course, rational thought did not entirely surrender to either the blows of the existentialists or the pragmatists, or the irrationality of the Marxist-Stalinists, nor did it give up when faced with the contradictions inherent to Reason itself. The victory of the capitalist powers and Soviet totalitarianism did, however, deprive rational thought of any chance that it might be widely disseminated, and it was therefore isolated in intellectual circles, marginal publications, provincial universities and intellectual projects of greater or lesser influence, such as the Institute for Social Research (the authors of the Frankfurt School and others affiliated with them), the Collège de Sociologie (Bataille), the magazines *Politics* (MacDonald) and *Le Contrat Sociale* (Souvarine, Papaioannou), the Regional Planning Association of America (Mumford), etc. Protected by the meager initial impact of their research projects, isolated from the socialist media, and removed from everyday political conflicts, without any dialectical relation with the totality of the social process and therefore without any useful application, the importance of theoretical social critique nevertheless underwent a boom of sorts with the outbreak of a new revolutionary cycle in the highly developed capitalist countries during the 1960s. Its proponents constituted a bridge between two eras; it would be the task of others to assimilate it and to practice it; in fact, this

task would fall on the shoulders of the protagonists of the revolts, the new rebels. It could not be irrefutably claimed that this task would not face almost unconquerable challenges, and by this we are not referring only to the forces of repression and the counter-propaganda marshaled by the existing order, but to the cage of Stalinism which, under diverse forms, for the most part Third-Worldism, seduced a large part of the revolutionary youth of the time. Yet the social critique did make progress, accompanying the real movement. The French May '68 was the high point of the "second proletarian assault on class society", as it was defined by the Situationist International, the only collective project that grasped the revolutionary potential of the era and that called attention to the points where the lever of revolt could best be applied. The situationist critique was the most coherent and innovative critique, formulating radical demands that, given the depth of the crisis, could be posed on a massive scale. But it did not find its proletariat, except for during a few brief moments, since the quest for theoretical consciousness on the part of the working class of the 1960s did not last very long. The S.I. delivered the *coup de grâce* to Stalinism and laid the foundations for a truly subversive radical critique, but its triumphs would only benefit the new amorphous and submissive generations, who were reluctant to leave the capitalist refuge to endorse revolutionary projects, the pillars of a victorious class that knew how to absorb and integrate their contributions.

Once the autonomous proletariat was defeated, the strategic objective of domination would be the eradication of its autonomy, whose first step would be realized by a project of theoretical disarmament. Everything that revolutionary thought had helped to bring to consciousness had to be erased from the social imagination; but the old positivist Marxism was defunct. Pseudo-radical academic reflection then became the ideal instrument by which the existing order would recover the terrain of ideas by way of the recuperation of conveniently denatured critical fragments, an easy task given the fact that the conditions of intellectual degradation that prevailed in the university milieu of the time created a favorable environment for falsification. The stars of recuperation acquired a notoriety that would have been unthinkable only a few years before. Thus, these thinkers in the pay of the State made themselves comfortable for a while amidst the theoretical debris of previous struggles—which had been rendered inoffensive by the defeat of the movement—as a necessary stage in the process leading to the advance of submission, and in order to bring about a situation in which revolutionary illusions would no longer be necessary. With a proletariat wallowing in modernized misery, ideas were no longer dangerous: any small-time professor could challenge any point of the old orthodoxy and propose a shoddy and fictitious alternative. The trick consisted in being extremely critical with regard to the details, but apologetic towards the existing order in one's conclusions. A submissive thought standing guard over subversive appearances was the most appropriate kind for a power that was based on certain wage-earning middle classes and a proletariat sinking into disorder, which, since both these categories were still under the influence of the recent disturbances, dreamed of a revolution that they did not really want and which in any case they were incapable of carrying out even if they wanted it. Consumers of ideology, they wanted both the prestige of revolt and the tranquility of order. This "revolutionary" phase of the ruling ideology, however, came to an end as soon as the perspective of class war vanished in the western world. In a very short span of time, immersion in private life, the preponderance of individual interests and the satisfaction of immediate needs produced such a generalized lack of consciousness that the road of weak thought was definitively cleared of all obstacles. The disconnection of social life and public life allowed the abundance of commodities to satisfy the manipulated desires of the masses and to

make it possible to satisfy their spiritual cravings with increasingly more simple substitutes. In 1979, the year when the adjective “postmodern” made its debut in its currently-accepted sense, the concept of revolution had already been easily demolished: with the proletariat in a dormant state, history could be re-defined as a “narrative” or “story”, that is, as a lullaby, a minor literary genre within which the revolution was reduced to a mere make-believe “event”. The revolution, however, was not exactly the object of the desire of these postmodern thinkers. This gang of “neo-philosophers”—most of them former Maoists—condemned revolution and universality as the road to totalitarianism. At last, the zealous intelligentsia was in an ideal position to confront an almost-extinct subversion. Order returned to society and these neo-thinkers became fashionable, casting aside their disguises and openly proclaiming their liquidationist goals. The end of utopia: not a few of them abominated May ’68 as revolution and praised it as modernization. These fashionable ideas were revealed for what they were, the ideas of domination. The ruling class that emerged transformed after the decomposition of the workers movement and the restructuring of capitalism, finally discovered a thought that was unmistakably its own, its own philosophy that perfectly reflected its nature and the new condition of its rule, the postmodern condition. In the well-paid world of academia, armed with an arsenal of ambiguous and murky categories expressed in self-referential jargon, yesterday’s post-structuralist and semiologist recuperators worked on its “thematization”.

There can be no doubt that reactionary postmodern thought was confected on the basis of one-sided interpretations of Nietzsche, above all, although Heidegger, Kant, Husserl, Lacan and Freud also lent a hand, to the extent that they were useful for the labor of destroying Reason. Rationalist philosophy had created universal values, postulating a progressive access to consciousness that in its final stage would make humanity capable of self-government in freedom. The category of universality put an end to the differences of birth, fate, gender, wealth, class, nation.... Its realization was a conflict-ridden process: hence the importance given to history as the history of liberation struggles. In its most radical formulations, revolutions constituted violent emergency solutions. Nietzsche questioned the reality of this emancipatory process, denying the *telos* or purpose of history and broaching the unconscious and obscure dimension—the Dionysian dimension—of human societies. He sought to prove that the foundations of Reason were not rational and that history was not evolving in accordance with a predetermined plan. The cleverness of Reason that derived general goals from individual passions was therefore a Hegelian fallacy. Moreover, Reason, by seizing upon “Life” destroyed it, and so, for the good of Life, Reason must be jettisoned. This would become, in a somewhat simplified form, the task that would inspire the first elaborators of the weak philosophy of postmodernity—Foucault, Deleuze and Derrida—and their genealogical, rhizomatic and deconstructive procedures. We cannot deny the theoretical enigma that arose from the cruel materialization of the idea of Progress, as expressed in the experience of the totalitarian states, and in the triumph of capitalism that Adorno, Benjamin, Bataille and others, each in their own way, attempted to resolve without needing to renounce Reason or making concessions to irrationalism. The critiques of reason and its historical meaning, however, were condemned to languish in enlightened circles, in the absence of an agent-subject that would be capable of making use of their results and implementing them in practice. Unfortunately, this subject, the revolutionary working class, had ceased to exist during the 1980s. The great achievement of capitalism was precisely this: the dissolution of the connections that linked individuals with their own kind, to their neighbors and to their class, thanks to the absolute privatization of life brought about by the disintegration of the social fabric by the techno-economic colonization

of everyday life. History was not the stage where a conscious humanity was recreated to liberate itself. In practice, History was annihilated in an eternal present where no one experienced being or becoming, but merely existed. Consequently, the theoretical annihilation of the subject of consciousness had to be one of the first objectives of submissive thought. It was necessary to complete the capitalist victory on the field of ideas, but not by using the usual tool of falsification, academic Marxism, but by innovating in the art of dissolving the truth in the lie and reality in the spectacle. The spiritual conditions of late capitalism—disconnection from the past, forgetting, loss of the value of experience, anomie, pseudo-identities—favored this operation by also providing it with the semblance of the prestige of a daring break with the past.

By disposing of the category of the totality, apologetic commentaries destroyed the truth and transformed it into *doxa*, opinion, interpretation, *bucle* [?]. As a result, all philosophical systems seemed to have become nothing but *doxa*. The milestones of thought are no longer contemplated as moments of its development, but as a pile of more or less useful debris. Any claim can be challenged (and “deconstructed”) by proving its invalidity *a la carte*. Objectivity is lost, essence is diluted and content is evacuated: in the end the true cannot be distinguished from the false. Politically, the relativism of such an interpretive delirium leads to submission to the prevailing order: nothing is true, support for anything is permitted. The result is a garden variety nihilism which, in its most strikingly negative aspects, has penetrated all obsolete ideologies, from Marxism to anarchism, hybridizing with them to a certain extent. In the most representative works of servile consciousness, Power does not appear as an extreme development of social hierarchy or as a product of certain relations that have been disorganized by capital, but as the substance that impregnates life, from the highest to the lowest social strata. Power, like God, is everywhere, in the offices of Multinationals, in state institutions and in workers assemblies, but especially at the very roots of the much-denigrated truth. In this context, it was not at all surprising that a genius discovered the unsullied truth in Khomeini’s Iran. The second wave of postmodernists, like Baudrillard, even claimed that reality does not exist, that it is a simulacrum. Others defined it as a “discourse”. A curious way to “interpret” Debord. The concept of the spectacle, however, derived from the concept of alienation, and referred to very palpable realities such as the relations between persons mediated by images, the ultimate form of commodity fetishism. Individuals were alienated as passive spectators of a representation of themselves that was created by others, the agents of domination. Thus, all their activities, in production, thought, and play ... were not really their own, but were designed and determined by rules established for the exclusive economic profit of the ruling class. Nonetheless, alienation was not an ineluctable fate, but a historical phenomenon that could, just as it had arisen, also be brought to an end. Suddenly. It is not at all surprising that for the postmodernists alienation was the main concept that was targeted for attack after that of the revolution. Without it, outright rejection of the dominant regime lost all justification. If reality was something more than just a spectacle, the copy was not as legitimate as the original.

As capitalism proletarianized the world with the inestimable help of technology, industrial conditions of existence were generalized and the postmodern mentality spread. The reflections of postmodernism were the most appropriate for the intellectual comfort of the middle level strata that had arisen during the phases of economic growth. We are referring to the wage earning middle classes, equipped with college degrees and very much at home with communications technologies [*hiperconectadas*]. The most common characteristics of everyday life in the turbo-capitalist regime are one hundred percent pre-established in these categories: nar-

cissism, existential void, frivolity, consumerism, lack of any firm commitments, fear, isolation, emotional and relationship problems, vapid gregariousness, worship of success, political “realism”, etc., all of which were transformed into the public ideal of the postmodern condition. The “French ideology”—as Castoriadis called it—despite its obscurity and vacuity, or rather precisely because of these aspects, was perfectly suited to the trivial nature of those sectors of the population, who comprise the social base of domination. The function of postmodern speculation, however, had other features: whenever a real anti-capitalist movement emerged, it was soon joined along the way by the civil society movement and by the advocates of progress and reform, inhibiting the crystallization of not only really antagonistic practice, but also really critical, anti-developmental thought. The critique of postmodernism currently performs the role that was once performed by the critique of the Marxist-Leninist religion, now that technological mass society performs the role of the old class society.

The first major difficulty faced by radical critique is that of discovering its subject, since the communities of struggle that have arisen from contemporary conflicts are usually not strong enough or stable enough to constitute such a subject. The presence of the middle classes turns conflicts into “communities of carnival” or “make-believe communities”, in the expression of Z. Bauman, that is, masses gathered together in spectacles, without common interests but with a shared, short-term illusion, a momentary identity, that serves to provide an outlet for the tension built up in the daily routine. In this type of pseudo-community, as soon as the festive protests come to an end, everything remains the same as it was before. The most harmful effect of the protest-spectacles of the last few years, by dispersing the energy of real social conflicts in ceremonial twenty-one gun salutes, has been the aborting of the development of real combatant communities. The avalanche of gestures of dissatisfaction buries any attempt at rational communication, and that is why contemporary assemblies shun debate and revel in expressions of emotion, attracting an endless array of neurotic and mentally disturbed personalities. It is obvious that if crises are not serious enough to generate irreconcilable antagonisms and to seriously threaten the survival of a part of society, the emotional plague will always deactivate real conflicts, and postmodern fragments will contaminate all well-intentioned reflections. The immediate task of anti-developmental radical critique will therefore consist in denouncing the psycho-political mechanisms of control and the mesocratic mentality in which those mechanisms are rooted, but always in the name of Reason. Anders, Marcuse, Reich and Freud can be of great help in this cause. However, the long-term endeavor is that of confronting the crisis of the idea of Progress, of History and of Reason itself—the crisis of capitalist society—without returning to the fold by succumbing to irrationality or an esthetic of rustic escapism. The symptoms of the historical social crisis must be explained without ever abandoning Reason, which, as Horkheimer says, is “*the fundamental category of philosophical thought, the only one capable of uniting it with the destiny of Humanity.*” In conclusion, one must pursue utopia, which is nothing but a reason *sui generis*.

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