

## ***AGAINST THERMIDOR: LESSONS FROM THE SIXTIES***

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“The moment I was held down, my world went from color to gray.  
I was begging for mercy, asking them not to press anymore”.

(Protester in Hong Kong during protest, August 11, 2019)<sup>1</sup>

**RESUMO** *Se os períodos históricos possuem cores, então o momento anterior aos anos sessenta, que poderiam ser considerados como se estendendo até 1965 seria cinza, já que – não apenas simbólica, mas até mesmo materialmente – tudo nele era acinzentado. Quando, finalmente, se entrou na década de sessenta, as coisas ficaram coloridas – roupas, carros, relações interpessoais e, de um modo muito peculiar, a política. Isso porque a esquerda ingressou numa fase mais arejada, em que não apenas a exploração do proletariado pelo capital, mas também a opressão das mulheres pelos homens (inclusive da esquerda tradicional), a destruição da natureza, o abuso de animais, dentre outras coisas, passaram a fazer parte dos movimentos mais radicais de oposição aos poderes constituídos. O título do texto, à primeira vista hermético, remete ao livro Eros e Civilização, no qual Marcuse desenvolve a noção de “thermidor psíquico”, segundo a qual há forças psicológicas no indivíduo que obstam a sua emancipação e, para o autor, o significado da “nova esquerda” teria sido exatamente procurar reverter o poder exercido nas pessoas por essas forças.*

<sup>1</sup> in video in New York Times, September 23, 2019, <https://nyti.ms/351UZ0z>

**Palavras-chave** *movimento feminista, nova esquerda, movimento ecológico.*

**ABSTRACT** *If historical periods had colors, the moment just prior to the sixties, that could be considered as extending itself until 1965, would be gray, since not only symbolically but also materially everything – cars, men’s suits, boys and girls school’s uniforms – in it were in some extent grayish. When finally the decade of 1960’ arrives, things became almost instantly colorful: dressing, automobiles, personal relations and – in a very peculiar way – politics. It happened because the leftwing entered a quite airy, open-minded phase, in which not only the exploitation of proletarians by capitalists but also the oppression of women by men (also by leftists), the destruction of natural environment, the abuse of animals, among other topics, were at stake in the most radical movements against the powers to be. The at first sight hermetic title of the article refers to Herbert Marcuse’s Eros and Civilization, in which the author develops the notion of “psychic Thermidor”, according to which there are psychologic forces inside people that obstruct their emancipation. To the article’s author, the significance of the “new left” – typically originated in the sixties – would have been exactly attempting to revert the power exerted by these forces on people’s mind.*

**Keywords** *feminist movement, new left, ecological movement.*

Things started out gray. History is not only political, social, and cultural but also symbolic and perceptual. The Fifties were gray. When I think about how I experienced the Sixties, by which I mean 1965 to 1974, what first comes to my mind as a perceptual background to the events and movements, is color. For me, the period of the 1950s and early 1960s was gray. It felt gray. Popular books then were *The Man in the Gray Flannel Suit* and *The Organization Man*. General Eisenhower, after leaving the Army and becoming a civilian, wore a gray suit. Even in junior high school and high school, the fashion for boys was to wear grey flannel pants. And it was also the military color: the color of battleships and bombers, the color of barracks, that shaped the Cold War. Indeed my very first memory of gray is from about two years after the end of World War II, when my father and brother and I assembled a model battleship and painted it gray to make it look like the real thing. When I first moved to Frankfurt in 1961, the apartment buildings that had been hastily

erected after the devastation of aerial bombing were gray. As the Hong Kong protester suggests, oppression and domination can change color into gray.

In the post-war period gray could be described as the color horizon for the new, conformist, "other-directed" people whose lives became oriented to consuming and to receiving the approbation of others – the people Holden Caulfield called "phonies" in Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye*. To be colorful, to stand out as an individual, invited rejection. Theodor W. Adorno, commenting on his experience in America, observed that the term "character", which used to mean strong individuality, now meant being weird: to say that someone was a "character" meant that the person was a weirdo, a peculiar person. And if you were "colorful", that meant that you were a flamboyant weirdo, somewhat allowed to entertainers but not to regular members of society. To have rich, colorful experience and express it was thus socially taboo. Gray had implicitly become the preferred color of experience and behavior:

The color gray is no one's color. It is the color of cubicles and winter camouflage, of sullage, of inscrutable complexity, of compromise. It is the perfect intermediate, an emissary for both black and white. It is the color of soldiers and battleships, despite its dullness. It is the color of the death of trees. The death of all life when consumed by fire. The color of industry and uniformity. It is both artless and unsettling, heralding both blandness and doom. It brings bad weather, augurs bleakness. It is the color other colors fade to once drained of themselves. It is the color of old age.<sup>2</sup>

In *One-Dimensional Man*, published in 1964, right before the Sixties proper began, Herbert Marcuse described the historical uniqueness of advanced industrial society's ability to absorb all of its contradictions and flatten them out, eliminating transcendence and the sense of tension between what is and what could be. It produced a shallow "Happy Consciousness" in which the transcendent element in love, sexuality, and art is eliminated and replaced by "'repressive desublimation", a kind of harmless, frictionless pleasure that decorated the world of what C. Wright Mills called "cheerful robots." So gray could be regarded as the color of "one-dimensional man". But in keeping with the cheerfulness of the robots of the new middle-class and the Happy Consciousness of one-dimensional man, it would be gray with a smiley face.

When I think back to the political and protest activities in which I was involved prior to the Sixties proper, that is before 1965, in my mind's eye I see them taking place against a gray background, even when the sun was

2 Megan Flaherty, "Ode to Gray" in the Paris Review, August 21, 2018. Url: <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/08/21/ode-to-gray/>

shining bright. The first was as a member of the Fair Play for Cuba Committee. At the time of the Bay of Pigs Invasion, a CIA-sponsored attack on Cuba, we demonstrated in the Boston Common, 30 or 40 of us, walking up and down carrying placards saying "Hands Off Cuba". We felt proud, but puny compared to the CIA. An older woman stood watching us, shaking her head while muttering "All beatniks! All beatniks!" Beatniks were a known image of some kind of social deviance, perceived as gray, if not black. She didn't think to call us Communists, just beatniks.

My second action in the gray period was in Frankfurt-am-Main. I had joined a small group called Subversive Aktion (Subversive Action), influenced by Situationism, surrealism, and the Frankfurt School's critique of the ideology of advanced capitalism. There were five or six of us, affiliated with a few other groups in Berlin and Munich. Our first public action handing out a flier to Christmas shoppers on the Zeil, Frankfurt's Broadway or 34<sup>th</sup> Street, to use a New York analogy, or Boulevard Haussmann, to use a Parisian one. The flier was a critique of consumption in the form of a satire on a passage from one of the Gospels. When the group met at a later date to plan its next action, one of the leaders wanted us to blow up a bomb in the steeple of a Frankfurt church. When I think of it now, just as I thought of it then, I visualized sneaking into the gray church steeple in the dead of the night, surrounded by the gray buildings of Frankfurt. It seemed scary. And it seemed wrong. I realized that this was not the kind of action I wanted to be involved in and dropped out of the group. I don't think they did set the bomb.

By contrast, at the level of perception, the Sixties proper, back in the U.S., arrived as a flood of color, rich, vibrant, variegated, radiant color, bursting into the world of gray, black, and white. In the U.S. color transmission and reception became the dominant form of television between 1964 and 1966: mass culture itself became colorful. Tie-dyed clothing with patterns of bright, "psychedelic" colors became popular among young people and were worn at both rock concerts and political demonstrations. The Beatles, the predominant and most characteristic popular music group of the Sixties, made color part of their image, especially on the album cover of Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band and in their animated film *Yellow Submarine*. A number of the cultural movements and phenomena of the Sixties had appellations that included color terms: Flower Power, the Rainbow Coalition, Mao Tse-Tung's Little Red Book. People who took hallucinogenic drugs reported vividly colorful experiences: my most striking memory of taking mescaline in the Sixties was seeing a gigantic purple claw disappearing into the sky.

Expanding the scope of consciousness and of perception was a defining feature of the movements of the Sixties in the U. S. A. The desire to escape from the limits of culturally defined restrictions on perception was one of the factors that led young people to experiment with drugs, especially marijuana and LSD. Inversely, their experience when under the influence of drugs confirmed that one could actually escape. One could perceive things radically differently. I remember that in my early experiences with marijuana, what most stood out was a striking alteration of my experience of time. When listening to music, it seemed as though the music, instead of flying by with the passage of everyday time, remained temporally suspended, as though one could hold onto a particular musical phrase and listen to it as many times as one wanted before letting the music pass on to the next phrase. Such experiences were a kind of confirmation that "normal" time consciousness was not the only way in which time could be experienced. For some of those who were open to, involved in, or committed to social and political change, such structural change seemed quite naturally to involve an accompanying change in perception and experience. In 1954, Marcuse had published *Eros and Civilization*, which argued that a technologically advanced society of material abundance made possible a civilization without repression – sexual repression in the Freudian sense – in which the world would be experienced aesthetically rather than in the interest of control and domination. This implied fundamental changes in the psychological structure of the individual as well as in her/his perception. It was as though some of the generation active in the Sixties didn't want to wait for utopia. We wanted to experience it directly. As the slogan said so powerfully – a leading slogan during the May events in France in 1968 – "Be realistic, demand the impossible."

Of course perceptual changes were not responsible for the sociopolitical, cultural, psychological, and ideological changes that constitute the Sixties. In the U.S.A., without the Civil Rights Movement, the anti-Vietnam-war movement, the women's movement, and the New Left, these perceptual and experiential changes might have remained pure fashion. On the other hand, those four movements alone could not have brought about what we think of as the Sixties with its distinctive counterculture, including new forms of consciousness, new beliefs, new practices, and new symbols. And there is no reason to think that those movements could have led to the belief in the possibility of the liberation of things that were not previously part of the horizon of emancipation found among radical social movements. The new sensibility that was part of the counterculture and the New Left extended beyond the traditional concerns of left-wing political parties, and the new use of color

is just one example of the factors that helped define the political and cultural movements as connected to a new, comprehensive rebellion against not only prevailing social forms but the prevailing culture.

Yes, the Old Left had been committed since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, over and above its advocacy of the liberation of the working class from the chains of capitalism, to the emancipation of women in some form since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, but not the liberation of animals and the liberation of nature, even its non-sentient parts. In the early 1970's Peter Singer's book *Animal Liberation* and a number of writings about the domination and liberation of nature received an eager audience. When in 1970 I started teaching at the California Institute of Arts, which had just opened, some colleagues and I decided to lead a discussion group of students who were sitting in a circle on the floor. We would ask a question and the students would answer it one by one. One of the things we asked was, "What do you feel oppressed by?" Students gave multiple different answers, but when we came to one young man he said something that sounded like a string of nonsense syllables, or perhaps a foreign language that none of us knew. When we repeated the question, he finally answered, "I feel oppressed by the English language!" So broad was the range of what people, especially young people experienced as oppression. It was often at quite a distance from the traditional forms of oppression, especially of the working class, that were the primary concerns of traditional socialist parties and of Marxian theory. Even spirituality, which from the perspective of Marxist-Leninist materialism was a hoax visited upon the masses, became married among some of its practitioners to radical action for social change, partly through the example of Vietnamese Buddhist monks and the legacy of Gandhi. In Los Angeles a colleague and I led a workshop on "meditation and social action". The idea was that if through meditation you could free yourself from attachment to ideas and desires that were part of your socialization into the prevailing order, you could come to protest more effectively and with mental clarity rather than as a way of acting out anger and resentment.

There was, though, a deep connection between these personal or cultural concerns and a new emphasis in Marxian theory, especially among theorists influenced by Hegel as well Marx. This was the focus on Marx's early writings, the so-called *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* as well as *The German Ideology*, which were only discovered and published in the 1930's and had not been known by the founders of Marxism-Leninism or social democracy and, in particular on the concept of alienation (*Entfremdung* in German), especially as presented in Fritz Pappenheim's *The Alienation of Modern Man* (1959)

and Herbert Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (1941, but reissued in 1954 and again in 1960). The way in which capitalism and its division of labor and class structure alienated a person from his/herself could be used to understand contemporary oppression – including one's own! – even if the latter didn't fit into the traditional Marxian idea about oppression as class domination and the exploitation of labor. Alienation separated the individual from his- or herself, his or her underlying nature or "species-being" (*Gattungswesen*), to use a term from the *Economic and Political Manuscripts*.

This notion of alienation was something that made palpable sense to student radicals. It seemed more directly applicable to our existence as students than did calls to unite the working class. For example, in our all-male college dormitories, we were not allowed in the dining room unless wearing a jacket and tie, and we were allowed to have young women in our room only a few times a week for a limited number of hours. Some of us experienced these regulations as irrational and oppressive, and we did what we could to get around them.<sup>3</sup> We could understand them more easily through the concept of alienation than through the concept of class struggle. Of course we sympathized with the plight of the industrial working class, but that was because it made sense to us intellectually and ethically, not experientially. Although there were a few members of my generation who came to the New Left from Communist and Marxist-Leninist versions of Marxism, many like me had no relation to those earlier movements and their current dogmatic implementations. We experienced anti-Communism, the official ideology of American society at that time, as irrelevant to us. Except for the initially small number of students who thought of ourselves as socialists, what catapulted many students and young people into a radical political stance was the Vietnam war, from a mixture of ethical repugnance and solidarity with the foreign victims of an imperialist war led by our own country.

There were a number of factors that led to the emergence of Second Wave Feminism, which was so integral to "the Movement".<sup>4</sup> Within "the Movement", a significant driver was the prevalence of sexism in the anti-war movement and the New Left. Traditional gender roles reproduced themselves within their organizations. Men talked more at meetings than women. After a meeting that

3 While the reader might see this as a typical manifestation of adolescent rebellion, that would be an adultist way to see it.

4 Much has been made of the role of the availability of birth control pills in increasing women's sense of personal and sexual autonomy. Approved by the U. S. Food and Drug Administration in 1960, the pill was used increasingly widely until it finally became available to unmarried women in all states of the U.S.A. by 1972.

included food, men expected the women to clean up and wash the dishes. This was so jarring, and seemed so unfair, that it was one of the factors that led to the formation of women's consciousness-raising groups, in which women could share their experience of sexism not only in the political movement but in other life domains, including their marital and love relationships. A key feminist concept and slogan was enunciated: "the personal is political". This experience and idea became central to "the Movement". It opened up to theory and practice domains of life that had been occluded from left-wing politics and to some extent kept secret. Men whose female partners had joined consciousness-raising groups were suddenly forced to examine their own roles, behaviors, and feelings, which led to the creation of men's consciousness-raising groups. This brought about significant changes in everyday life. For example, it was through this change and new awareness that I learned how to wash dishes. I had been brought up in a traditional family in which household work was defined as "women's work." My mother washed the dishes after meals and never asked her husband or her two sons to help her. So when I, a radical, and my girlfriend, a radical, lived together, it seemed normal to both of us that she would wash the dishes, and it never occurred to me to participate. As happens with a social distribution of tasks of this sort, I actually didn't know, or didn't feel that I knew, how to wash dishes. Even if I had wanted to help, I wouldn't have known what to do. Now all of a sudden the question arose: "Why is she washing the dishes?" And, of course, "Why am I not washing the dishes?" So she taught me how to do it, and from then on, I have washed dishes. Indeed I enjoy it. I like the feeling of immersing my arms in a sink full of warm soapy water. I like the feeling of scrubbing food waste from the dishes and making them clean. These were sensual experiences that I had been deprived of without realizing it.

These consciousness-raising groups led to both women and men raising to awareness deep aspects of themselves that they had never examined before and of which they were unaware only partly aware. Thus they inevitably had psychotherapeutic or at least psychodynamic aspects and side-effects. This was at a time when psychotherapy had extended to a wider population of individuals, and when, within the field of psychotherapy itself there started to be a greater focus on group psychotherapy, family therapy, and marital therapy. Simultaneously in both the academic and business worlds, the field of group dynamics was evolving, with a focus on how people interacted in groups and the intersection between people's group and communicative behavior on the one hand and psychodynamics on the other. In other words, connections started to emerge among political and social structures, gender relationships, patterns



of communication, and the psyche. It became easier to see and grasp patterns of manipulation and domination as they occurred in relationships and small groups. These trends led to the attempt to introduce therapeutic approaches and understandings into personal life, relationships, and groups.

It was in this context that attempts emerged to integrate the theory and practice of psychotherapy into the radical theory and practice of the Movement, and vice versa. They had several foci: looking at how patterns of domination and oppression manifested themselves into the individual psyche; bringing radical social theory and practice into the practice of psychotherapy; and democratizing psychotherapy in order to make it accessible to the masses of the population. Attempts had been made to integrate psychoanalysis and Marxism as far back as Wilhelm Reich's efforts starting in the late 1920s in Vienna. But these new attempts were not descended from Reich. "Radical therapy" emerged from an American form of personal and group psychotherapy called "transactional analysis; "Re-evaluation Counseling", or co-counseling arose independently of psychotherapy. Both placed emphasis, in different ways, on "internalized oppression", the process through which societal patterns of oppression become lodged in the psyche of the individual, such that they not only cause suffering to the individual but in certain ways make him/her an unwitting collaborator with the status quo. So the healing of the individual was inherently connected with him/her taking an active role in combating societal oppression. Re-evaluation Counseling rejected entirely the traditional relationship of therapist to client or patient. The idea was that individuals could help one another heal psychologically without resorting to professionals. They could do this by learning certain basic listening techniques that encourage one another to focus on the emotional sources of their patterns of distress and free themselves from the effect of painful emotions. Individuals met in pairs and alternated in taking the "counselor" role and the "client" role. The goal was to help one another recover their personal intelligence and power from the limitations that had been imposed by a repressive social order. This would make them happier and also more effective social change agents. In his article "Progress and Freud's Theory of Instincts"<sup>5</sup>, Marcuse put forward the concept of "psychic Thermidor", the notion that there are internal psychological forces in the individual, especially feelings of guilt, that lead him/her to undermine emancipation, experienced as transgression, by returning to and reinforcing the forces against which he/she rebelled. The modalities of radical therapy

5 Herbert Marcuse, "Progress and Freud's Theory of Instincts". In: *Five Lectures. Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Utopia*. Translations by Jeremy J. Shapiro and Shierry M. Weber. Boston, Beacon Press, 1970, p. 38.

were designed to strengthen the emancipatory forces in the individual and weaken the oppressive ones.

Because of the breadth of "everything lib", i.e. the recognition of the manifold ways, domains, and dimensions in which human and social existence occur and the manifold ways in which restriction, domination, and oppression can manifest themselves in those dimensions, the Sixties, both in the United States and globally, have left us with a rich variety of resources fruitful for social change movements and for the flourishing of a more humane existence enriched by creativity. Perhaps the most important, but also the most daunting legacy of that period is the understanding that all of the dimensions of society and culture are interlocked in such a way that it is difficult to make changes in one dimension without also changing the others. This is the basis for a different kind of Thermidor. If we think of society as a system whose dimensions are more or less adapted to each other, then, if a single dimension is transformed, the other dimensions will try to undo that transformation and re-establish the prior state of the system. For present purposes we can define these dimensions, in any society, as basic social structures, i.e. the class structure, the political structure, and the family structure; the structure of interpersonal communication; the structure of personality; the structure of belief systems; and the human and social relationship to nature. In a social system these dimensions mutually reinforce one another, such that the full existence of the system requires a particular configuration of each of them and will regenerate them as needed if there is for any reason a change in one part of the system. It's a little bit like the monster Hydra in Greek mythology, which, if you cut off its head, would grow another head to replace it. In the present perspective, all parts of the system things are causes of one another; it is not just as though one is the cause and the others are the consequences. Because, although from a traditional sociological point of view it is convenient to say that the hierarchical social structures of domination determine the rest, in fact, if you try to eliminate hierarchical domination among people who have deformed identity and distorted communication, they will probably voluntarily recreate a hierarchical social structure. For if they have a negative self image, they feel powerless, and if they cannot communicate as equals and cooperate with one another, what will come out of that will be a hierarchical social structure. So the most important lesson of the Sixties is developing strategies for change that take into consideration the complementary transformations in the different dimensions of society that will be necessary to produce more effective movements and an emancipated society.

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