

HERBERT MARCUSE'S “IDENTITY”

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What was my father's “identity?” He was clearly a philosopher by training (although his first degree was in German literature), and by occupation (although he was also employed as a political analyst during the war, and lectured on a wide variety of topics in his later life). He was politically active all his life, although he would have disclaimed the description “activist.” That was something he admired and supported in others; he saw his own role as supportive and engaged, but hardly as leading a charge.

But the question I want to examine is that aspect of identity so often taken to be its main substance: ethnicity, or nationality. Was my father German, or American (we nationalistically use the term as meaning from the US), or Jewish, or what? Our family came to this country [the US] when my father was 35, and I 5 years old. We were certainly Jewish; we would never have been in the US otherwise. My father was bar mitzvah'd, and to my knowledge his parents were relatively observant. But he himself was strictly secular. I remember at home hearing Jewish jokes, a smattering of Yiddish, Jewish friends, a Jewish intellectual circle – no doubt we were Jewish; but I remember no religious observance, no going to *schul* or services, even on the High Holy Days. At least before we arrived in the US, I suspect he never felt any contradiction between being German and being Jewish; his father refused to believe that, as a good German, he could possibly be the subject of discrimination or persecution, and refused to consider leaving Berlin until the very last moment before the war broke out, and then getting out only at substantial risk and cost. We of course were luckier (or read the political signs more accurately – political understanding does after all sometimes have some direct personal use!).

My father's identity, one would think, was well formed by then; mine perhaps not. I had to learn English here and was put in a private school for one year to help the process; but thereafter I went straight through public school in New York City and then in California. I never had any doubt, as a grown-up, that I was American, even though, as late as college, friends

made fun of one or two remaining quirks of foreign accent. I first went back to Germany on a visit in 1976, when I was 47, and had to struggle to regain my German.

But my father spoke fluent, indeed both eloquent and, when he wanted, very colloquial, German all his life. When he lectured there, everyone recognized him as German-born. They did in the US, too; even after he had been here thirty years, his German accent was clearly recognizable. I sometimes kidded him that he kept it on purpose to go with his philosopher's persona. But I don't think that was quite fair. He really was "German" in many ways. His cultural tradition was German; he had not only studied German literature, but had the complete Goethe prominently on his bookshelf, and could quote German poetry from all ages. When I was studying German literature at college, he would write me regular commentaries on what I was supposed to be reading – good stuff, too, which I wish I could still find, but I did not know then how good it was or how famous he would become!

When we first came to this country, our social circle was entirely German. My father met regularly with other friends from the Institute for Social Research who had come over at the same time. They played skat (a cross between bridge and pinochle, and a standard German pastime) with each other, went for Sunday drives in the country together, vacationed together. When we moved to California just before the beginning of the war, his circle was overwhelmingly of German émigrés: Brecht, Reichenbach, Günther Stern (later Anders), and of course the Institute crowd. He still needed and got help with putting *Reason and Revolution*¹ into English, and would occasionally pace up and down in his study looking for a word in Roget's Thesaurus, or even asking me or one of my friends.

But I think that identity changed when we moved to Washington, DC, and he began working for the government in the war against fascism. The Neumanns were still our closest friends, but conversations were as likely to be in English as in German, and his circle, both through the office, through the psychoanalysts he began to know in connection with his research on Freud, and socially, were American. My mother, who worked as a statistician at the Department of Agriculture, was in an entirely American environment. And so was I, at school, at summer jobs, and then at college in Boston. Ten more years, and there was no question my father was American – although also clearly of German extraction.

I do not think the change was entirely political, although politics certainly played a major role. We had relatives in England who had barely escaped Germany before the war began, in addition to my grandparents, including an uncle who swore never to set foot in Germany again. My father of course went back many times, but he always refused to buy (or have his wife buy, since he did not drive) a Volkswagen, because of its association with Nazism. He was also always very much in with the German Left opposition, had many German friends all through his life, visited often, and

never had misgivings about doing so. I think he felt no more or less at home there – and no more or less alien – than he did in the US.

More than the political, I think my father found the more informal and open atmosphere of the US more congenial than the more rigid and hierarchical relationships traditionally found in Germany. It was for a time a matter of amusement in the Research and Analysis section of the Office of Strategic Services, where my father and some others of his set, specifically Franz Neumann, also worked during the war, that they all addressed their American colleagues by their first names, but each other by their last. Even that issue is not exclusively cultural, but also partly political. I was surprised, during a visit to Frankfurt much later, that when my father was invited to a small house party at his publishers, he addressed everyone, and they addressed him, with the informal "Du," not the formal "Sie." Well, he explained, they were all on the Left, and addressed each other as comrades.

Other former colleagues from the Institute did of course return to Germany after the war, most notably Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. Their politics only separated from my father's in the 1960s; during and immediately after the war, they remained close, both personally and politically. The correspondence in the first volume of the material we are publishing from the archives² is revealing of that relationship. But both Horkheimer and Adorno were stiff – what one might today call uptight – in their personal posture, Horkheimer to the point of pomposity. I remember as a little boy always being told to be on my best behavior when we went to visit Horkheimer and his wife. My father simply liked the American manner more than the German. While he enjoyed giving lectures, which he always carefully prepared, he enjoyed even more the question and answer sessions that followed that were certainly more part of the American educational style than the traditional German. He simply liked living here better than living there. Perhaps there was a subtle change of identity involved, but it was a conscious one, an adaptation to a different environment that was found more acceptable than the old.

At the same time, my father had a much clearer view of political and social relations in the US than his former colleagues who returned to Germany after the war. In the famous exchange of letters about the war in Vietnam, Adorno makes the comment that, after all, "in America, everything is possible." My father knew better; *One-Dimensional Man* is, after all, one of the most trenchant analyses of the American way of life yet written. Unlike Adorno, who looked down on political activists (according to his analogy, they were like radio technicians, while serious political thinkers should be media analysts), my father took immediate political issues seriously, and was actively involved in campaigns around both foreign policy issues and issues of civil rights and civil liberties.³ Not that he did not have his doubts about conventional parliamentary politics; in conversations with Rudi Dutschke, who he regarded as highly as anyone in the European Left,

he continually warned about the difficulties a Green party would have in playing the conventional political game. But he was not interested in “*Flaschenpost*,” putting a message for the future in a bottle and casting it on the seas, hoping some day someone somewhere would find and heed it; he wanted to influence things today, because they so badly needed changing and possibilities were similarly so great. The situation is not so different today, and I am happy that what he said and wrote then may still be of some help to us in the here and now.

Notes

- 1 Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1941. This was the first full-length study he published in the US.
- 2 Herbert Marcuse, *Technology, War and Fascism: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, vol. 1, ed. Douglas Kellner, London and New York: Routledge, 1998.
- 3 Of course, he was not a conventional civil libertarian, *vide* “Repressive tolerance” [in *Critique of Pure Tolerance*, Boston: Beacon, 1965 – eds]. It was one of the few points on which I felt that he misunderstood the political situation in the US. I was then practicing law, and saw an important role for civil liberties in the US. He had a different perspective on the issue.