

# Toward a Critique of Consumer Society

Gunzelin Schmid Noerr

Los Angeles, July 14, 1942. The geopolitical constellation of this period is one of the century's darkest. National Socialist Germany blanketed the world first with its politics, then its war, and stands at the zenith of its military accomplishments. From the perspective of the philosophy of history, its opponents – Western monopoly capitalism and Eastern state socialism – also appear only to represent different paths to a single historically generic irrevocable goal: the relentless steering of the individual through collectives and cartels, the abolition of the subject in an “administered world.” This, in any case, is the background assumption – as suggested by their political experience – of several scattered German émigrés of the Frankfurt School who, “at the end of the flight, on the ocean, where the East again dawns in the furthest West,”<sup>1</sup> found themselves in the company of like-minded intellectuals to discuss Nietzsche's views on needs and culture. Why “needs,” why “culture,” why Nietzsche?

“Needs” describe general feelings of physical or psychic conditions of deficiency and thus provide men and women with the means and ends of their activities. Since the Enlightenment they have been a theme in social philosophy, specifically under the sign of their expansion in the wake of the Industrial Revolution. In the process of the emergence of bourgeois society, the dynamically growing “system of needs” (Hegel) burst open the feudal fetters. While the unleashing of needs was valued as a symbol of progress by liberal Enlightenment thinkers, in romantic-conservative sociology it was viewed as a cause and manifestation of cultural destruction. Both thematizations, the affirmative and the critical, joined in a peculiar combination in the tradition of German idealism and the Marxist critique of political economy. In the economic web of relationships in which the satisfaction of individual needs is intertwined at the same time with the satisfaction of the needs of others, Hegel perceived subjective egoism transformed into objective morality. In Marx, the recourse to needs even played the “secret leading role,”<sup>2</sup> insofar as the politico-economic categories of the value of labor-power, surplus-value, and use-value all were defined with the help of the concept of needs. Marx also assumed “that every revolution and its results . . . were determined by needs.”<sup>3</sup>

So the discussants, who see themselves in this intellectual tradition, could not reject out of hand the assumption that total socialization [*Vergesellschaftung*] does not proceed smoothly and unperturbed, indeed that in the human nature of needs there exists a type of emancipatory potential for resistance. How, though,

when these needs themselves increasingly become the object and point of departure for total socialization? This consummates itself (if in very different fashion) in all three aforementioned social formations – capitalism of the American type, National Socialism, and Stalinist state-socialism – through the apparently far-reaching transcendence of traditional crisis-scenarios. In broad measure the satisfaction of basic material needs seems secure. The different ideological organizers, the propaganda apparatuses, the authoritarian collective, the production of the culture industry – all aim, above and beyond this, at a distorted channeling and compensatory satisfaction of needs and at a mass-paranoiac persecution of minorities. Leaders and followers alike project their own repressed needs onto others in order to persecute those needs in others. Thus the “revolt of nature”<sup>4</sup> leads to its (self-) repression.

The need-steering and -satisfying capacities of advanced capitalism, and of the later so-called consumer society in particular, call into question the traditional socio-philosophical bases of political legitimacy. Social order up to this point had counted as legitimate if it secured the greatest happiness for the greatest number or if it was grounded in the consensus of those concerned. Now, however, there occurs a historically-altered framing of the problem – for example, by Aldous Huxley in his dystopia *Brave New World* (1932), in which a social constellation is described that thoroughly fulfills the legitimacy requirements of the utilitarians and the contractarians, while at the same time obviously remaining morally illegitimate. With the alleviation of material need, in Huxley’s view, culture also disappears, and with it the idea of a transcendence of the extant.<sup>5</sup>

The keyword “culture” refers to the second systematic focal point around which the discussion revolved. At stake in the exchange under consideration is the relationship between “material” and “cultural” needs. In this connection, it seems appropriate to point to the particular connotations of the then-standard usage of the German term “*Kultur*,” which, in contrast to Anglo-Saxon or French usage, has a pronounced normative sense. Common among the educated classes was the moral devaluation of an outwardly material and inferior “*Zivilisation*” as opposed to an inward and spiritual, higher “*Kultur*.” In theoretical contexts following this interpretation, “*Zivilisation*” meant the totality of accomplishments and behavior patterns that stamp “society,” while “*Kultur*” drew, in a narrower sense, primarily from the aesthetic, religious, and moral spheres. This opposition can be traced back in Germany to the eighteenth century. Originally it had a social sense: only through the achievements and the value of culture could a political but unconscious bourgeoisie legitimate itself, insofar as it opposed this to courtly civilization.<sup>6</sup> In the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and particularly at the time of the First World War, this idealist self-consciousness of a politically aspiring class was also recast as a nationalistic ideology of superiority.<sup>7</sup>

It was against just this schema – elaborated, for example, by Oswald Spengler in *The Decline of the West* (1918–1922) in the particularly crass form of a partly biological, partly moralizing opposition of these two realms – that materialist

cultural critics like Freud, who remarked that he “scorns the separation of culture and civilization,” oriented themselves.<sup>8</sup> In the context of a critical theory of society, the critique of a mistaken opposition of material and spiritual needs, of civilization and culture, is decisive. At stake is the sound grounding of the critique of the culture industry. As demonstrated by the germane reflections of Horkheimer and Adorno, the Frankfurt School authors wanted to remove, through a social-theoretical framing of the concept of need, the bases both of cultural conservatism and of vulgar materialism, which play off the ideal against the material and vice versa.<sup>9</sup> The culture industry – so goes the objection to cultural critics of the Huxleyan type – is therefore not fateful because it destroys traditional cultural values, but rather because it cements relations of domination and thus hinders the undiminished satisfaction of material needs themselves.

Why the recourse to Nietzsche in this context? Nietzsche also observed the common “cultural values” with the deepest mistrust, yet without surrendering the idea of human cultivation and morality itself. He had already sketched (in a manner comparable to Huxley) a social situation in which, if still very distant from the broad fulfillment of basic material needs, collective contentment prevails and the longing for higher cultural development is almost extinguished. Simultaneously, the reflection of the socially constitutive function of needs reaches its apex: “Facts do not exist, only interpretations. . . . Our needs interpret the world; our drives and their ‘for and against.’ ”<sup>10</sup> Nietzsche is the ancestor and, until today, the crown witness of aesthetic modernism, who revolted against the spiritual leveling of mass society in the hope of establishing new, life-enhancing values. Ludwig Marcuse’s paper concisely summarizes Nietzsche’s position on culture: “What did the culture against which Nietzsche wrote look like?” It is that of the “most contemptible,” of the “last man.”<sup>11</sup> “What did the culture for which Nietzsche wrote look like?” In place of the three classical-idealist *leitmotifs* of the beautiful, the true, and the good, Nietzsche establishes three new cultural images: 1) aesthetic appearance as justification of being through artistic genius; 2) the “free spirit,” who no longer believes in the illusion of truth, as well as the “blond beast” that synthesizes the fragmented world according to its own interests; and 3) the “superman” who redefines the meaning and value of being according to his own standards.

The “longing above and beyond man,”<sup>12</sup> in which all of Nietzsche’s utopian ideas flow together, now becomes extremely attractive for a critical theory of society. One must also consider, however, that these ideas could be instrumentalized for the National Socialist worldview. Thus Nietzsche’s own theoretical blind spot regarding society is subject to criticism, and his utopian cultural images must first and foremost be related to the contemporary social situation, or even be “deciphered.” Nietzsche is neither, as most interpretations suggest, a representative of German imperialism nor of a romantic irrationalism; nor is he a metaphysician and philosopher of being, as Jaspers and Heidegger suggest. To “decipher” Nietzsche means:

- 1) to understand him better than he understood himself – “Nietzsche understood everything about the present except for its immanent context”,<sup>13</sup>
- 2) to organize his views in a comprehensive socio-historical frame of interpretation – “as an objection to civilization, the master morality misrepresented the oppressed”,<sup>14</sup>
- 3) to understand his unfortunate effective history from within his work – “the fate that befell his own works. . . , has . . . its necessity”,<sup>15</sup> and
- 4) to relate his thought to the contemporary situations and questions of its interpreters.<sup>16</sup>

In the spirit of the fourth rubric, the question presents itself to Ludwig Marcuse: “How do we stand in regard to this longing” of Nietzsche’s above and beyond the human? In its place, he rephrases it thusly: “What connects me to Nietzsche?” The form of pronoun chosen here is not coincidental, because in the ensuing discussion completely different interpretations arise (that surely cannot be equated entirely with the Nietzsche interpretations of the respective discussants),<sup>17</sup> concerning whether and how an economically enlightened critical theory of society can fasten onto Nietzsche. Formulated in terms of personalities, it means the question: Nietzsche *or* Marx?, or, Nietzsche *and* Marx? These interpretations can be divided into two main types: 1) that Nietzsche’s concern is irreconcilable with a critical theory of society, and 2) that the former not only is reconcilable with the latter, but allots it first and foremost the requisite scope and precision. Anders, Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, and Pollock argue for the former position, Ludwig Marcuse and Adorno for the latter. Further differentiations, however, are necessary:

- 1a) *Nietzsche as ideologue of the extant* (Anders, H. Marcuse, Pollock): In this traditional Marxist interpretation, Nietzsche should be denied every emancipatory potential. Building on Marx – “if Marx is right, Nietzsche is wrong” – the satisfaction of material needs as prerequisite must be observed so that ideal needs can actually articulate themselves in a non-ideological fashion. The critique of social control must remain related to the non-satisfaction of material needs.
- 1b) *Nietzsche as indicator of the dialectical unity of material and ideal needs* (Horkheimer): First of all, the perspectives of Marx and Nietzsche are to be relativized historically, sociologically, and psychologically. This means that both are to be thought through again as soon as material needs are satisfied in broad measure. Horkheimer holds fast, with Marx, to the practical primacy of the satisfaction of material needs, but at the same time gives it the Nietzschean dimension of a new orientation of society as a whole. Its own formulations of ideal needs are contradictory in themselves. So long as they can be grasped concretely enough, they show themselves as the form in which the material needs reveal themselves or are satisfied.<sup>18</sup>

- 2a) *Nietzsche as true diagnostician of his age and revolutionary* (L. Marcuse): Nietzsche's diagnosis of nihilism, the dissolution of all certainties of an objective sense of being, is the central problematic of contemporary society. Material needs therefore are only specifications of the ideal; hunger is "a subdivision of longing." This way of putting the matter is itself objectively identical to Marx's call for a classless society.
- 2b) *Nietzsche as radicalizer of Marxist ideology-critique and ideology critic of political praxis* (Adorno): The necessary deciphering of Nietzsche leads not only to an unabridged Marx (thus position 1b), but over and beyond this to the critique of anonymous structures of domination (domination without a "ruling class"). A point of criticism, inaugurated by Nietzsche and central to an ideology-critique of socialism, is that of social praxis.

In the Frankfurt School's Nietzsche reception, all four interpretive viewpoints play a role, each in its thematic and temporal contexts. While Nietzsche's ideological formulations are stressed in the pre-fascist era, after the mid-thirties it seems more urgent to rescue him from fascist appropriation and work out his critical motifs. Those interpretations that have abandoned the alternatives "pro" or "contra" Nietzsche in favor of "deciphering" him have proved especially fruitful. Characteristic of this is a further discussion of Nietzsche that Horkheimer and Adorno had in 1950 with Hans-Georg Gadamer. Here the discussants agree on the formula of Nietzsche as *parodic* or *ironic* author who *plays* with language. This means – applied in extreme to his scandalous statements – that in Nietzsche nothing is claimed as immediately valid; instead, everything is related much more to a criticized antithesis or counterpart. As Horkheimer put it:

Nietzsche saw that Christianity would not heal the world. So he became an Antichrist and abruptly wore his anti-Christianity on his sleeve. He saw that the bourgeoisie could not solve all social questions. So he familiarized himself with feudalism, and wore his aristocratism on his sleeve. He also saw how far we have come in the scientific understanding of truth, but recognized that not all harms are thereby redressed. And thus he asked himself if the truth was worth anything at all.<sup>19</sup>

This depth-hermeneutic look at Nietzsche, according to which surface meaning appears as distorted on the basis of virtually opposite motifs, prevented – despite its admiration of Nietzsche as ideology critic, psychologist, critic of perception and language – critical theory from ever slipping into the stream of apocalyptic Nietzscheanism that justified suffering in anticipation of an eschatological end-state. Instead, Nietzsche functioned for critical theory as a hedge against the weakening force of enlightenment, in light of the sublime hierarchies of power of the "Spirit" and "Kultur." Proceeding on the basis of the universalist truth-claims of positive science and morality, critical theory discovered in Nietzsche impulses of naked self-preservation and power – "instrumental reason."

Insofar as it still recognized despair in the face of the extant precisely in Nietzsche's *amor fati*, in the proclamation of new values, and in the idea of the "eternal recurrence of the same," it sharpened its critique of the anonymous might of the extant. For critical theory, the extant was neither a pejorative designation of "capitalism" nor an empty formula for the prevailing social whole, but instead related itself to the inherently factual, as predominating [*ausgreifenden*] and opaque, as dubious validity- and legitimacy-claim. From it proceeds the pressure to adapt that weighs on the individual and makes forgetting a functional requirement of social life. This social critique, imbibed from a properly-understood Nietzsche, can rely upon neither material nor intellectual needs exclusively, and yet has as its criterion the elimination of socially determined suffering. The Los Angeles discussions of 1942 mark the decisive reflexive step toward the critique of reason and society of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the concomitant researches into the structure of needs in developed consumer society.

This today in no way consists of guaranteeing a comprehensive and unabridged satisfaction of "material needs." The political idea that this is the driving or compensatory task of the democratic state finds itself in global retreat. Poverty and socially engendered suffering are far from elimination. Constantly expanding consumption functions as an incentive for the frictionless assimilation to the economic expectations of society. Whoever does not fulfill these expectations is pushed out of the way, and the threat of suffering the same fate constantly hovers above the conformists. Nobody can feel totally safe – so goes the daily report from politics and mass media. Individuals have internalized the fact that they only stand a chance for a successful life and the satisfaction of their needs if these conform to the requirements of the ruling economic powers. Claims to happiness which do not come up in the service of the enhancement of economic and technological gain are pushed aside into the structure of private life, of home and family, which often enough cannot withstand the pressure of these expectations. The pretexts for using hate and force as an outlet to reduce the pressure under which a deformed structure of needs places isolated individuals become ever flimsier. Writes the author Wilhelm Genazino on "everyday small pogroms":

In my estimation, [the use of] force will expand considerably in the coming years. There will be murder because someone felt himself poorly entertained by television; there will be murder because someone suddenly notices that he cannot express himself; there will be murder because someone suddenly has no more beer; there will be murder because someone no longer understands his biography. There will be murder for new reasons, and these new murders will be more difficult to comprehend than the old ones.<sup>20</sup>

The critique of the bourgeois concept of culture rapidly disappears in face of its object. Ideal needs, whose character as "appearance" Marx as well as Nietzsche could still expose, have been degraded to the status of exotic hobbies. The global

victory parade of “instrumental reason” is unbroken. The diagnosis of critical theory that draws its dark side, the distortion of needs, into the light is one of urgent contemporary relevance.

(Translated by Gerd Appelhans)

#### NOTES

1. Max Horkheimer, “Einige Betrachtungen zum Curfew” (1942), *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt a.M., 1987), 5:351.
2. Agnes Heller, *Theorie der Bedürfnisse bei Marx* (Hamburg, 1980), 27.
3. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Die deutsche Ideologie* (1845–46), *Werke* (Berlin, 1983), 3:362.
4. Horkheimer, “Zur Kritik der instrumentellen Vernunft” (1947), *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt a.M., 1991), 6:105ff.
5. The discussants concerned themselves with this problematic of Huxley’s cultural criticism in a later round of talks on July 28, 1942. – It is worth noting that apart from this, the philosophical relevance of *Brave New World* first was noted almost half a century later; cf. Hilary Putnam, *The Many Faces of Realism* (LaSalle, IL, 1987).
6. Testifying to this, for example, is Immanuel Kant, “Idee zu einer allgemeinen Geschichte in weltbürgerlicher Absicht” (1784), *Werke* (Akademieausgabe) (Berlin, 1968), 7:26.
7. Admittedly, the concept of civilization as used in England and France originally was in no way as innocent and neutral as it later represented itself scientifically. Norbert Elias, in reference to France, pointed out that the conglomerate of technology and manners, science and religious ideas, social institutions and private customs, designated by “civilization” expressed above all the self-consciousness of the West, distinguishing its way of life as “civilized” over and against the “primitive” as “uncivilized.” (*Über den Prozess der Zivilisation* (Bern, München, 1969), 1:43ff.) In Anglo-Saxon cultural anthropology also “civilization” often designated an urban way of life with written communication, while a society without this at its disposal was described as “culture”: “Chinese civilization but Eskimo culture.” Alfred Louis Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, *Culture. A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions* (Cambridge, MA, 1952), 20.
8. Sigmund Freud, *Die Zukunft einer Illusion* (1927), *Studienausgabe* (Frankfurt a.M., 1982), 9:40.
9. See, Horkheimer, “Zum Problem der Bedürfnisse” (1942), *Gesammelte Schriften*, 12:252 ff.; Adorno, “Thesen über Bedürfnis” (1942), *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt a.M., 1980), 8:392 ff.
10. Nietzsche, “Aus dem Nachlass der Achtziger Jahre,” *Werke*, ed. Karl Schlechta (München, 1969), 3:903.
11. Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1883–85), *Werke*, 2:283.
12. *Ibid.*, 284.
13. Horkheimer, “Bemerkungen zur philosophischen Anthropologie” (1935), *Gesammelte Schriften*, 3:265. This hermeneutic principle is justified by Nietzsche himself when he says of Richard Wagner: “Geniuses of his type seldom have the right to understand themselves.” *Jenseits von Gut und Böse* (1886), *Werke*, 3:724.
14. Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (1944), in Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 5:124.
15. Horkheimer, “Zum Problem der Wahrheit” (1935), *Gesammelte Schriften*, 3:323.
16. What in philosophical hermeneutics corresponds to the principle of “application” [*Anwendung*]; cf. Gadamer *Wahrheit und Methode* (Tübingen, 1965 (1960)), 290 ff.
17. Thus, for example, a completely different image of Nietzsche than the one represented by him here can be found in Herbert Marcuse, *Triebstruktur und Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt a.M., 1968 (1955)), 119ff.

18. This view becomes clearer in Horkheimer, "Zum Problem der Bedürfnisse."

19. Theodor W. Adorno, Hans-Georg Gadamer, and Max Horkheimer, "Über Nietzsche und uns. Zum 50. Todestag des Philosophen" (1950), in Horkheimer, *Gesammelte Schriften* (Frankfurt a.M., 1989), 13:115.

20. Wilhelm Genazino, "Fühlen Sie sich alarmiert!," *Frankfurter Rundschau* 193 (21 Aug. 1999), ZB 3