

**„MANIFESTO OF THE CRITICAL THEORY OF SOCIETY
AND RELIGION: THE WHOLLY OTHER, LIBERATION,
HAPPINESS, AND THE RESCUE OF THE HOPELESS”**

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This three-volume work, with its imposing title, discusses a heavy load of social and religious thought exceeding 1500 pages—in addition, it has over 250 pages for Bibliography, Name- and Subject Indexes.

Several classical authors in sociology, like Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, who produced multiple works on the same subject of religion in connection with issues of society and culture, or like Talcott Parsons, who researched the interconnections of social structures, culture, as well as personality, those who tried and succeeded in the integration of the subject matter are few and far in between. The broad subject of the *Manifesto* and the length of this marathon book show the ambition of its author as well as his passion for his subject, expressed in the word ‘manifesto.’ Socially and religiously, its ultimate goal is nothing less than the elaboration of a full-bodied critical theory of society and religion.

While the greater part of the *Manifesto* concerns religion focusing on the links with social issues, doing sociology of religion is not its goal. In its subject matter and its concrete content, this monumental work constitutes an account of what 20th century humanity was like and what it continues to be. This is its main theme: suffering and human unhappiness, of which the extermination of the German and European Jews is the hard to imagine core. As the author acknowledges, religiously, this work is a theodicy. “Could God be justified” after Auschwitz? Or, as in the subtitle: ‘Can the hopeless be rescued?’ Thus, the author’s ultimate goal is finding some kind of relief or consolation for the millions who had to experience the Nazi slaughter-bench, and assuring that “the murderers will not triumph over innocent victims, at least not ultimately (*Manifesto*, pp. 407, 868, 1345). However, the author extends his scope to include other forms of social injustice and suffering caused by physical illnesses and eventually punishing outbursts of nature.

Outline

To summarize briefly, the *Manifesto* has twenty-eight consecutive chapters and ends with a long Epilogue (130 pages). The first volume introduces all the components of critical theory formation, all the themes and sub-themes, ideas,

aspects, and concepts that appear in these three volumes. Argumentation centers on various forms of social thought, the 'isms' that emerged in Western Europe and that dominated politics and a large part of economic practices. The last chapter of this volume initiates a new model for the study of religion, focusing on the possibility of foreseeing its future.

Volume II discusses the internal and external links between social thought and religious practices, revealing the powerlessness and irrelevance of religion in socialist, liberal, and fascist societies. Its last chapter elaborates on the view of critical religion, termed "religiology."

Volume III first returns to the grave problems of the author's home country, Germany during its prewar period, comprising the causes of WW II. Then, it resumes the discussion of the historical development of Judeo-Christian thought, and finishes with many reflections on the meaning or meaninglessness of death, partly in connection with conceptions of God.

The Epilogue epitomizes the author's chief goal: the elaboration of his "dialectical religiology." It examines the potentials of religion contained or suggested in many dialectical links between religious and secular thought. Religious potential could lead towards *reconciliation* concerning the most problematic antagonisms of modern civil society: *between the religious and the profane and between personal autonomy and social solidarity*. The author calls his ideal of a radically new society: "Alternative Future III." For religion itself, it would constitute an apotheosis in the form of a kind of mystical faith towards what used to be called an 'eternal God,' but which the author designates as "the X-experience," and "the longing for the wholly Other" than anything that reflects human conditions.

Methodological considerations

Dialectical reasoning is the *Manifesto's* primary mode of discourse. It engages both the subject and the objective world. Seen concretely, realization of socio-cultural change involves subjects (thought and practice) as well as social structures. In other words, when squarely focusing on the past, one sees that specific ways of thought and praxis are definitely discarded, or in dialectical language "determinately negated," not in a theoretical way but as a matter-of-fact. Concrete realities, as it were, cancel each other out. Most importantly, this true-to-life way of social evolution and historical development is the basis of critical theory.

One point of gravity of this dialectical discourse is put in place based on Enlightenment thought, which is informed by a plethora of writings of German philosophers, from I. Kant, F. Schelling and G. W. Hegel to A. Schopenhauer, K. Marx, S. Freud, and others. Still greater momentum derives from the philosophy of the early Frankfurt Institute of Social Research, founded by the non-conformist Jewish philosophers: M. Horkheimer, T. Adorno, W. Benjamin, E. Fromm, and again several others. In the 1930s, these intellectuals were concerned with discovering

the root causes of WW I, and the rise of German nationalism. After WW II, their sole task was to express “anamnestic solidarity with the innocent victims of fascist society, who had died under unspeakable pain, agony, anguish, and misery” (p. 961). It is their thought that the author seems to have made his own view of the matter—and therefore is most influential in the whole work. Still additional resources come from literary authors such as J. W. von Goethe and H. Heine, to scores of recent writers and philosophers (E. Bloch, J. Habermas) as well as works of religious authors like P. Tillich, J.B. Metz, and H. Küng.

The author’s innovative argumentation focuses on social and cultural antagonisms. According to the author’s working definition of critical theory, “... modern civil society [is] an antagonistic totality of non-equivalent processes” (p. 11). Twenty-four types of antagonisms are graphically lined out in Appendix F (pp. 420-2). The author does not intend to track the implications of all of them, which is nearly unmanageable anyway—mainstream structural-functionalist sociologists like Parsons and his followers understood societies as well defined, almost machine-like systems, amenable to categorization of actors, collectivities, roles, cultural and instrumental orientations, and so on. In contrast, the author of the *Manifesto* maintains that: “Critical theory is not systematic” (p. 332). Evidently, history cannot be understood as a system. According to the *Manifesto*, history reveals itself as an “open dialectic.” The relations among antagonisms (e.g., religious/secular; collective/individual; theory/praxis; form/content, race and generational antagonisms, etc.) are never closed (p. 99). Nothing is ever totally closed or fixed—neither political structures, nor forms of art, or religion or philosophy and science (pp. 452-5). In respect to the sociological point of view, the *Manifesto* recurrently points to the specific problems of positivism and conformism. The former reifies objective reality and the latter closes its eyes in serving the powers that be (pp. 276-9).

In addition to dialectical reasoning, a narrative literary style is another point of general methodology. It enhances considerably the readability of the books. In the same vein, the *Manifesto* owes much to accounts of personal experiences as well as descriptions and musings about recent happenings particularly in the political world. In Chapters 21 and 22 the author tells about his highly dramatic involvement in WW II as an adolescent. He barely survived (pp. 1004-7).

Perspectives within the subject matter

The overlapping of various levels of social and religious actualities is the second major characteristic of the *Manifesto*, which in part follows dialectical discourse.

First, with respect to social realities, three perspectives can be distinguished: (1) socio-philosophical thought, (2) latent socio-cultural antagonisms, and (3) types of social behavior. To recapitulate, regarding society, the author tackles

various forms of social thought, their names being: capitalism (as a system of exploitation that is the main culprit; it continuously produces a great divide between the haves and the have-nots), Nazism and Communism (brown and red fascism), nationalism, neo-fascism, neo-liberalism, neo-conservatism. It is these that reinforce and temporarily arrest particular antagonisms and therefore produce various practices of domination, exploitation, injustice, race discrimination, the infliction of violence and out-and-out evil. Obviously, all related types of obnoxious social behavior are denounced.

Second, with respect to religion (mainly Judaism and Christianity) four interrelated perspectives come into the picture: (1) the holistic theological development of Judeo-Christian thought bearing on most aspects of living, family, and work; (2) its narrower version of ethical and moral considerations that bear on interpersonal relations—with respect to (1) and (2), much is missing in modern civil society due to counterproductive conservative religious conservatism (fundamentalism) and dogmatism; (3) its dimension of spirituality, which again is specific for Judeo-Christian thought and its ‘theodicy’ based on it, by means of which people would be able to overcome all human woes; and (4) thought concerning the supernatural: the mystical view of the Epilogue that somehow transcends all mundane reality into ‘a mystical orbit’ so to speak.

Evaluation

Before getting to a general evaluation with respect to the above-mentioned characteristics, let us first look once again at the total picture this work embodies. Metaphorically speaking, the *Manifesto* resembles an old-new large city. Its main thoroughfares and crossroads are clearly marked, but there are also many walkways, small roads and back alleys that may please enchanted travelers. Yet, inspecting all streets and paths is tiresome, particularly in haste. The architect-author took his time for more than 30 years perhaps for plotting everything and planning renovations. Other architects with different abilities may want to test their own capacities, which needs not be a way of criticism, but rather putting in place distinct approaches to solve similar problems.

If the above summary of perspectives is accurate, this wide-ranging work is well integrated. Formally, integration also is evident from the arrangement of the chapters. While constantly discussing the links between thought and practices, each volume ends with a chapter on religion.

The important points of evaluation concern the ‘How’ and the ‘What’ of the *Manifesto*: methodology and content.

Firstly, with its style of discourse, the *Manifesto* is steeped in Enlightenment thought and dialectics à la Hegel, which stands tall in European philosophy as a manner of thinking. At the same time, it is amenable to the discussion of the mundane forms of thought the author discusses. For one thing, it reveals ex-

traordinary erudition, and for another, in combination with episodic narration, it serves good readability.

This methodology should be above any criticism, particularly for someone like the present reviewer, who's knowledge in this matter is limited, but who is more at home in the subject religious studies.

Secondly, the 'What' of the *Manifesto* concerns the Judeo-Christian thought as the religious subject matter seen in combination with societal arrangements. The author is an expert in this matter too. He started his higher education with theology to which, as plentiful references show, he added considerable expertise in Biblical scholarship, which he further extended with the meta-theological views of the afore-mentioned Jewish academics, including their views of the historical Jesus and his Messianic inspiration. Confronted by the immense misfortune of their people, those scholars contemplated the reality behind and above all human misfortune. They thought that solace might be found through "remembrance" and the "longing for the wholly Other," (the expressions used by Theodor W. Adorno). "[T]he wholly Other appears after God has disappeared in the guilt, the meaninglessness, and death in the disintegrating hellish world of antagonistic bourgeois society" (p. 103).

Evidently, the ethical/moral implications (that match the views of the Gospels and evoke a higher sense of humanity) as well as the vision of non-theological expressions of spirituality are above any criticism for believers, having the same faith. However, the *Manifesto's* spirituality is of a particular kind. Corresponding conceptions do not exist in other religions such as Early Buddhism and Shintoism. As inner-worldly religions, Buddhism and Shintoism are also ethically distinct. The problem of evil that emerged in Biblical religion and became a specific focus in Enlightenment philosophy in connection with overcoming it in theodicy-thought, has no equivalent in these religions. The notion of "the wholly Other" too is strange to them.

Thirdly, with respect to the discussion of the societal state of affairs in the *Manifesto*, the author's originality gets into high gear in his discussion of the role religion plays in social life. The author explains the possibility of reconciliation between the latent antagonisms, following renewed religious ideas that might be realized in the future.

Imagining future developments cannot be criticized. It does not concern 'analysis' that eventually could be incomplete or biased. "Models of utopian realism" and "models of the good society" serve "a politics of self-actualization" (Giddens 1990: 154-8).¹ Thus, what the author calls "alternative Future III," is of central significance to his work. This future state of affairs is supposed to expand globally. "[T]he critical theory of society...anticipate(s) ... and prepare(s)...the dawn of a post-European, post-bourgeois, post-capitalistic, post-liberal, post-modern,

1 Giddens Anthony. 1990. *The Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press.

post-theistic paradigm" (p. 1028). Concretely, societies would be characterized by "the reconciliation of personal sovereignty and universal solidarity and a friendly, peacefully living together of all people" (pp. 314-24; 354-5). It creates "the City of Being, of non-damaged, creative and happy life... living labor would be liberated from the domination of dead capital... all murderous prejudices would be dissolved...and the *Lex Talionis* would be superseded by the Golden Rule... (p. 1031)."

One can say that the author's vision of religion is the crown on his work. In future societies, "...theistic, traditional, authoritarian and dogmatic religion may very well be concretely superseded into a post-theistic, critical, a-dogmatic and non-authoritarian religion..." (p. 1107). This vision implies considerable criticism of Catholicism that the author, wisely, does not mention. In discussing religion within society, focusing on the interlinking of social and religious thought, the author abstains from theological engagement. To him, social and religious thought are, like the two wheels of a wagon, equally vital. Since societies evolve dialectically, in a longitudinal fashion, both religion and society stand to be re-invented in the process, but it would seem that societal evolution is the more important quantity.

Fourthly, as the message on the back book cover has it, "the *Manifesto* develops further the Critical Theory of Religion intrinsic in the Critical Theory of Society of the Frankfurt School into a new paradigm of the Psychology, Sociology, Philosophy and Theology of Religion." Accordingly, one could look at what the *Manifesto* contributes to these fields of study, or, on the other hand, where it might not stand up to the criteria of validity in these social sciences. We can still add European history and the study of its culture, as well as the sub-specializations of futures studies and value studies.

With respect to value studies, one can note that this approach could introduce still another antagonism not listed or discussed in the *Manifesto*: rationality vs. feelings. Since the goal of the *Manifesto* is the elaboration of a scientific theory, in which types of thought are central, rationality must have the upper hand. Yet, for humans, both reason and emotion are evenly important. How happiness and sadness as well as good and evil are antagonistic, would be much clearer, when seeing those states of mind in terms of feelings. Also, incorporating reflection on values—all of which involve feeling—would benefit the subject matter of religion better than does rationality. Unfortunately, value studies still wait for this kind of elaboration.

Back to the *Manifesto* as it stands, its vast scope exceeds the capacity of a single reviewer. Many reviews of this great work are possible, eventually also criticism of particular issues. I myself have attempted an additional review, in part, about the 'Why' of the *Manifesto*, titled "The Author and his Work." It focuses on the author's many experiences, referred to or recounted in his *opus*, particularly those of WW II, including the plight of his former fellow citizens at the time. It also

attempts an interpretation of the author's cultural identity as a native German scholar, who immigrated to the USA.

Humanism

Finally, how to evaluate the *Manifesto* as a work of social science? What represents its appeal and its strength? Social science is best when its goal reaches beyond regular study, when it benefits human relations and social life. The author of the *Manifesto* avowed that, from the beginning, the goal of his work as well as his life was promoting humanism, which is “a system of thought and feeling [that] center[s] upon man, his growth, happiness, integrity, dignity, and freedom: upon man as an end in himself...not as a means toward anything” (pp. 866-7; 1045). Human knowledge is worthy of the name only when it shines “from the redemption on the antagonistic world” (p.1574). Yet, many kinds of knowledge are significant to the author. He is passionately philosophical, passionately religious, and passionately humane. Ultimately, the nobility of humanism is his high ground. What is unbecoming religiously or humanly should have no place in future societies.

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