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The Irrational Dimension of the Holocaust and the Technological Rationalization of the Instrumental Violence. *Marcuse and the Holocaust.*

Abstract

The present paper is an attempt of reconstructing and exposing Herbert Marcuse's perspective on the Holocaust viewed in its economical, ideological and psychological dimensions. The main perspective is organized on the supposition that the social cohesion after the First World War needed to be renewed by directing the aggressiveness and the social tensions against a common enemy. An organized manipulation of the frustrations and accumulations of social tensions on the background of the failure and poverty made possible a social unity of the dominant group, and the Jew was the perfect victim of an instrumental, sacrificial, violence.

Motto:
To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.
And this corrodes even the knowledge of why
It has become impossible to write poetry today.
(Th. Adorno, "Cultural Criticism and Society", *Prisms*)

The beginning of the XX-th century brought with it, among notable technological progresses, which permitted a reconfiguration of the ideal of welfare, a growing political and social tension, which will burst into two devastating World Wars. The constant element of this tension was the curse of the antisemitism – old heritage of an unresolved religious and social conflict -, aggravated on the background of the first World War's misery and poverty. I could mention here one of the attitudes of the epoch, namely that of A.C. Cuza from 1922, who, talking about "the science of the anti-Semitism"[1], saw in "the Jewish problem" a real one both from a religious standpoint (the Jews have a separate religion that undermines the official faith) and from an economical point of view (they live a parasitical life, without producing anything), the solution suggested for this problem being the extermination. World War II was going to turn this solution into a reality that will not stop to rise horror, feelings of helplessness, controversies.

In the following, I will try to bring into discussion several questions concerning what has been more newly called, by recent researches concerning the national-socialist politics of the hitlerist Germany from the years 1939-1945, *the politics of destruction (Vernictungspolitik)*[2]. This term represents a compromise made with the purpose of representing most adequately what has been (and still is) called Holocaust, Shoah or, holomerical, Auschwitz – the extreme solution to "the Jewish problem".

These several question here discussed do not vise the entire research field, but only that part of it that represents its beginnings – the research activity from the war years of some refugees in the U.S.A., members of the Frankfurt School -, and they are the result of some personal perplexities (confusions and/or prejudices) of not being

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[1] A.C. Cuza, "Ştiinţa antisemitismului" ("The Science of the Antisemitism"), *Apărarea Naţională*, nr. 16, 15 Nov. 1922, an I

[2] This terminology was imposed by recent researches from Germany concerning the Holocaust. Cf. Peter Longerich, *Politik der Vernichtung* (Munich: Piper, 1998) and Ulrich Herbert (ed.), *Nationalsozialistice Vernichtungspolitik 1939-1945: Neue Forschungen und Kontroversen* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1998). For the references from here see also Tim B. Muller, "Bearing Witness to the Liquidation of Western Dasein: Herbert Marcuse and the Holocaust, 1941-948" in *New German Critique*, nr. 35, January 2002, pp. 133-165

able to understand how was possible, in the name of Christianity, the breaking of the Christian commands "Thou shalt not kill!" and "Love thy neighbours!"[3], which are the real dimensions of the Holocaust and to whom is redistributed the moral blame for the most terrifying episode in the history of the XX-th. Century.

From what it is already known, the members of the Frankfurt School (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse and others) were forced to leave Germany since as early as 1934-1935. In the United States they have restarted their activity from the Institute (Institut für Sozialforschung, become Institute of Social Research). Herbert Marcuse, together with other two members of the School, Franz Neumann and Otto Kircheimer, entered sine 1941-1942 in the Research and Analysis (R&A) research team that belonged to an American agency involved in the planning of the U.S. politics towards Germany, agency that was a forerunner of the actual CIA, known then as the *Office of Strategic Service (OSS)*[4]. Inside this agency Marcuse held, as a philosopher of history, the function of "critic of ideology"[5] preoccupied with the social implications of the national-socialist ideology and with the role of anti-Semitism in Germany[6], developing his theory concerning these topics around the concept of technological rationality (rationality invested exclusively with a technological function in which transformed, in consequence of the industrialization, its critical function).

Even since first researches, Marcuse affirmed that"

National Socialism is a striking example of the ways in which a highly rationalized and mechanized economy with the utmost extreme efficiency in production, can also operate in the interest of a totalitarian oppression and continued scarcity. The Third Reich is

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[3] The source of these misunderstandings is due, in the first place, to the periphery discourses of the national-socialist politics mixed with the old traditions in the allied states, specially Romania, where the justification of the extermination of the Jews had a pronounced religious character: they killed Jesus Christ, they can be saved only through extermination, etc. Here is an excerpt from a letter dated 6-th of September 1941 belonging to Alexander Şafran, representative of the Hebrew confession, addressed to Nicodim, the Patriarch of Romania, letter in which it is asked for the nullification of the distinctive sign for Jews: "What can truly believe a right believer who, coming out from the Church in which he heard sung and praised the Psalms of David and the love of one's neighbour, sees how the star of this ascendant of the founder of Christianity is profaned and how this sign serves exactly as an instigation to the hatred against one's neighbour" ("Documents" in Al. Şafran, *Un tăciune smuls flăcărilor* (*An ember pulled out from the flames*), Bucharest, 1996, p. 302), excerpt that stresses on the same kind of perplexity. The things seem to have been yet of a completely different nature. The testimony of a woman from Cluj, deported in the war years in Poland, together with her entire family, was saying that: "Nazism excluded at once Christianity. A nation 'rasially superior', with Nazi-like ambitions, could not accept a God who was good, generous, tolerant. The Nazis needed a heathen god who admired their murders, tortures and barbarities, a god who recognized in their barbaric actions their doctrine. According to that doctrine, based on traditions of ancient heathen gods, Hitler's Nazis celebrated their rituals under the free sky. The matrimonial ceremonies took place in front of the great stone effigy of Wotan which, in the time of the Teutons, represented the altar where sacrifices were brought" (Olga Lengye, *Cuptoarele lui Hitler* (*Hiler's Ovens*), translated from Spanish by Mariana Popilean, ed. Dacia, Cluj-Napoca, 1986, p. 9). Testimonies in that sense are also the historical facts regarding the persecution of the Christian Churches in the Germany of the years 1933-1945, on which I will come back later.

[4] The agency was not only concerned with analysis and research, but had also an active division that dealt with informing the decision factors, boycotting some dangerous actions or with sabotage acts. Is seems that the research and analysis division was not as influent, even if it was as active as the latter. The documents and dossiers left from those times show the high level of an objective approach of the events from then. Cf. for that Martin Jay, *The Dialectic Imagination. A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research 1923-1950* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1973); Barry Katz, *Foreign Intelligence: R&A in the OSS. 1942-1950* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Barry Katz, *Herbert Marcuse and the Art of Liberation: An Intellectual Biography* (London, 1982): Tim B. Muller, *op. cit.*
[5] Cf. Tim B. Muller, *ibidem.*
[6] The analysis that he left were subsequently grouped in an anthology, Technology*, War and Fascism: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, edited by Douglas Keller only in 1998 (London, Routlege) and turned out to be until now the most pertinent analysis of the German national-socialism.

indeed a form of "technocracy". (…) In National Socialist Germany, the reign of terror is sustained not only by brute force which is foreign to technology but also by ingenuous manipulation of the power inherent in technology: the intensification of labor, propaganda, the training of youth and workers, the organization of the governmental, industrial and party bureaucracy – all of which constitute the daily implements of terror follows the lines of greatest technological efficiency.[7]

And this "terrorist technocracy", according to Marcuse, can not be attributed to the exceptional requirements of the "economy of war", but to the normalization of this state inside German Nazism. Subsequently he develops this theory in terms of the dialectic of the rational and the irrational, partly specific to the Frankfurt School[8], as follows: the technological rationality is used as an instrument of domination; deprived of critical function, it manifests as an irrational force which engages and masses the population, seduced by the promise of the future welfare; it rationalizes this irrational force in the view of its turning efficient the historical and social process commanded by the totalitarian national-socialist domination. Once become a "standardized subject of the brute self-preservation", the man, as a "member of the crowd", declines from the competitive purpose imposed by the social pressure of the egotistic interest's tendencies, accepting thus "the conformity of the technological

rationality" and the advantages of anonymity in which the aggressive impulses, "developed under the requirements of poverty and frustration"[9], can be easily released. The crowd becomes, through the redirecting of the individual frustrations towards a common enemy ("weaker competitors and obvious outsiders": Jews, foreigners, national minorities, etc.), an unitary whole, opposed to "community", and thus the national-socialist party, uniting masses of instrumentalized men, becomes the antithesis of the state (he is a "non-state, chaos, ruling of lawlessness and anarchy"[10]), a simple "executive organ al the imperialist economic interests"[11].

From now on, the economic basis of the totalitarian expansion tends to turn into political domination and expansion, the structure of rationality and irrationality being open for intuition in the generalization of terror, from the concentration camps to "the political use of sex" and, finally, to the bureaucratic terror. As political domination, the technological rationalization receives a new understanding, being now placed under the magnifying glass of some new elements: the growth of the irrational force of the racial politics, that brings with it the abolishment of the taboos, the instrumentalization of the sexual relations for the purpose of the system's perpetuance (what Marcuse calls "repressive desublimation"), the turning of the weak, vulnerable and defenceless (Jews, sexual and national minorities, foreigners) into objects of humiliation and slavery.

Thus takes birth a new mentality whose discourse permanently links the irrational to the rational language of organizing, administrating and technologization[12]. It is a mentality that not only separates from the occidental civilization, but also organizes, turning, in its fight against this civilization, "the metaphysical and

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[7] H. Marcuse, "Some Social Implications" in *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science*, nr. 9/1941, pp. 41-42.
[8] He was even objected this attitude tributary to the theoretical commitment towards Marxist principles. F. Neumann had already developed at R&A a theory regarding the national-socialist ideology from an economical approach tributary to Marxism, theory that become and remained inside the research branch of the R&A the analysis' vanguard. Marcuse overcomes yet this pattern. Chiefly interested in social implications, he brings into discussion more profound aspects of the Nazi phenomenon.

[9] H. Marcuse, *ibidem*, p. 53
[10] *idem, ibidem*, p. 54
[11] *idem*, "State and Individual under National Socialism", *Technology*, p. 78
[12] *idem*, "The New German Mentality", in *Technology*, p. 149

mythological elements" of German tradition - through the destruction[13] of their content – into "instruments of conquest and totalitarian control"[14]. The myth is deeply anchored in each and everyone and by this anchoring itself it becomes an every individual's need to be integrated into a community. The tactical, functional use of the myth, doubled by ideological elements, is also a part of the rationalization of the irrational, responsible for the inciting of the masses against the Christian civilization, the Jews, the "capitalist plutocracy" and every potential enemy.

From what has been said till now it is possible to see the following conclusions: 1) the German national socialist regime was one of "technocracy" which, starting from an economic restructuring of Germany on the background of the failure of the first World War, developed an expansionist system of terror; 2) one of the modalities for winning the masses' support was the orientation of the social tensions appeared on the background of frustration and poverty towards a common enemy, identifiable by the following attributes: inefficient from the productivity point of view, physically and/or mentally weak, foreigner, racially inadequate, opponent of the system, socialist, communist, vulnerable, defenceless, etc; 3) the racial politics of the national-socialism was looking to institute new traditions, a new mentality, a new man, by appealing to myth and fighting against Christianity and occidental civilization[15].

In respect to anti-Semitism and Jews extermination, Marcuse's analysis is not disengaged in the same degree. Being conscious of the unimaginable and the impossible to adequately represent[16]

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[13] There are some tensions at the level of the nazi ideology; *i.e.* the racial policy mixed on one side a german basis, nationalist (the arian myth) with the theory from the second half of the XIX/th century of the Frenchman Gobineau concerning the inequality of the races (the white race being superior), on the other side. These tensions justify in great proportion the hypothesis of the myth's instrumental function.

[14] *Ibidem*, p. 150

[15] These conclusions can also be justified historically. It is known that the first concentration camp was the one from Dachau. This one and the many to follow received opponents (communists, socialists, sindicalists), Jews, homosexuals, common criminals etc, being a labor camp. Here, the use of cheap work force brought the state a benefit of 6 marks to every 0.70 marks paid for one day.

The extermination camps appear in 1939 and were destined especially to the eliminating of the Jews from the Reich, but also of Gypsies who entered under the incidence of the same racial law promulgated in '35 at Nuremberg. The anti-Semite persecution begins on the first of April '33 when the day of the boycott is organized. On the walls of a Jewish store it is written: "Jewish store! Germans, do not buy from here". Thus was the beginning of the social polarization between the good and the bad. It lasted only two-month. A new wave of persecutions bursts only in 1938 (the pretext: the assassination of German councilman for the Embassy from Paris, Ernst von Rath, by a young Jew). In '39 Hitler decides that the Jews who didn't want to leave Germany will have to be exterminated, first by massacres executed by special squads commanded by the SS, then in the death camps. The commissioner of the Christian police (who was dealing with the persecution of Christians and who had already asphyxiated with CO_2 more than 100.000 German mental alienated) is charged in 1941 to create on Polish land the first concentration camp destined to Jews. All this time, the persecution of Catholic Church was much more active. Though, even from *Mein Kampf*, Hitler attacks both the Catholic Church and the Protestant Church, reproaching them that they didn't want to recognize the Jewish problem, he holds on the 23-rd of March 1933 an eulogic discourse about the Christian faith, "an essential element for the salvation of the German people's soul". A day later we find out the real justification for this discourse, when all the executive and legislative power is given to Hitler by the law of full power voted by Reichstag for 4 years, that is till '37, when the Reich completely nazified renews in unanimity the Führer's power. Ten days later (the 4-th of April 1933) millions of priests, monks and religious people are arrested under diverse pretexts: immorality, traffic of foreign things etc. In the 30-th of July 1934 Erich Klausener, the chief of the Catholic faction is assassinated and numerous publications with religious character are suppressed. In June 1941 the following decree is promulgated: "All the influences that might impede the Führer's influence over the people with the help of N.S.D.A.P. or that might harm this influence, must be eliminated. The people must be more and more driven away form the churches and their representatives, [...] the churches will not be allowed any more to have any influence in the directing of the people. This influence must forever and completely come to an end." (Louis Saurel, *Hitler au pouvoir*, edition Rouff, Paris, 1968, pp. 111-117].

[16] This is also Adorno's approach in "Cultural Criticism and Society", in *Prisms* (London: Nevill Spearman, 1976, pp. 111-117).

dimensions of the crimes, Marcuse could only partial justify the horror. The Jew was the victim of a system, which directed the aggressiveness and the social tensions against a common enemy, expandable in view of reestablishing social cohesion. Only it could satisfy the following conditions: 1) that of being the weakest enemy of Nazism; 2) that of being the enemy against whom it was possible to direct the instrumental violence of the masses thus coalesced; 3) that of being a competitor whose elimination would have advantaged the small bourgeoisie, which would thus have been on the system's side; 4) of being represented in all countries, anti-Semitism being thus a profitable means of attracting and mobilizing allies; 5) that of being easily to endow with the "qualities"[17] of the shrewd enemy's ubiquity:

> "The Jew – wrote Marcuse to Horkheimer in '43 – has now become an "internal" being, which lives in Gentiles as well as Jews, and which is not conquered even with the annihilation of the "real" Jews. If we look at the character traits and qualities which the Nazis designate as Jewish elements in the Gentiles, we do not find the so-called typical Jewish traits […] but traits which are regarded as definitely Christian and "human""[18]

It is not possible though to represent the real dimension of the genocide. It is an unimaginable dimension in which it is only possible to intuit the irrationality of a regime of inhumanity and terror. It can neither be understood, nor explained inside the boundaries of logic, and the "singularity" of Auschwitz doesn't allow either the possibility of its relativization. There it is Marcuse's answer to the attempt of the turning relative and justifying the Holocaust by equating the war politics:

> "People in Germany were exposed to a total perversion of all concepts and feelings, something which very many accepted only too readily. […] This is not a political but instead an intellectual problem – I am tempted to say: a problem of cognition, of truth. You, the philosopher, have confused the liquidation of occidental Dasein with its renewal? Was this liquidation not already evident […] long before 1933? […] For only outside the dimension of logic it is possible to explain, to relativize, to "comprehend" a crime by saying that others would have done the same thing. […] If however the difference between inhumanity and humanity is reduced to this erroneous calculus, then this becomes the world historical guilt of the Nazi system, which has demonstrated what, after more than 2000 years of western Dasein, men can do to their fellow men."[19]

In great measure, the Second World War may be seen as the natural prolongation

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[17] See for that the distinction made by A. C. Cuza in "The Science of anti-Semitism" between "Jews" and "Jewdanised".

[18] H. Marcuse, in a letter to Horkheimer, dated 28. July. 1943, in *Technology*, ed. cit., p. 245. A similar profile can be reconstructed using a later theory, of the escaping goat, belonging to Renne Girard. According to him, the instrumental or foundational violence is associated with the sacrificial act, with the victimizing kill. It is a foundational mechanism of the social order that puts in moving the mimetism of the human nature that coalesces the atomic individuals towards the same object identified with a common desire. By imitating behaviors, they feel members of a community, integrated in it. The third is thus always coalescing, when he is easily identifiable with an expandable entity: foreigner, handicapped, child, animal, object). Violence thus passes outside the group, this foundational event keeping ritually its cohesion. (René Girard, *La violence et le Sacré*, 1972, rom. *Violența și sacrul*, translated by Mona Antohi, Nemira, 1995; cf.

for a critical perspective on this theory Claude Rivère, "Violența nu este fondatoare. Reflecții asupra ritului sacrificial" ("The Violence is not Foundational. Reflections on the Sacrificial Rite"), in *Violența. Aspecte psihosociale* (*Violence. Psycho-Social Aspects*), Polirom, Iași, 2003, pp. 7-15)

[19] H. Marcuse, letter to Heidegger, in *Technology*, pp. 266-267.

of the First World War, of the frustrations and accumulations of social tensions on the background of the failure and poverty. It may be seen as the most unhappy, lethal expression of a will of power that has ingenuously rationalized, instrumentalized in order to achieve the kind of connection necessary for the increasing of the efficacy and productivity of the "war economy", the most primitive form of violence. As a foundational violence, the Holocaust's violence has rationalized, in its turn, justifying and maintaining the social unity of the dominant group, all "the chimerical, irrational and paranoid roots of anti-Semitism"[20], of the dark side of Christianity, of inhumanity. The moral blame becomes eventually a knowledge problem, a problem of truth, of its recognizing. In talking of Auschwitz, the omissions, denials, transfigurations, relativizations, are all of the same gravity, and the obligation of not committing any act of error is entirely ours; the loss of the critical function and the ideological instrumentalization of the reason predisposes to violence, to crimes against humanity, for "even the Reason in full self-possession and becoming violence might break the limits of the Reason"[21].

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[20] Tim B. Müller, *op. cit.*, p. 155
[21] Max Horkheimer and Th. Adorno, "Eléments de l'antisémitisme. Limites de la Raison", in *La dialectique de la raison*, translated by Elaine Kaufholtz, Gallimard, 1974, p. 217.