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« Leo Löwenthal's Text « The Demonic » as a Key to Understanding The Jewish and Religious Roots of Early Critical Theory”

I would like to share with you today a lesser known aspect about the origins of the Frankfurt school's critical theory: the fact that a certain number of its members had participated in intellectual circles influenced by a religious worldview. This fact is not a mere detail, but rather one that will have a lasting impact on critical theory, whether in more visible or surreptitious ways.

Certain philosophical texts have the capacity to embody the spirit of the movements from which they originate, just as works of art embody an entire *zeitgeist*. I will argue today that this is precisely the case with Leo Löwenthal's *The Demonic*.

One of the more complicated issues that I will try to confront will be to explain religious elements in predominantly marxist philosophies and the ways in which they represent central elements.

While the term "heterodox" Marxists remains a qualification often encountered in the most common presentations of the Frankfurt School's thinkers, this denomination reveals, in our view, an essential problem of interpretation. It should be emphasized here what the Franco-Brazilian historian of ideas Michael Löwy's book "Heterodox

Jews” reveals on the ambiguous use of this expression. Löwy shows that the use of theological conceptions that originate in large part from Judaism and the qualification of "heterodoxy", from a Marxist point of view, can be linked without any contradiction. Löwy's heterodox Jews are mainly considered as heterodox because, **although** they are Marxists or anarchists, they remain Jews. Frankfurt's heterodox Marxists are then considered so because they use biblical and theological references related to Judaism while remaining Marxists. This is how Löwy isolates in the same historical moment the return to religion of Rosenzweig, Buber and of the young Leo Löwenthal around the *Freie Jüdische Lehrhaus* in Frankfurt and the emergence of an *atheist-religious* libertarian Judaism, to use the term coined by Feuerbach for the working class of his time. Löwy attributes this term to a group formed by Lukács, Fromm, Bloch and Löwenthal having been influenced by Weber's Heidelberg circle.

The term heterodoxy, in the scientific field, has thus lost its heretical tone inherited from the middle-ages to designate an epistemological difficulty of classification, and it is also in this sense that the Frankfurt School is qualified as **heterodox**. It was basically a question of solving the problem of the Frankfurt School's inclusion in the field of Marxist theory. When we speak of heterodoxy concerning the early critical theory, we use a term that is originally charged with both a religious consistency and an epistemological difficulty. This also betrays the bivalence of the way in which Marxism can be apprehended: one can either reduce it, like

Voegelin or Löwith, to a simple secular religion, or, on the contrary, like Althusser, make of it a science of history and economy.

Critical Theory, infatuated with sociological empiricism as well as with theological references, reveals this double aspect, perceived as contradictory, of Marxism. On this point, the work of Michael Löwy seems to offer us an example of a first possible answer, the latter being one of the pioneers of the rediscovery of the messianic aspects of Marxist thinkers and at the same time the defender of a reading of Critical Theory faithful to a certain Marxism that he qualifies as rationalist.

The Frankfurt School expresses indeed a certain refusal of axiological neutrality considered as illusory without fully adhering to a deterministic sociology of knowledge of Mannheimian inspiration which would link epistemic positions and social positions (Standort) and which Horkheimer would qualify as relativism. The stake of Critical Theory is to think at the same time the philosophical ambition to aim at a transhistorical truth, not relativist and even anti-relativist, while being inscribed in a conception linked to historical materialism, a question that prominently emerges in the use of secularized theological concepts, of which one can wonder if it is not an element which betrays the admission of a permanence of certain mental or historical structures. We note an overlap with the epistemic debate of the secularization theorem on the alternative between consistency of historical transformations or permanence of religious patterns.

To illustrate how this problem may have haunted members of the Frankfurt School, I have chosen, in view of the theme of the conference, to look at one aspect of the transition of some members of the School who belonged to the *Frei Jüdische Lehrhaus*, a Jewish religious group, to historical materialism. This path obviously has many similarities with Benjamin's, even though theological references were precisely suppressed and repressed, while nonetheless nourishing many original aspects of The Frankfurt school's Critical Theory.

I will therefore focus on a text that actually belongs to a constellation of texts that form a coherent whole from Lukàcs to Benjamin and Bloch. It is Leo Löwenthal's rarely read *The Demonic* that will provide the basis of our reflection.

It is probably one of the most astonishing texts, coming from an author attached to Critical Theory, whatever the genre considered, and *a fortiori* one of the rare ones explicitly concerning religion. It is also a text with a strong biblical and esoteric tone, which summarizes the contradictions we have just enumerated concerning the dialectic between the use of the Religious and a critique of Reason within the first Critical Theory.

This text is at the same time a perfect framework for any reflection on religious phenomena, and a critical approach, a sort of "negative philosophy of religion" (an expression coined by Löwenthal himself). Written by Leo Löwenthal in 1921, in the context of the young

Löwenthal's participation in the Frankfurt group of the *Freie Jüdische Lehrhaus*, in which many exoteric occurrences of such a reflection appear, and in its most esoteric forms. Löwenthal was not yet integrated into the Institut für Sozialforschung's system, and this text must thus be read within the framework of the Jewish religious atheism which is the substance of Lukács' *Theory of the Novel*, of Bloch's and Benjamin's early writings, and probably even of Adorno's *Kierkegaard*, and one of the **premises** of Critical Theory, as explained by Michael Löwy. It should also be remembered that this text was published in a collection in **homage** to Rabbi Nobel, whose influence on Fromm and Löwenthal was essential.

However, it seems necessary to include here, since the themes it develops

- beyond their sometimes baroque presentation - announce the prevalent structures that we will find within the late Critical Theory itself and in particular in Horkheimer's theme of *Absence*. This incredibly rich and intriguing, yet rarely studied text, partly because Kracauer and Adorno were openly **hostile** to it, calling it *a sin of youth*, deserves to be re-evaluated and interpreted.

This text must be at first understood under the triple constraint of what the philosophical tradition has recognized in the concept of *demonic*, which gave it its very title: this term refers first of all to the Socratic and ancient tradition of the *Daimon*, invoked as **personifying** the reflexive mediation of the subject with itself proper to the philosophical activity such as Alcibiades described it in the portrait he dedicated to Socrates in

The Banquet. The notion of the *demonic* has found a new usage in German culture with Goethe, who sees the irrationalism of the demonic, almost synonymous with inspiration, as a creative force capable of upsetting the social order through the aesthetic mediation to which it leads. At last a revival of the term can be found in Lukács' work *Theory of the Novel*, who can be considered as a central attractor of this intellectual galaxy of religious atheism. The latter makes it an explanatory model of certain aesthetic forms proper to the genre of the epic novel.

Löwenthal often quotes Lukács, using some of his expressions in his own text. It should also be noted that the concept of the demonic also came to Lukács through the mediation of Max Weber, a reader of Heine. This idea appears in a footnote to Weber's book *The Protestant Ethic* devoted to Heine in a passage where Weber theorizes the problem of the paradoxical relations between the sphere of ethical values that Protestantism promotes and that of the economic practices it gives rise to, in which Weber sees the process of dilution of the said values, bringing it closer to the *peripeteia* of Aristotelian poetics, which designates the tragic result of an action that leads to an end that is the opposite of the intentions that animated it. Weber explains that such mechanisms that he describes correspond to Heine's conception of the demonic in history "willing the Good but doing the Bad".

Löwenthal develops here his own conception of the demonic. First of all, he cites a text from the prophet Isaiah, in which he describes the birth of

his vocation as a prophet in the pictorial form of an angelic intervention. This famous passage describes how the placing of a burning coal on his lips by a seraphim removed from Isaiah all iniquity and lies. God then calls and asks who will be his prophet, a call that Isaiah does not shirk. From this biblical imagery, Löwenthal draws an oratorical questioning of the issue of mediation and revelation.

In fact, in Löwenthal's eyes, Isaiah's situation describes the ideal-typical situation of any believer for whom the mediation of Revelation by the text both veils and reveals the Absolute. There is no grasp and understanding of God without the mediation of the Angel. Now, in the text, the Angel veils the Face of God. According to Löwenthal, what made the Revelation possible was not the coal placed on the lips, perceived as a transitional object with a magical content, but the fact that the angel had to go away to place it, thus discovering his Lord, allowing part of the divine mystery to be revealed by his absence. A very important passage brings this mode of revelation closer to a political formation that Löwenthal calls "mystical democracy", in which the "rays of utopia" would be revealed. Löwenthal engages here in the transformation of the theological model derived from Isaiah's narrative towards a properly political form with an utopian tone.

Let me emphasize that this approach is reflective and strategic, but not explanatory: it is not so much a matter of discovering a pre-existing political model in Isaiah, which demonstrates that the movement of secularization of the narrative is not strictly speaking a transposition, but rather a constructed and conscious transformation, which aims at constituting this narrative in the historical present as an active political metaphor. Löwenthal employs here the typical mechanism of the dialectical image that one can find later described by Benjamin as much as he is influenced by Bloch's concept of *Ungleichzeitigkeit*, by the confrontation of an image with a historical situation, on the one hand, and by trying, on the other hand, to reanimate within the present a past cultural production in order to act on the history of the present.

Löwenthal's approach is itself formally demonic in the Goethean sense, in that it aims at an effective historical transformation through these images endowed with a practical scope, but it is by no means irrational. Such an approach is equidistant from the relative impotence of the religious metaphor as denounced by Blumenberg and the impregnability of theological schemes as exposed by Löwith or Voegelin.

What Löwenthal calls *the demonic* begins with a reflection on the problem of mediation and representation and on the role of all those intermediary creatures between God and Man that populate religious narratives and representations, especially in the Baroque era. The categories employed by Löwenthal are those of demythologization and

disenchantment: the task of all critical reflection is thus *to make the angels absent* in order to reveal the truth of the present in a world where, however, "God is not". It is thus a question here of metaphorizing the critical activity on the model that Horkheimer will adopt, that of a semiotics of the Absence: one seizes reality only through the signs deployed by the absence of what should be. What does the metaphor of angel represent, if not precisely the link between sign and absence, the gap between being and ought-to-be that must be overcome as a sterile opposition in the acceptance of Revelation as an illusory sign ?

As a symbol of the activity of communication, the Angel of monotheism joins the ancient Daimon placed under the aegis of Hermes as a pagan idol. The absolute Absence that is the divine absence as result of the demythologization and the prophetic revelation as model of ethical requirement of truthfulness of the saying and the interpretation of the signs are found attributed by reversal to the immanent critical activity that constitute both the social criticism and the criticism of religion. It is thus indeed a negative philosophy of religion.

This negative aspect, this semiotics is only the first step towards the positive affirmation of the messianic. The mythical figures of mediation that cover the truth must be overcome as positive figures, as *eidoloi*, so that only their value of sublimation remains, which is revealed par excellence in the messianic scheme of finality, of a meaning to be given to History that is unrepresentable. The *demonic* is thus understood

pejoratively as the whole of the false mediations and false representations whose irrational character threatens History. Löwenthal's approach finds here a full affinity with the concept of *Bilderverbot* (ban of the idols). It is not a question of renouncing all mediation, since absence is a sign and every sign refers to an absence. The absence of what must be is thus mediation, but a mediation according to Reason.

For Löwenthal, History is summed up in the passage from a generalized enchantment of the world of mythology to a desertion of the world by God, whom one continued to imagine in vain as a "negative proof of his existence". The mediation by the absence cannot be finalized in a return of the Myth and by a revival of Religion.

One finds thus also the implicit criticism of dialectical theology and the Kierkegaardian paradox as a Christian pattern. It is indeed the task of a modern negative theology to pursue the enterprise of demythologization started by the prophets from Israël while preserving the idea that the abandonment of the world beckons us without recourse to God, remaining a proof of the possibility of an Other, which, expressly in Löwenthal, does not reside in God but in the messianic movement itself, conceived as a political figure.

The task that Löwenthal assigns to all critical philosophy is to pass from the mythical to the messianic as a purified, cathartic political form, freed from all mythology and all transcendent tendencies. The messianic is the

positive and rational answer to the irrationality of the *demonic* in history. Löwenthal's demonic is thus a highly Mephistophelian figure that is embodied in the form of demonology as a proliferation of idolatrous representations. Faced with Goethe, Löwenthal thus finds himself in the anti-idolatrous attitude of the Hebrew prophets.

Thus we find, right from the writing of this text, a profound tendency that will run through Critical Theory, even though Löwenthal is not yet an essential member of it and this text has been despised. This task thus passes for Löwenthal by a daring research program with sociological tendency of restoration of the social link endowed with the vigor of the community link.

This vision culminates in a relation between the historical materialism of Marx, considered under the angle of the prevalence of the economic facts, and the Weberian report of the disenchantment, which results from the irreversible separation of the world and God. Löwenthal underlines it in words very close to those used later by Benjamin and Adorno: the prevalence of the economic laws of capitalism as the new cosmos of society cannot be grasped without the parallel consideration of its effect of disenchantment.

Löwenthal's text must also be read from the perspective of the resolution of the paradoxical relations described by Weber. It is a question of

opposing the *periteia* of the demonic with other forms of paradoxical relations whose intentions and effects would coincide.

According to Löwenthal, Marx's economic and sociological analysis must in fact be inserted into the critique of Culture and rationalization at work in the Weimar era. With a certain sense of provocation, Löwenthal thus brings Marx closer to Husserl, in spite of his idealism, as two holders of a convergent analysis of the deleterious effects of rationalization. It is regrettable for the later reception of the text that Löwenthal allowed himself to be drawn into a research program which, presented in this way, could only be perceived negatively as an unthinkable alliance of circumstance with an approach that was epistemologically much too far removed from that of future critical theorists.

Moreover, Löwenthal aggravates this gap by reducing the Husserlian position to its axiological dimension, of which Scheler is the incarnation, whereas a position centered on the notion of Life with the Simmelian resonance it implies would undoubtedly have been more discussed.

Nevertheless, such a text sheds light on the nature of the relationship between theology and materialism, which runs through the whole of Critical Theory, through the notion of a paradoxical relationship. Löwenthal's text thus testifies first of all to a certain form of continuity, or at least to undeniable resurgences, between the theological Jewish themes preceding the formation of the Institute and the later themes of the first

Critical Theory. The link between the critique of religion and the critique of instrumental reason is thus perpetuated, the use of negativity in abstract forms revealing the decisive influence of the negation determined by the *Bilderverbot*. However, it is in the parallelism between theological conceptions and materialist and sociological concerns that Löwenthal sheds considerable light on the problem of what kind of a materialism with theological overtones can emerge.

To conclude, despite its complexity and marginalization, this short piece of writing is in fact the repository of a difficulty that runs through the whole of early Critical Theory: how to reconcile the power of mythological and religious representations, how to capture their capacity for social and political mobilization while defending a rationalist program of critique of society through the social sciences? One can say that the discrediting of this text, is also a reaction of resistance, in the Freudian sense of the great thinkers of the Frankfurt School, because this text exposed too clearly, both in content and in form, this insoluble contradiction.