Cyborgs, drag queens, and goddesses: Emancipatory-regressive paths in feminist theory

Marsha A. Hewitt

Herbert Marcuse once observed that religion contains a "basic ambivalence," that is, an ambivalence that persists as a result of the unresolved tension between "the image of domination and the image of liberation" at the heart of religious consciousness. For Marcuse, religion denies the hope for peace, justice and happiness that it once aroused in human beings by teaching them "to appreciate the facts in a world of alienation." The link between religion and the desire for a just world identified by Marcuse derives from Marx's definition of religion as "the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world . . . the spirit of spiritless conditions." For Marx, religion detaches the legitimate desire for justice on earth from concrete historical struggles, with the result that human beings are directed to find their happiness in illusions, rather than in the actual conditions of their life experience. That is why for Marx the critique of religion is central to "the premise of all criticism": with the abolition of religion and its compensating illusions, the "task of history" as the establishment of "the truth of this world" becomes possible.

The idea that the abolition of religion is requisite to the struggle for social transformation is predicated on the recognition that, in the words of Max Horkheimer, "[d]issatisfaction with earthly destiny is the strongest motive for acceptance of a transcendental being." Following Marx, both Horkheimer

---

1 This paper grew out of a paper read at a session on "Contemporary Feminist Theory and the Study of Religion" at the North American Association for the Study of Religion annual meeting, San Francisco, November 20, 1992.
3 Marx, 1975, 175.
4 Ibid., 176.
and Marcuse argue that religion is the spiritualization or alienation of the human longing for a better, more humane existence, and that religious belief in the possibility of “a perfect justice” beyond history conceals the impotence of human beings to effectively change their conditions. It is not only, then, that religion offers an escape from painful reality; it is also that religion mystifies this escape by providing the further illusion that engaged, historical struggle against oppression and domination is irrelevant to a more genuine, or ‘higher’ form of salvation.

The dialectic of domination and liberation identified by Marx, Marcuse, and Horkheimer as central to religion may be seen to correspond, beyond the field of religion, to the dialectic of theory and ideology that surfaces in contemporary critical discourses oriented to emancipation. The tension between theory and ideology that resides within critical thought is the focus of Horkheimer’s and Theodor Adorno’s inquiry into the “self-destruction of the Enlightenment.” In their diagnosis of the pathology of modernity, Horkheimer and Adorno ask why humankind “is sinking into a new kind of barbarism,” the result of the failure of the Enlightenment. In their attempt to answer this question, Horkheimer and Adorno explore the internal dialectic of reason itself, where the tension between substantive and instrumental rationality becomes gradually resolved in the triumph of reason as purposive and technical mastery over nature. With the ascendancy of instrumental reason, the possibility of reason directed toward justice, freedom, and happiness disappears, and with it, the related possibility of a humane society that values people as ends rather than means.

Instrumental reason coincides with the logic of capitalism, such that “thought inevitably becomes a commodity, and language the means of promoting that commodity.” Ideology emerges in the commodification of thought, submerging the critical power of theory to interrogate its own concepts. Since the tension between ideology and critique is always at work in theory, a consciously critical theory must continuously examine its own internal tendencies toward reification in order to prevent that which is human from becoming absorbed within abstract concepts that are severed from material existence. Emancipatory theories contain that ambivalence between images of domination and liberation described by Marcuse, and this tension threatens at every turn closure of the critical process. In the case of Christianity, Marcuse locates this kind of closure as taking place in the “transubstantiation of the Messiah” and “his gospel,” along with their removal from “this world.”

---

5 Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972, xi-xii.  
6 Marcuse, 1962, 64.