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1968/Social Theory: Biography meets History

I spent the first half of 1968 as an undergraduate at the New School for Social Research in New York City preparing to write a senior thesis on Hegel's influence on the young Marx. The New School became known as the 'Refugee University' during World War Two, as many intellectuals fleeing fascist Europe found a temporary home there. The tradition of inviting (West) German intellectuals continued and I attended Hannah Arendt's lectures on The Human Condition and a seminar led by a leading German expert on Marx. I spent the latter months of 1968 at Leicester University, being tutored on Hegel's Philosophy of Right and attending Anthony Giddens class on Classical Social Theory. Besides Giddens own texts, we read George Lichtheim's The Concept of Ideology (1967), which along with Marx's own The German Ideology give us a foundational concept, especially when coupled with 'alienation' and 'false consciousness'. Giddens was also the faculty advisor to the Student Socialist Club, where I defended Arendt's critique of Marx, to unsympathetic ears that rejected her distinction between 'work' and 'labor' and the relegation of Marx's thought to the latter. Aside from Giddens himself, the interest there was more in political practice than theory and a few of the graduating students refused their diplomas to join the working class. 1968 was both exhilarating and depressing, with the highs being student strikes and mass demonstrations and the lows being violence and political assassinations. Social theory ran through it all, at least for those I associated with. Most of all, social theory meant critical theory, the Frankfurt School and the Budapest School around Lukacs. Marcuse's Reason and Revolution Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory (1941), One Dimensional Man (1964) and Negations Essays in Critical Theory (1968) were the works we carried around like the Bible at a religious college. My New School tutor Trent Schroyer, chided us for not being sufficiently fluent in German to read these works in the original. Lukacs' History and Class Consciousness (1923) was unavailable in English until 1971 and we had to rely on the sections appearing in journals and Schroyer's interpretations. That was social theory! I never read Weber or Durkhiem or any other French theory, let alone Americans like Parsons, until graduate school much later.