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**ON AGRESSIVENESS.
THE CRITICAL THEORY'S VIEW AND ITS UTOPIAN IMPERFECTIONS**

Abstract

The present paper is focused on the problem of aggressiveness in a Marcusean account. Thus, the thesis is mainly this: in the contemporary society of opulence and of advanced industrialization, the social aggressiveness is not due "to some individual disorders and maladies, but to the normal functioning of the society". Our contemporary society puts under a highest social pressure human beings, manipulating their instincts and natural needs. Aggressiveness will be intensified as a normal element in an "exterminating" struggle for existence. An expected conclusion will be that our reason will not accept the character of normality of opulent society in such terms without doubting. Consequently, we can understand aggressiveness (and the death instincts) as normal only if we postulate a funciary illness of our present society.

An important aspect of an account on violence is the relation between power, aggressiveness and domination. On this base, the political philosophy repeatedly attempted to build up a theory in order either to explain the underlining causes of violence and domination or to realize a theoretical outline of a society conducted upon the rules of moral values as justice, liberty, toleration and others. But while these theories are continuing to alternate, the history doesn't cease to be characterized by the constant relation between power, aggressiveness and domination.

From a historical point of view, the XX century is strewn, as its forerunners, with aggressive outbreaks, manifestations of the force relations, tendencies of an imposed or refuted oppressing dominance, moral decadence etc. But on the background of successive industrial and technological revolutions, the accents are moving, in the theoretical field, on the increasing interest in finding the lost or the unknown identity of both individuals and nations rather than on discovering a general commune human nature.

Thus, old dimensions are dressed up with new contents in respect with an increasing irrational progress of a more and more inhuman society.

In the present paper I'll make an account of the Marcusean critical theory view regarding this issue and I'll attempt to stress some important aspects of a theoretical approach which claims, as a main premise, both a psychological and an anthropological foundation of aggressiveness. I'll also draw the Marcusean interest focused on the ethical status of the concept of aggressiveness and the necessity and the possibility of overcoming the contemporary state of affairs.

I have to mention, from the beginning, that the Herbert Marcuse's critical theory¹ has, as a particularity in comparison with other theoretical constructions of the

¹ It was a commune place the idea that the historical context of the Second World War and the Holocaust was a major cause of the adherence of Jews to Leftist ideas. Marcuse is no exception. Thus, even if he makes no references in his after-war writings to these events, he uses the term fascism to underline the negativity of the advanced industrial capitalism of the contemporary world.

Frankfurt School, the conspicuously affirmative and optimistic character, for which more often has been affirmed to border the utopia. Hence, we can find here not only a proper diagnostic regarding the moral impossibility and the aggressive character of such a society of opulence² - as a dominant type of community in the XX century -, but also an enthusiasm regarding the possibility of overcoming this state of affairs.

About aggressiveness Marcuse speaks explicitly in a lecture presented in 1956 and published in a reviewed and ample version in 1967 in the *Die Neue Rundschau* review. Entitled "The Aggressiveness in the Contemporary Industrial Society"³, the lecture has the main purpose the imperative of pointing out "the tensions and the tares" of the society of opulence. Thus, it will be expressly revealed to us that the typical features of this type of society are the following:

- an excessively developed industrial and technical capacity, meant in its major part to the production and the distribution of "unproductive" goods and services (luxury goods, insignificant objects, goods for consumption that are exposed in a planned way to be quickly "out of fashion", military investments, etc.);
- an increased standard of life that tends to be extended also to the anterior unprivileged strata of society;
- a high level of concentration of the economic and political power, which are providing and favoring the

organized interference of government in economic life;

- the scientific and pseudo-scientific manipulation of individuals' behavior during the work-period or leisure and the verification of the results for commercial and political goals.

The ensemble of all these features constitutes the *syndrome* that indicates the normal functioning of this society of opulence.

From now on the problem of aggressiveness will be closely related to this character of *normality* of the society of opulence. The Marcusean thesis is mainly this: in such a type of society "the tensions and the tares are not due to some individual disorders and maladies, but to the normal functioning of the society".⁴

But this thesis divides the problem of aggressiveness in two other issues: on the one hand we have an aggressiveness as a deviation in respect with the normality, and on another hand we have an aggressiveness as a consequence of social pressure. However, this split is dissolved immediately, when the accent falls on the social dimension of normality. "The society appears –says Marcuse- as a factor of normality in a more substantial sense than the one of an external influence, that "normal" refers rather to a fundamental social and institutional structure than an individual one".⁵

The normality is given here by the general nature of profession, social context and status, and in accordance with such a normality individuals have to adapt and integrate themselves to the *normal* functioning, by accepting and perpetuating their condition. Thus, a person belonging to an unprivileged minority defeated in front of a dominant social class, i.e. belonging to a pauper group which is usually supposed to do inferior, boring and brutalized works, will be adapt to the normality only when she will do a work associated to her group. Hardly, or even at all, that person would pass in another social

² For Marcuse the society of opulence has also some other names as "the society of consumption", "the one dimensional society", "the post-industrial society", and others, and it specifically refers to the after war American society, in which Marcuse sees the embodiment of both his theoretical aspects and the great provocation of the future.

³ For the present paper I used the Romanian version in the translation of Sorin Vieru, appeared in H. Marcuse, *Scriseri filosofice*, ed. Politică, Bucharest, 1977, pp.239-260.

⁴ H. Marcuse, *Agresivitatea*.....op.cit, p. 246.

⁵ *Ibid*, p.241.

category, for example the one of the industry and politics' potentates who are also characterized, in the light of the normal functioning, by having a great capacity of being efficient, without scruples, amoral and permanently aggressive.

In such a society in which the one that dominates is the principle of productivity and efficiency, the aggressiveness is itself a part of the normal functioning both explicitly as an accessory of the dominant class, and implicitly as a social pressure. In the last sense it must be said that the social pressure, both directly or indirectly expressed, acts in order to deform and to mutilate the human being, that is the adaptation to normality and the reproduction of pre-existent social structures, and of its fundamental institutions and relations.

But from the thesis of the aggressiveness as normality are rising some doubts regarding the normality as a measure for the "soundness" of the society of opulence.

Consequently, not farther, Marcuse defines an unhealthy society in this way: "A society is ill when its institutions and fundamental relations (that is its structures) are in such a manner that they don't permit the use of the material and intellectual existing resources for an optimal development of human existence".⁶ And that "they don't permit" is imposed by a *supplementary repression* of the instincts (pulsions), a necessary repression for the major interest of maintaining of the existent society.

In respect with such a definition, the society of opulence will appear (as it is supposed to be) as an ill society with its main symptom: "the discrepancy between present form of existence and accessible possibilities of the human liberty". The human liberty is a in important clue, because due to it and in order to avoid unexpected situations "the society must operate a more efficient coordination of individuals"⁷ subjecting the

individuals' mind to a systematic manipulation.

Thus the aggressiveness becomes both symptom and consequence of an ill society which individuals are permanently oppressed and forced by the tares of this repressed society. The genesis of this aggressiveness occurs when "the premises for a translation in life of the existent possibilities of freedom, pace and happiness are lacking", and "the sound and normal individual will possess all the features that are permitting to him to treat with other normal individuals from his society".⁸ And exactly these features are the ones to measure the individuals' oppression.

The social pressure of such a repression and of such a manipulation of instincts (pulsions) and of human needs intensifies the aggressive instincts against vital instincts; the society of opulence forces its individuals to continue their "exterminating" struggle for existence, reproducing their own repression. Thus, the destructive tendencies are sublimated in a socially useful form of existence. "The destructive energy transforms itself in a socially useful energy, and the aggressive impulses nourish the political progress and the technical progress."⁹

So, the aggressiveness is a component of the dynamics by which life (Eros) instincts and the death (Thanatos) instincts are forced to be unite. Forcing the realization of the harmony of these two antagonistic fundamental instincts, the manipulation gives birth to an outsized destructive impulse, that is to a dissolution of this unity in favor of an omnipresent tendency of society to aggressiveness and against the affirmation and celebration of life.

The normal functioning of the society of opulence "nourish" the aggressiveness:

- by dehumanizing the process of production (the individual's machination) and of the process of consumption (the human being becomes thing in relation

⁶ Ibid. p. 242.

⁷ Ibid. p. 243.

⁸ Ibid p, 245-246.

⁹ Ibid p, 248

with an object; “to be” becomes “to have”);

- and by creating a specific situation of overcrowding and hubbub in which what is realized is an “excess of socialization”.

The asocial character of Eros is opposed to this exacerbation of instincts of death, of destructive impulses. In Marcusean critical theory, the same as in the Freudian psychoanalysis, Eros is the Principle of Pleasure, and it has an asocial and amoral character. The instincts of death, consequently, would correspond to a Principle of Reality, a social substitute for the initial Principle of Pleasure that makes the transition of the “ego” to the social level and morality. An excess of socialization presupposes an excess of morality in which the aggressiveness becomes normality and socially useful pains. Thus, aggressive tendencies triumph throughout the repression of every need of independence and initiative.

In the mass society the individual feels no responsibility, and in the same time he is the perfect consumer of the manipulating informational contents.

The Marcusean account receives new valences. It is brought in discussion also the brutalizing of the language and of the image. Both tend to normalize the death throughout unusual discursive interferences (i.e. presenting the news about a massacre in a quotidian maybe even humorist way, and immediately followed by news about the stock exchange or about weather). The language used for political and social interests will operate a severe discrimination by using a vocabulary of hate, resentment and calumny against an enemy and by mobilizing the aggressiveness against this chimerical, deformed enemy. “At last, here it is talked about the stabilization and consolidation of a system that is threatened by its own irrationality, by the precarious base on which is founded its prosperity, by the

dehumanization that its wasteful and paralyzing abundance provokes.”¹⁰

Hence, we have until now a concept of aggressiveness understood as normality of an irrational society that tends to reproduce itself by a supplementary repression (an over-repression) of its individuals’ instincts. But we also have a concept of aggressiveness from the light of death’s instinct, which imposes itself as a consequence of a reality principle by which the transition from asocial to social, from amoral to moral is producing. At the same time, the aggressiveness is viewed as a symptom or as a an effect of an ill society in which the impulses for destruction affirm themselves both as protector of a failing society and as aspiration to the abolition of the internal tensions and to the full rest.

But in this explicitly aggressiveness’ approach, they are implied a lot of other aspects already existing in the Marcusean critical theory. The Freudian theory on the dualism of *Eros* and *Thanatos*, for example, was involved in Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization* (1955) as a central point of a theoretical complex construction. The result was for the first time this: the humanity must be mould according to the instincts of life (*Eros*), for the scarcity and “the need to toil” are artificially maintained, and thus they are bringing in Death (destruction and domination). A society of domination will always imply an “engineering of the soul” and a “science of the human relations” in order to assure an efficient repression of individuals’ need of liberation. The starting point of the account from *Eros and Civilization* is constituted by Freud’s affirmation that the whole civilization is based on a permanent subjugation of human instincts. “The free satisfaction of human being’s instinctual needs –says Freud– is incompatible with the civilized society: the renunciation and the postponing of the satisfaction are the obligatory conditions for progress. The culture means just the methodical sacrifice of

¹⁰ H. Marcuse, *Agresivitate*.....op. cit, p. 253.

libido, its becoming, rigidly pushed to socially useful activities and expressions".¹¹

But this progress seems to be related with the increasing lack of freedom. This is just the progress based on the repression and domination, in which what is persisting and well functioning are the negative aspects of culture, and the continue development of productiveness assures as realizable the promise of a better life for all.

In the shadow of this unfulfilling "promesse de la bonheur", the civilization is identified with the repression, with all those processes of (conscious or unconscious, internal or external) restraining, constraining and suppression of the instinct (understood as a primary *pulsion* subdued to *the historical modification*). Throughout the civilizing process "the human-animal becomes a human being [...] in a substantial transforming of his essence, transforming that afflicts not only instinctual goals, but also the instinctual "values" –that is those principles governing the realization of these goals".¹² Thus, the immediate satisfaction is switched with a postponed satisfaction, and the joy (the simple playing) becomes effort (labor), the receptiveness – productiveness, and the liberty (understood as absence of repression) – security. In these very specific transitions from a state of affairs to another consists in transforming the *principle of pleasure* in *principle of reality*.

The installation of the *principle of reality* makes from any human being an *organized ego* looking for his comfort, for the absence of risk and danger, for a more secure life, etc. His *rational function* is developing only in order to "devise" the reality, in order to be capable for an useful distinction between

good and evil, true and false, useful and harmful. The *organized ego* acquires conscious functions, and what under the impact of the principle of pleasure was only a "motory discharge" of the psychical apparatus from its accumulation of excitants now becomes *action* ("convenient modification of reality"). Under this aspect, the replacement of the principle of pleasure with the one of reality is inevitable and desirable. But what does makes this replacement to be non-desirable is the influence of the social frame, in which each conscious individual focuses on his own action. Thus, "the capacity of the man to consciously modify the reality according to "what is useful" gives the hope of satisfaction. But neither the desires, nor the actions of modifying the reality don't appertain to him, but they are "organized" by the society in which he lives, and which permits him to transubstantialize the originally instinctual needs".¹³

The society of opulence, as a society of consumption that overestimates the dimensions of the reality principle adding a new structure, the principle of *efficiency* (a history form of the fundamental principle of reality), increase the power of reality as domination. And all this is done in the prejudice of a rational exercise of that authority that is normally associated to the division of work in any society. But meanwhile the last is based upon knowledge being limited to a good administration of the reason's functions in order to protect the whole, the first one is imposed by one group (or individual) only in order to preserve a privileged position and to increase its own power. In this case, the principle of efficiency is strongly related with the *supplementary repression*, as the effect is

¹¹ H. Marcuse, *Eros și civilizație...*, op. cit., p. 21

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.32

related to its cause, and it has as a major purpose the abolition of the conscience and the individuals' isolation.

The successes of the post-industrial society (clearly revealing the above-described situation) let the possibility to catch sight of a future change of the extent situation. They also give to the man a chance to radically transform the sense of progress and to break the negative unity between productiveness and destruction, between liberty and repression.

Subsequently, in *One Dimensional Man*, this issue will be took again: the man could avoid the future of a *Welfare –Through– Warfare State* just attaining a new point of start from where his new destiny could begin again. But this time is in the direction of reconstructing the productive apparatus without that “worldly asceticism”¹⁴, which is the main resource of the psychical bases for domination.¹⁵

Beside the account from *Eros and Civilization* (1955) there is another account even more distant, the one from the article “Contributions to the Critique of Hedonism” (1938). About the Marcusean approach from this article I have dialed with some other occasions, and for this reason I will insist here only on the relevant aspects for the present subject in discussion. As it is known, in this article Marcuse explicitly discuss the problem of happiness in the light of the concept of pleasure, imagining a dispute between a part of the German Idealism according to which between happiness as

pleasure and reason there is a definitive grasp. Thus, the rehabilitation of the concept of happiness as pleasure means to assume a distinction between two moments: the personal one and the social one. The objective character of happiness is really established not by recognizing the seizure, but re-thinking the discourse about pleasure. The couple pleasure and happiness is analyzed in a ample complex of an “essential link” between the quality of a human, good and the truth of pleasure, complex situation that transforms the entire aspect of the problem in a moral one. “For –says Marcuse- this link is decided, in the last analysis, by the concrete form of community; the pleasure obeys to society and enters in the sphere of duty to himself and to the others. [...] Inside a society of which existence reclaims a morality (as an objective and general code of habitudes [...]), the amoral behavior is inadmissible: it destroys the bases of the social order.”¹⁶

The morality is, hence, the expression of the antagonistic relation that raises between the interest of a particular and the general interest. The social life is assured throughout an universal to which any individual is subjugated by respecting and acting according to external imposed imperatives. And thus, the pleasure – viewed as an immediate satisfaction of particular interest– will conflict with the general interests that represent the constraining “historic right” in respect with the isolated individual.

Confronted by the request of the universal, the individual looses not only his happiness, but also his liberty. “The isolated individual’s protest of hedonism –says Marcuse- is amoral”¹⁷; it is beyond the right and wrong, but it can conduct to a new generality, in which it becomes

¹⁴ The “worldly asceticism” is the one “proposed” by the German Idealism when in the problem of happiness and pleasure the happiness is condemned to marginalization. The only possible happiness is not the one related to the vulgar, immediate, ephemeron pleasure, but the one related to spiritual and rational dimensions.

¹⁵ H. Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man. Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, Beacon Press Boston, 1964.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp.153-154.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.155.

possible the harmonization of the particular interest with the general interests. Being in a social framework means the renunciation to amorality; the dominant social law manifests power both over the individual and over his needs and objects of the satisfaction of his needs. Under these circumstances, however, the amoral doesn't violate the moral laws that are the only one capable to connect "the extent order with a more rational and happy one".¹⁸

According to the *critical theory's* account what occurs inside a consumerist society is the radical reduction of the individual's action (as a "man educated in the spirit of internalization") to a simple functional aspect as a result of a planned determination of the reason. The planned determination of the reason, which is eclipsed and in impossibility of providing valorizing criteria, is imposed throughout the principle of efficiency (as it is theorized in *Eros and Civilization* and *One Dimensional Man*). The reason is fully geared in the social process, and the its only truly important part remains the operational value. The ideology of the post-industrialized society will become a construction on this limitation of the reason to a state of instrument and also on this irrational increasing productiveness. Both social life and individual life will be strongly influenced by a negative, dehumanizing character in the light of which the human behavior will have a predictable and controllable character. Human beings are becoming simple objects or less, reified individuals without a conscience of their state of object. The society of principle of efficiency is permanently interested in preserving and reproducing the structures of which it is made of and for this the private-of-liberty individual is most important. Or in order to maintain him in

this alienated state, such a society must create a proper illusion conformable for an unproblematic conscience.

The mainly idea is, as it can be seen until now, that the *Principle of Reality* will always replace the *Principle of Pleasure*, because this is a necessary mechanism in order to realize the integration of the individual in the real life. But the *Principle of Efficiency* is not a necessary one. It is an anomaly determinate by the tares and the failure of the contemporary advanced society. Throughout it an ill and destructive society attempts preserve and reproduce its fundamental structures. The problem of aggressiveness also becomes a moral one. It is supposed that by the normality inside the society it is meant a set of values capable to rule and conduct the human behavior. In the society of the principle of efficiency the normality is only the normality of aggressiveness (a set of destructive values) in which the amorality of the pleasure principle is opposed to the social moralization of the principle of reality.

However, the Marcusean approach tends to affirm, in any point of its discursive content, the possibility of an overcoming of such a society. The utopian aspect is permanently present, for the new society is presented to us as a new idyllic state of affaires. More than this it is told about this new society that it will come as a liberation of pleasure principle from the domination of the reality principle. But it is not really like that. The real meaning of the Marcusean approach is that the new society will come as a liberation of the reality principle from its extreme form, the efficiency principle. The principle of pleasure must be, as it always is, the starting point. A new society means not a simple eternal pleasure principle, but a new principle of pleasure on which a new

¹⁸ *Idem.*

principle of reality will be healthy constructed.

Marcuse is very optimistic. He clearly affirms that in the society of opulence already are the tresses of future possibilities of forming a new content in order to produce a qualitative change of society.

The aggressiveness is the state of normality in the extent society conducted by the economic structure of capitalism. Can be overcome this state of repression and destruction? Even the optimistic Marcuse becomes somehow pessimistic, because the need of power and domination seems to be stronger than ever. But here, the critical theory's view will encounter its utopian imperfections.

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