

Critical Theory after Frankfurt

Angela Davis, the West German SDS, and the Critique of Fascism

Von: Cecilia Sebastian

Among the most famous documents to emerge from the West German student movement is the *Organisationsreferat* by Rudi Dutschke and Hans-Jürgen Krahl. Originally presented in September 1967 at the 22nd Delegates Conference of the Socialist German Students League (SDS) in Frankfurt, its notoriety stems from the fact that it marked the antiauthoritarian ascent within the SDS. The unexpected joint appearance of Krahl, representing the SDS's largest branch, Frankfurt, with Dutschke, representing its most radical branch, West Berlin, signaled that the organization would no longer prioritize domestic coalition building, nor plead with the Bonn government to enact its constitutional pledges to democracy and transparency; its sights were now set on anti-imperialist, anti-capitalist global revolution.¹

The *Organisationsreferat* further testifies to the blend of Frankfurt School Critical Theory and Third World Marxism that characterized the antiauthoritarian line. Dutschke and Krahl made liberal use of Max Horkheimer's 1942 essay "The Authoritarian State" in diagnosing recent state responses to the 1966 recession, reviving the central argument that, in advanced capitalist society, the primary function of the state – liberal-democratic or otherwise – is to manipulate and postpone economic crises, with the goal of evacuating the subjective (proletarian) will to revolution. They then looked to Che Guevara's *foco* theory for a means of fomenting solidaristic oppositional consciousness in the metropolises. Fashioning student activists as "urban guerillas," Dutschke and Krahl envisioned the strategic deployment of nonviolent direct actions to jolt local public sentiment into popular revolt.²

Of course, this strategy did not pan out, and the antiauthoritarian students are often remembered as fundamentally misguided in their revolutionary aspirations and appropriations of Frankfurt School and Third World theories. And yet, particularly in a moment when Frankfurt School Critical Theory has increasingly been called in for criticism due to its political conformism³ and postcolonial blind spots,⁴ one begins to wonder whether the historical encounter of Critical Theory and anticolonial thought and practice in

the 1960s was really such a dead end. Perhaps instead it spurred alternative political and theoretical trajectories of Critical Theory, ones that might not only inform these contemporary criticisms, but the present historical conjuncture that motivates them.

The collective organizing in Frankfurt that presaged the *Organisationsreferat* suggests a framework for charting one such alternative path. It shows Horkheimer's early critique to have undergone several critical revivals in the hands of his students for the purpose of articulating the historical nexus of economic downturn, state power, and racialized violence. Moreover, in the first of these, the early critique had been precisely revived to counter the aging Horkheimer's imperialist apologetics. In May 1967, during a speech at Frankfurt's America House, a 72-year-old Horkheimer defended the U.S. war in Vietnam on the shocking grounds that, "When America chooses to wage war, it is not about defending the fatherland, but about defending the constitution, defending human rights."⁵ Heckled by antiwar students, he doubled down, arguing that foregrounding the war unfairly vilified the United States, since the "horror" of Vietnam was "part of the world in which we live." He insisted that West Germans owed Americans gratitude for their restored civil liberties and ought to honor their shared liberal "culture," since "there are not that many nations [Völker] left who can actually defend what we call culture."⁶ These comments made manifest the specters of cynicism and fatalism that had long haunted Critical Theory; they seemed to dictate that, since violence was pervasive in history, there was little else one could do but embrace the liberal perks of bourgeois security, as procured by Western domination.

In an open letter in the student newspaper *diskus*, the Frankfurt SDS sought a new path for Critical Theory by recalling Horkheimer to the old. Citing Horkheimer's own dialectical fighting words from 1939, they reminded him that "an appeal against fascism to the liberal ideology of the nineteenth century is itself an appeal to the instance in which fascism triumphed."⁷ They then outlined a critique of the U.S. war economy as a political-economic fix to the crises tendencies of late capitalism, while drawing attention to how state-sanctioned anticommunism (the ideological rationale for the war in Vietnam) and anti-Black racism (vis-à-vis civil rights activists) functioned to stifle political dissent. In so extending Horkheimer's early articulation of the nexus of crisis, fascism, and racialized violence to neocolonial warfare in Vietnam and racism in the United States, the letter sought to render it more capacious and global in scope—and thereby less consonant with a defense of American militarism. Rather, these different instantiations of repression, they argued, were evidence that "the process of fascisation [*Faschisierungsprozeß*] is accelerating in American society."⁸

Recentring this May 1967 encounter already helps to locate the antiauthoritarians' revolutionary ethos together with their critique of Critical Theory in the internationalism that motivated them. If one looks to the group responsible for the young Horkheimer's critical revival, the concreteness of their internationalism comes into still clearer view. In the spring and summer of 1967, Angela Davis and Lothar Menne had spearheaded the production of a pirate edition of Horkheimer's early work, which had never been published in Germany.⁹

The production required transcribing and mimeographing the out-of-print writings, which they undertook at the dilapidated factory building at Adalbertstraße 10 where they and several other SDS members were living, including for a short time Krahl.¹⁰ According to Menne, Davis did the bulk of transcribing, usually by night.¹¹ Possibly all three had a hand in the open letter to Horkheimer. Ultimately, the proceeds from the pirate edition were used to finance a group trip to the Dialectics of Liberation Congress in London that July, where Herbert Marcuse was slated to speak alongside Stokely Carmichael, Allen Ginsburg, Michael X, and other figures of the international New Left. To save money in London, they arranged to stay with the radical historian Robin Blackburn in Notting Hill.¹²

For Davis, London would be a stopover on her return to the United States. After two years studying with Adorno in Frankfurt while moonlighting in the SDS, she had decided to pursue her PhD in philosophy at UCSD with Marcuse. Her relocation was motivated by the growing militancy of the Black freedom movement; as she later put it, she had wanted to “contribute something concrete to the struggle.”¹³ Just how important her contribution became can be measured by the state campaigns to silence, intimidate, and terrorize her. In 1969, Davis was fired from her position as a Professor of Philosophy at UCLA for her Communist Party membership. In 1970, she was arrested and jailed on the trumped-up charges of criminal conspiracy, kidnapping, and murder in connection to a police shootout at the San Marin County Courthouse; the charges carried the death penalty.

From behind bars in 1971, Davis issued a call for the abolition of the prison system that has defined her subsequent activist and intellectual trajectory. She was joined by several other incarcerated Black radicals including Soledad Brothers John Clutchette, Fleeta Drumgo, and George Jackson and Black Panthers Ericka Huggins, Huey Newton, and Bobby Seale. Together with her comrade on the outside Bettina Aptheker, Davis edited a compendium of their writings titled *If They Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistance*. In its opening pages, she and Aptheker wrote that, “the entire apparatus of the bourgeois democratic state, especially its judicial system and its prisons, is disintegrating. The judicial and prison systems are to be increasingly defined as instruments for unbridled repression, institutions which may be successfully resisted but which are more and more impervious to meaningful reform. Rather they must be transformed in the revolutionary sense.”¹⁴ A page later, they named their objective as the prison system’s “abolition.”¹⁵

Rarely recalled about this original abolitionist critique of the prison system is that it was rooted in a theory of fascism. As Davis and Aptheker wrote in the preface, the mounting intensity of state repression served “as a measure of the fascist nature of government.”¹⁶ Reviving a familiar theory, they next argued that fascism was not an idiosyncratic descent into illiberalism but rather *immanent* to liberal society; it was a bourgeois state solution to crises inherent to the capitalist system. They argued further—now with reference to Marcuse—that the present iteration of fascism functioned as a “preventative

counterrevolution,” that is, as a counteroffensive to the political ground then being gained by antiwar activists, Black militants, Communists, and other oppositional groups radicalized by these same crises.¹⁷

Most striking about Davis’s 1971 argument was that it pegged fascism’s immanence in liberal democratic society to the concrete site of the prison.¹⁸ As Alberto Toscano has demonstrated, Davis’s argument was not just that liberalism begets fascism and therefore cannot be conceived as its antidote, but that a veritable state of racial terror is already operative *within* liberal democracy’s judicial and prison systems.¹⁹ In so arguing, Davis’s critique aspired to a precise articulation of the conjunctural crisis for which carceral fascism supplies a political-economic solution. As she put it in one of her solo pieces for the volume, not only did the criminal justice system work to quash revolutionary resistance by incarcerating many of its most viable subjects, but it also abetted the “extract[ion] of super profits from [Black] underpaid labor” by legitimizing and entrenching the links between race and poverty, and between poverty and crime.²⁰

Read together with the SDS’s immanent critiques of Critical Theory, Davis’s 1971 argument adds still another dimension to the enduring utility of the critique of fascism for a changing historical context. Where the *Organisationsreferat* has red-flagged the liberal-democratic state’s technocratic manipulation of conjunctural crises and the open letter had highlighted its exportation of fascist violence to former colonial territories, Davis’s 1971 critique showed the redirection of that same violence to the prisons. Overseas militarism and domestic carceralism were two sides of the same, nominally liberal-democratic coin. Meanwhile, all three critiques upheld anti-fascist resistance in the form of voluntarist (activist) organizing and coalition building, which had been virtually absent in early Critical Theory.

More so than the theory of the West German student movement, Davis’s 1971 work has had considerable staying power. It laid the ground for the contemporary abolitionist critique of mass incarceration, which delinks punishment from crime to show how the prison-industrial complex in fact originated as a post-Keynesian solution to the surplus crises of global finance capital.²¹ That it did so in part by critiquing and expanding an early Frankfurt School theory of fascism, already begun in Frankfurt in 1967, illuminates a transatlantic path for Critical Theory. This path will appear dissident in view of the conventional periodization of the Frankfurt School into philosophical paradigms of communication and recognition. Yet importantly, it was forged in the historical encounter of Critical Theory and the anti-imperialist, anti-racist struggle of the 1960s, and it has continued to develop by affirming the productive tension between theory and history. In veering, then, it reclaims Critical Theory as the critique of the nexus of capitalist exploitation and racial domination, with the goal of their abolition in practice.

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