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Marcien Towa, father of Cameroonian Critical Theory: a comparison with Max Horkheimer

In this paper, I examine the extent to which Marcien Towa (1931-2014) can be considered the Father of Cameroonian Critical Theory. In this regard, I compare what can be called his social philosophy with the project of a critical theory of society, as outlined by Max Horkheimer (1895-1973). I specifically consider Marcien Towa's idea of philosophy, which I confront with Horkheimer's project from the perspectives offered by their sociopolitical premises, conceptual references, and progressive goals. On each of these aspects, I discover sufficient correspondences that allow me to argue that Towa and Horkheimer, who barely knew each other, formulated a somewhat similar claim, namely to provide a critical theory of society, whose aim is not only to understand society but more importantly to change it.

Keywords: Critical Theory, praxis, Hegel, Marx, Nkrumah

Introductory Remarks

It is uncommon to speak of a "Cameroonian Critical Theory". Thus, the preliminary requirement of this paper is to explain this surprising combination of words. This task involves the definition of "Critical Theory". As such, and before any form of debate, we are faced with two major questions: first, what is Critical Theory? And second, to what extent are we entitled to speak of a Cameroonian Critical Theory, if any?

I will address the first of these questions in the first section of the paper, while the remainder of the article will hopefully provide an answer to the second by confronting the project of a critical theory of society as outlined by Max Horkheimer in the 1930s and 1940s with Marcien Towa's conception of philosophy.

I refer to Horkheimer as one of the dominant figures of the first generation – that is, the earliest version – of Critical Theory in the first of the meanings that will be specified below and in his capacity as Director of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, which was and still is home to Critical Theory.

It should be noted that my comparison between Marcien Towa and Max Horkheimer avoids the two pitfalls identified by Jean Godefroy Bidima. First, it has nothing of the “*lazy comparatism*” he denounces, and by which “Critical Theory established as a paradigm and thermometer would suggest to other cultures what to do” (Bidima 2021: 77) [My translation]. Second, it avoids treating Marcien Towa's critical philosophy as a “mere refraction of [German] Critical Theory” in a way that would transform Critical Theory into a “new dogma” (Bidima 2021: 77). Those two pitfalls are avoided at once when we observe that both authors ignored each other, although they were almost contemporaries.¹ As such, Towa and Horkheimer developed, almost simultaneously, two distinct approaches to philosophy, which are nonetheless similar in many respects. The comparison, which, on the one hand, informs and, on the other hand, follows from this observation, is therefore *educated* rather than “*lazy*”.²

1 To my knowledge, the only direct reference to a member of the first generation of the Frankfurt School in Marcien Towa's writings is to Herbert Marcuse in his state doctorate (the dissertation was defended in 1977 in Paris but was not published until 2011). Marcien Towa mentions, in a sympathetic tone, Marcuse's conception of utopia (Towa 2011: 238) as expressed in the concept of a “transcendent project” (see Marcuse 2002: 224–225). There are, however, later references to the concept of techno-science, which Towa says was “introduced into [Cameroonian] philosophical circles by... Ondoua Pius”, drawing on the work of “the Frankfurt philosophical school” (Towa 2001: 8) [My translation]. While Ondoua employs this term in a pessimistic way, Towa's usage is more optimistic.

2 A word of caution: I must admit at the outset that in order to keep this essay within the required length, I was forced to simplify – sometimes to the extreme – Horkheimer's views, reducing them to what seems to me their most decisive content. As such, the philosophical benefit of my demonstration may seem to have been, to some extent, calculated at his expense. In my defence – and this does not in any way replace the apology I owe and implore from the meticulous reader – this is a conscious and totally assumed choice, motivated by the fact that I wish to focus on Marcien Towa, whose work is less well known than Horkheimer's. This is not to say that there have not been any significant studies of Marcien Towa's philosophy (most recent works include Mabe 2015; Mbede 2020; Mintoumè 2021; Ayissi 2021). However, aside from a few texts (Towa 1991; Serequeberhan 2012), Towa's oeuvre is hardly accessible to the English reader (thus, unless otherwise stated, I am responsible for all the translated excerpts of Marcien Towa's texts in this paper), and more importantly, there has not yet been any noticeable discussion of his relationship to Critical Theory.

Defining Critical Theory

Two concepts

Historically, Critical Theory is the methodological perspective that served as the theoretical programme of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, Germany, whose members were later known and identified as the Frankfurt School. This institute, generously founded by Felix Weil and whose first director was Carl Grünberg, emerged, under the leadership of Max Horkheimer (from 1930), as a leading school of thought in Germany, the aim of which was the critique of capitalist society.

Conceptually, however, Critical Theory is more than a 20th-century German philosophical movement. According to Horkheimer, who coined the term in 1937 (see Horkheimer 2002a), the critical intent of Critical Theory can be linked to the social function of philosophy, which is the opposition of this discipline to reality. Horkheimer argues that this particular intent of philosophy goes as far back as Socrates (Horkheimer 2002b: 257, 260).

Martin Jay does not go that far in reconstructing the history of Critical Theory. He finds more direct influences not in Socrates but in Left Hegelians in the 1840s, notably Karl Marx. As such, the basic claim, “the very heart,” as Jay puts it, of Critical Theory is “an aversion to closed philosophical systems” (Jay 1973: 41). The Left Hegelians thus give historical Critical Theory its negative intent – among other orientations that will be discussed below – especially in relation to Hegel’s philosophy.

I will render this twofold character of the term “Critical Theory” by a graphic convention the reader might have spotted by now. When Critical Theory refers to the specific theoretical programme of the Frankfurt School as outlined by Horkheimer, I will write “Critical Theory”.³ However, when the term is used in a broad sense to encompass diverse and various intellectual attempts to understand reality from a determined point of view, I will write “critical theory”.⁴ In this second sense, I wholeheartedly agree with Albrecht Wellmer’s remark that it has become evident that “critical theory is not a privilege of the so-called Frankfurt School”, on the condition that “we take the term broadly enough” (Wellmer 2014: 724).

3 In this sense, “Critical Theory” is a “proper noun” (Durand-Gasselín 2023: 3).

4 This way of doing roughly aligns with James Bohman’s distinction between a narrow and a broad meaning of critical theory. See Bohman (2021).

The Critical Theory of Marcién Towa: preliminary considerations

In line with the above distinction, I will not use the term Critical Theory too loosely when referring to Marcién Towa, for I will make the case that Towa's conception of philosophy as a social practice is similar in some decisive respects to Max Horkheimer's theoretical programme. To support this claim, therefore, it is crucial to consider Critical Theory in its narrowest possible sense rather than its broadest meaning,⁵ hoping that this meaning is directly related to the actual practice of the Frankfurt School. From there, I hope to be able to establish that Cameroonian and German Critical Theories are *counterparts*, a conclusion that should be reinforced by the fact that they appeared relatively simultaneously, as I mentioned earlier. This claim needs to be clarified before going any further.

To be sure, there is a significant historical gap between Horkheimer (1895–1973) and Towa (1931–2014), and the latter had just been born when the former became Director of the *Institut für Sozialforschung*. However, although Horkheimer's programmatic writings were completed in the 1930s and 1940s, they were not, for the most part, widely accessible, especially to the non-German-speaking audience. They began to circulate in the 1960s and were translated into French and English (Towa's two working languages) from the 1970s onwards, at the time when Towa was developing his own philosophy. The *simultaneity* of which I speak is therefore not that of the *production* of the respective works but that of their *reception*, particularly by the French-speaking public. From this perspective, Towa's relation to Critical Theory is significantly different, in Cameroon, from that, for example, of Jean Godefroy Bidima, because the critical theory at work in the latter is directly informed by (historical German) Critical Theory (see Bidima 1993, 1998, 2021). I claim that it is precisely this relative ignorance of Horkheimer's theoretical programme that testifies to and reinforces the genuine character of the critical theory of the society that Marcién Towa developed almost *simultaneously*.

My attempt is thus significantly different from that of Maimire Mennasemay (2012, 2021), who claims the existence of an Ethiopian Critical Theory that developed prior to the historical movement that has been identified with that name. The major worry of this attempt is that it uses an enlarged concept of critical theory, which I wish to avoid because defined as he does, critical theory refers to any critical understanding of any situation or event, which is exactly what

5 To be sure, there are many interests in considering critical theory in the broadest sense. For example, it allows to apply the concept to various problems, situations, and subjects, ranging from political science (Macdonald 2017) and particular political issues such as Brexit (see, for example, Jahn 2021) to education (Rasmussen 2015), feminism (Schlöpmann and Daniel 1990; Allen 2015), race (Crenshaw et al. 1995; Wischmann 2018), and Black Studies (Rabaka 2002, 2009).

philosophy is in its essence, regardless of particular and specific traditions. The similarities I find between Towa's and Horkheimer's projects are less superficial and concern the intimate characteristics of Critical Theory with regard to its goals, influences, and pattern of thought, according to its canonical and historical German description.

I therefore speak of a Critical Theory in Marcién Towa in the specific sense that the historical, critical, and theoretical impulses of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, as presented by Horkheimer, are visible, to a large extent, in Marcién Towa's social philosophy, and I claim that Marcién Towa's social philosophy theoretically and practically participates in right and not incidentally to the concept, that is to say to the proper name that is Critical Theory. I will now substantiate this claim.

A common enemy

Critical Theory begins with the observation of social catastrophe and struggles to articulate a critical response to it (Slater 1977: 15–25; Morrow 1983: 35; Wiggershaus 1994: 47 ff; Leguerrier 2020; Durand-Gasselín 2023: 9–57). This response takes the form – and this is true for any kind of critical theory as noted by Shane O'Neill – of struggles against injustices, precisely the “the unnecessary suffering in the world, and the structures of injustice associated with [it]” (O'Neill 2010: 127). Horkheimer and Towa share this starting point, even though they focus, because of their respective situations, on different aspects of the same catastrophe, namely the decline of modern society.

Horkheimer against the bourgeois society

With respect to his social philosophy, Horkheimer's main opponent is the bourgeois society, which has created a generalised situation of unfreedom in the modern world because of the development of capitalism. In fact, Horkheimer notes that the human being who was supposed to be the central beneficiary of civilization (that is, the development of the bourgeoisie and its social ideals, among which the most important is arguably the emancipation of the individual) is now a mere instrument in the hands of capitalism. As such, Horkheimer's diagnosis points to the “lack of freedom” (Horkheimer 1978: 51) that contradicts the very social promises of the bourgeoisie, namely freedom and equality. Horkheimer's philosophical enterprise can be described as the attempt to make sense of this contradiction, which means, in his own words, theorising it, but in a particular way, distinct from how theory has been traditionally understood. Hence, the central distinction between traditional and critical theory.

A schematic way to present the distinction between traditional and critical theory is to say that the former surrenders to the facts, whereas the other treats them as an antagonistic totality to be transformed. Thus, in a traditional sense and in relation to the facts, “a theory always remains a hypothesis” (Horkheimer 2002a: 188), whereas a critical approach to theory presents it as a *praxis* intimately connected with and committed to the transformation of the observed reality. Ultimately, considering that theory must correspond to the facts is not only a naïve attitude but, more importantly, a conservative one, for it allows traditional theory – especially under its form of scientific knowledge – to be integrated into society under the illusion that such a theory is only concerned with a “purely mathematical system of symbols” (Horkheimer 2002a: 190). But the kind of calculation this mathematical system of symbols implies – such as the anticipation of some results according to specific causes – is “a logical tool of history as it is of science” (Horkheimer 2002a: 194). The conservative content of traditional theory rests, on the one hand, on the perfect understanding of this situation and, on the other hand, on the integration of scientific knowledge into the system of objective reality that is the society.

Contrary to traditional theory, critical theory emphasises the “real social function of science” (Horkheimer 2002a: 197) and more largely of knowledge and understands this function as the commitment to identify “what theory means in human life” (Horkheimer 2002a: 197). And this question does not belong to the realm of science but to philosophy,⁶ whose “real social function... lies in its criticism of what is prevalent” (Horkheimer 2002b: 264). According to Horkheimer, criticism is not a “superficial fault-finding with individual ideas or conditions... Nor does it mean that the philosopher complains about this or that isolated condition and suggests remedies” (Horkheimer 2002b: 264). In fact, the philosophical critique is *totalising*; its chief aim “is to prevent mankind from losing itself in those ideas and activities which the existing organization of society instills into its members” (Horkheimer 2002b: 265).

In short, and in relation to the generality of unfreedom in the advanced bourgeois industrial society, the task of social philosophy is to examine – which here means providing a critical explanation of – how such a situation has been made possible. Horkheimer undertook this task in several writings, including the seminal *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002) and *Eclipse of Reason* (Horkheimer 2004).

6 Horkheimer defines philosophy, and especially social philosophy, as the realm constituted by a set of specific problems, “namely, the question of the connection between the economic life of society, the psychological development of individuals, and the changes in the realm of culture in the narrower sense (to which belong not only the so-called intellectual elements, such as science, art, and religion but also law, customs, fashion, public opinion, sports, leisure activities, lifestyle, etc.)” (Horkheimer 1993: 11).

However, Critical Theory is not satisfied with the mere description of this situation. Its ultimate goal is to overcome these limitations and to free the human being, not as an abstract concept but as a concrete individual. As such, the central thrust of Critical Theory is the need for social change. In Horkheimer's words, "a critical theory of society [is] a theory dominated at every turn by a concern for reasonable conditions of life" (Horkheimer 2002a: 198-199). From there, it follows, as noted by Shane O'Neill (2010: 127, original emphasis), that "A distinctive feature of any *critical* theory of society is that it aims not only to explain or to interpret key aspects of the social world but also to engage in a project of emancipation."

Marcién Towa shares these fundamental programmatic views and convictions with Horkheimer.

Towa against colonialism, that is, the bourgeois society

Contrary to popular belief, Marcién Towa's philosophy does not start from nor revolve around the critique of ethnophilosophy,⁷ and it is therefore a mistake to reduce it to that particular subject, as Charles Romain Mbele (2006) rightly pointed out. Moreover, discussing the philosophical relevance and validity of the so-called "African philosophy" is not a main concern for him. Instead, Marcién Towa started his philosophical journey in the early 1960s with the critique and criticism of the colonial enterprise. Until the very end, his philosophy remained preoccupied with emancipation from the colonial evil spell, through which it directly proves to be social, according to Horkheimer's typology.

Marcién Towa defines colonialism as the rational consequence of European mastery of science and technology, which took the form of a system of domination.⁸ After the domination of nature (the successful disenchantment of the world), European modernity extended its domination to human beings. Towa shares this central insight and critique of European modernity with Horkheimer and Adorno, who notably explored this issue in detail in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

7 See, for this line of thought, how Abiola Irele presents Marcién Towa in his introduction to Hountondji's book, *African Philosophy: Myth and Reality* (Irele 1996: 25 ff). Kwame Anthony Appiah (1992: 95) restricts his discussion of Marcién Towa to the question of ethnophilosophy as if Towa's philosophy could be reduced to this issue. In addition to limiting Marcién Towa to the critique of ethnophilosophy and Negritude – a perspective that misses the larger picture I shall present below – DA Masolo, for his part, equates Towa's views with those of Hountondji, claiming that they come together in an "extremism", according to which the only relevant understanding of philosophy is the Western sense (Masolo 1994: 177).

8 As early as 1963, he wrote that colonialism is "a regime of exploitation based on violence" (Towa 1963: 28).

Although it may not seem evident at first glance, Marcién Towa's criticism of European colonialism is, in fact, a criticism of the European bourgeoisie. According to him, it is indeed the European bourgeoisie that "spread ruin and desolation in Asia and Africa" (Towa 1971: 37) and "organized by this very fact the suffocation of the thought and the reason of the majority of humanity" (Towa 2012: 82. Translation slightly modified). And against colonialism, that is, the objectified "cupidity" (Towa 1963: 26) of the European bourgeoisie, Towa adopts an attitude similar to that of Horkheimer by pointing to the "node of inconsistencies and contradictions" (Towa 1963: 25) that forms the core of its ideology with respect to its emancipatory claims and promises directed at the colonised. It is precisely on this point that Towa's critique of colonialism is most ferocious.

Towa contends that Western civilisation – which he often uses as a synonym for European bourgeoisie – defined itself by the cult and the promotion of reason and claimed, toward the societies deemed inferior and primitive, a civilising mission through which they would be able to participate in humanity, reason, and history (some of the key concepts of the enlightened European bourgeoisie). However, a closer look at the colonising initiative reveals that it can be understood as an outright enterprise of domination and violence, hence Towa's observation that the colonised, who were said to be the central beneficiary of the civilising mission (that is, the expansion of the rationality of the European bourgeoisie to other parts of the world), is instead a mere instrument in the hands of the colonisers because the real aim of colonisation was to "reduce the natives to means of production" (Towa 1963: 29). Towa, who writes that "Industrial Europe, armed with its science and technique, bent under its yoke all the non-industrial peoples of the world" (Towa 1968a: 31), acknowledges by that the intimate connection between the colonialist project and the development of European advanced industrial society, to the extent that a parallel can be drawn between his diagnosis and that of Horkheimer (and Adorno), and more broadly of Critical Theory. Indeed, if authoritarianism (notable examples of which are Fascism and Nazism in Critical Theory) is the name that takes on domination at home (that is, in Europe), colonialism is the name that takes on the same domination when it is exported toward non-European peoples. In any case, however, the same domination project is at work, and the same criticisms apply. A quick remark can be made concerning the essence of this domination.

Like Horkheimer, Towa conceives that the domination of the bourgeoisie was made possible and is sustained by science and technology. Again, this may not seem evident because Marcién Towa does not directly criticise science and technology in his writings, a point Jean Godefroy Bidima has critically noted. However, there is not much evidence to Bidima's claim that Towa's understanding of science is "neutral *and* non-contradictory" (Bidima 1995: 99. My emphasis). In fact, because Towa criticises colonialism and identifies science and technology as

the reasons for “the defeat inflicted on colonial peoples by the West” (Towa 1971: 40), it is easy to see from these premises that Towa’s approach to science and technology is twofold and thus contradictory. In the Western context, science and technology have promoted domination over nature and non-European peoples, while in the African context (which is also that of all dominated peoples in this respect), Towa considers that they can and should promote emancipation. With regard to neutrality, however, Bidima is correct: Towa has written that “Science is characterised by a narrow specialisation, the concern for ethical and ideological neutrality” (Towa 2012: 23). But it should be recalled that Towa distinguishes in his mind between scientific research as such – which he considers neutral – and the use of scientific results – which he considers ideological, that is, instrumental, as the latter are tied to identified ends, regardless of their ethical intent or content. Towa’s position can thus be summarised as follows: scientific research *in general* is neutral, while *in concreto*, its results are mere instruments that can serve either domination or emancipation. To be sure, this view of scientific research is largely traditional and somewhat naïve (see Kuhn 1996), if not properly mythical in many respects (see Punke 1970; Rose and Rose 1971; Fausto-Sterling 1981).⁹

Remarks

Although they ignored each other, Horkheimer’s and Towa’s diagnoses of the decadence of European modernity stem from a similar observation. When Horkheimer and Adorno write that “Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always claimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity” (Horkheimer and Adorno 2002: 1), Towa contends that “Europe proclaims itself the champion of humanism while massacring human beings wherever it meets them” (Towa 1963: 28). In each case, European modernity is defined by an inner contradiction that opposes in its concept the progressive social claims of the European bourgeoisie (liberation in Horkheimer and Adorno and civilisation in Towa), and the evil reality of terror and domination. This basic assertion of the failure of European modernity is the fundamental affirmation of a critical theory of society, and it leads, within the critical enterprise, to the fundamental conviction that this situation must be addressed socially.

9 In his defence, Towa shares this myth of the neutrality of science with a large number of scientists and philosophers of his time. Moreover, and to be brief, if Horkheimer does not share Towa’s optimism regarding “The Promotion of Science” (Horkheimer 1978: 125), it is because of reasons that have to do with the nature of the scientific practice in advanced industrial societies as opposed to societies in which, so to speak, everything remains to be done. Pessimism, that is, “The verbal denigration of science and modern technology” (Towa 2012: 80), is therefore a luxury that Towa cannot afford with regard to his goal, namely the emancipation of Africa.

As shown above, Horkheimer and Towa share the same conviction that philosophy is primarily social, and what Marcién Towa calls the “practical dimension of philosophy” (Towa 2012: 23) is almost literally what Horkheimer conceptualises as the “social function of philosophy” (Horkheimer 2002b). Additionally, like Horkheimer, Towa is not content with merely describing European domination. More importantly, what is at stake for him is to respond adequately – which means critically – to domination in order to overcome it, that is, to foster social change. According to Towa, the ultimate goal of such an enterprise, which he defines as “the very meaning of [his] project” (Towa 1971: 68) is “a free Africa in a liberated world” (Towa 1971: 68). Now, in Towa’s view, neither Africa nor the world is free, which reaffirms the central idea of the generality of unfreedom, to which he responds by the centrality of freedom in his theory. This centrality of freedom in Marcién Towa’s social philosophy undoubtedly reminds the perceptive reader of this statement by Horkheimer: “The concept of necessity in the critical theory is itself a critical concept; it presupposes freedom, even if a not yet existent freedom” (Horkheimer 2002a: 230).¹⁰

Conceptual references: relation to Hegel and Marx(ism)

Martin Jay has explained why it is tempting but unavoidably inaccurate to characterise Critical Theory as “no more than a Hegelianized Marxism” (Jay 1973: 46). It is nevertheless true that Hegel and Marx are the two dominant conceptual references of Horkheimer and by extension, the early version of Critical Theory.¹¹ Marcién Towa’s social philosophy shares these two central references with Horkheimer’s, with the notable difference that Towa is not directly inspired by Karl Marx but by Kwame Nkrumah. On several points, notably methodological, Towa’s “Hegelianized Black Marxism” resembles Horkheimer’s “Hegelianized Marxism.”¹²

10 What would this “liberated world” look like, where human beings would experience the realm of freedom? There is no precise response to this question in either Towa or in Horkheimer, a restriction that some scholars have attributed to the association of early Critical Theory with Judaism (see Jay 1973: 56; Schmidt 1986: 181; Bidima 1993: 50; Tarr 2011: 28 ff). This explanation, of course, does not apply to Marcién Towa.

11 As its Director, Horkheimer made it clear that Hegel and Marx played a central role in defining the tasks of the Institute for Social Research (see Horkheimer 1993: 12).

12 Throughout his book, John Abromeit provides an excellent discussion of Horkheimer’s “critical appropriation of Hegel” (Abromeit 2011: 82). So does Finlayson (2017) with the first generation of Critical Theory (Horkheimer, Adorno, and Marcuse). For a broader presentation of the influence of Hegel’s thought on the Frankfurt School, from Friedrich Pollock to Axel Honneth, see Paul Giladi’s edited volume (Giladi 2021).

Dialectics and praxis in Horkheimer

The relationship of Critical Theory with Hegel comes from history as critical theory conceptually emerged, at least according to Martin Jay, as a characteristic of the philosophical commitments of Left Hegelians in the 1840s. Horkheimer himself acknowledges this filiation when he writes that he will call “critical” the “human activity which has society itself for its object” (Horkheimer 2002a: 206). He adds, in the corresponding footnote to this statement, that the term “critical” is used in reference to Karl Marx and the dialectical theory of society.

Horkheimer inherits from Hegel the idea that society must be understood globally, and the corresponding reflection must address the collective destiny of human beings instead of their isolated, particular actions. Therefore, philosophy, socially speaking, is the general reflection on the general, which is precisely how Hegel defines philosophy in its “Notion”, namely as “the Thought which, as the universal content, is complete Being” (Hegel 1995: 94). This sense of totality,¹³ which conveys the idea that individual and individuals’ actions ultimately bear the stamp of a higher end, the latter, situated beyond the immediate realm of necessity, being ultimately what ought to be called the reality, is testament to Hegel’s influence on Horkheimer. Hegel thus provided Horkheimer (and Critical Theory) with the grounds for this very broad understanding of philosophy that enabled him to connect the task of the Institute for Social Research with the “old question concerning the connection of particular existence and universal Reason, of reality and Idea, of life and Spirit” (Horkheimer 1993: 12).

Horkheimer retains another decisive lesson from Hegel, namely that ideas (ideals) must be separated from means in such a way that reality does not impose its law on the subject. On the contrary, the subject is the one in charge of reorganising reality according to higher ends, in an “objective” way, following the distinction Horkheimer draws between objective reason – which can be said to be *Vernunft* – and subjective reason – which can be said to be *Verstand*, that is, the lower understanding – in *Eclipse of reason* (Horkheimer 2004: 3 ff). This opposition – or “tension” (Horkheimer 2002b: 260) – between reason (philosophy) and necessity (reality), the universal and the particular, the social and the individual, is how Horkheimer understands Hegel’s dialectics without subscribing to the solution he proposes. Indeed, Horkheimer claims that Hegel’s

13 On this concept of totality in Horkheimer, see Jay (1984).

reconciliation, by which his dialectics come to a settlement, is a conservative strategy that initially served the social status quo.¹⁴

This conviction, which embodies Horkheimer's main disagreement with Hegel, relates to the practical or historical implications of Hegel's theory of spirit.¹⁵ Unlike Hegel, who believed and taught that history was the manifestation of reason and that the primary task of philosophy was thus to witness the latter at work in the different moments of the human journey, Horkheimer contends that "Philosophy is the methodical and steadfast attempt to bring reason into the world" (Horkheimer 2002b: 268). In other words, Horkheimer recuses the *descriptiveness* of Hegel's theory that unfolds from the "idealist belief that any theory is independent of men and even has a growth of its own" (Horkheimer 2002a: 240). In short, Horkheimer expresses his "incredulity toward meta-narratives", to borrow from Jean-François Lyotard (1984: xxiv), and this particular position testifies to his Marxism, that is, his commitment to the last of Marx's *Theses on Feuerbach* (see Rush 2004: 10).¹⁶ This last thesis underlines the importance of what is known as "praxis", namely practice informed by theory and oriented toward social change.¹⁷

Again, Marcién Towa shares these two influences with Horkheimer.

14 Only incidentally does it become, through "Reason," a "poor ally of reaction" (Horkheimer 2002b: 271). Indeed, Horkheimer recalls that Frederick William III, King of Prussia, called Hegel to Berlin to "inoculate the students with the proper loyalty and to immunize them against political opposition. Hegel did his best in that direction, and declared the Prussian state to be the embodiment of the divine Idea on earth" (Horkheimer 2002b: 270–271). Thus, in its essence, Hegel's dialectics – especially with regard to Hegel's concept of the state and the *reconciliation* it implies – is more traditional than critical.

15 This is also true for Hegel's concept of reason. While the latter challenges the vulgar approach to reality – see Hegel's rejection of "common opinion" in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (Hegel 2018: 40) – at work, for example, in "traditional theory" (see Horkheimer 2002a: 188 ff), it is in turn challenged by Karl Marx, who rejects its ahistorical aspect, by which it ultimately seems to impose itself on reality from a place outside of time.

16 Karl Marx wrote: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in different ways; the point is to *change* it" (Marx 1994: 118). For an overview of the engagement of the first generation of critical theorists with Marx and Marxism that emphasises Horkheimer, see Hoff (2018).

17 On the usefulness of the category of praxis in Horkheimer's critique of Hegel, see Rush (2004: 16 ff); on the usefulness of the same concept in Horkheimer's rejection of any historicism, see Abromeit (2011: 322 ff); on the interplay and tension between reason and praxis in the first generation of the Frankfurt School, see Jay (1973: 64–65); for an evaluation of the treatment of the theory-praxis nexus in the same generation with regard to historical materialism, see Slater (1977); and on how "praxis" has survived in contemporary Critical Theory, see Honneth (2004).

Dialectics and praxis in Towa

In many respects, Towa's philosophy is informed by Hegel. In his first major book, for example, Hegel is by far the most discussed author by Towa. And Towa's reference to Hegel concerns how the Master of Berlin provides a unified vision of reason through the concept of philosophy, by which he can reconstruct the history of humanity. Many commentators have noted this point, although they have mostly been blind or inattentive either to the disagreement between Towa and Hegel (Nsame Mbongo 2013: 22; Niamkey-Koffi 2018: 21 ff),¹⁸ or to the reasons for this disagreement (see, among others, Fouda and Sindjoun-Pokam 1980; Bidima 1993: 30–31; Dieng 2006: 48).

Towa indeed accepts Hegel's definition of philosophy as Thought in general (Towa 1971: 15). But although this definition primarily serves to dismiss ethnophilosophy, it has a deeper usefulness, namely enabling Towa, like Horkheimer, to articulate a very broad conception of philosophy, where it ultimately relates to a spirit rather than to a definite corpus. Therefore, Towa retains from Hegel the abstract character of his definition, which allows him to assert that philosophy opposes myth and religion by promoting a particular attitude toward what exists in general, this particular attitude being criticism.¹⁹ As such, Towa's concept of philosophy, which he borrows from Hegel, is as large as that of any ethnophilosopher, whatever he says (Towa 1971: 26, 30, etc.), the only difference being that whereas Towa insists on criticism as a distinctive characteristic of philosophical activity, the authors he criticises – in particular Basile Fouda and Alassane Ndaw – do not. Their concept of philosophy is thus general, but in the wrong sense, because this generality – the abstraction of the Notion – does not lead them to call into doubt the materials on which they are reflecting. And this is precisely how Towa understands the abstract character of philosophy, namely as the capacity to extract one's self from the realm of absolute necessity, a theoretical standpoint from which it is therefore possible to reorganise what is given according to higher rational ends. As such, philosophy, in its most intimate sense, contradicts what is and establishes itself as a superior way to relate to reality.

18 In this later work, Nsame Mbongo reverses an earlier position he had adopted concerning Towa's attitude toward Hegel. Indeed, in 2006, he wrote that "Towa does not show any real ideological attitude of blind conformity vis-à-vis Hegel [from whom] he repeatedly takes the trouble to distance himself explicitly" (Nsame Mbongo 2006: 184) [My translation].

19 Towa's idea that philosophy must be opposed to religion and distinguished from science also speaks to his Hegelianism (Hegel 1995: 55 ff). The same view is expressed in Towa (2012: 17–24) and several subsequent writings.

Still following Hegel, Towa understands this capacity of philosophy to turn its back on what is given as its freedom in which the philosopher participates.²⁰ Ethnophilosophers are thus mistaken because they do not participate in the freedom of philosophy, that is to say that they do not approach the object of their analyses, namely traditional African cultural productions, from a critical perspective. According to Towa, philosophy, which stands in contrast to this attitude, “only begins with the decision to submit the philosophical and cultural heritage to an uncompromising critique” (Towa 1971: 30). Now, by saying this, Marcién Towa proves that he subscribes to Hegel’s first, and thus most fundamental, condition for the commencement of philosophy, namely “freedom of thought” (Hegel 1995: 94), which translates into detachment and opposition to reality. Therefore, to stay true to his theory, Marcién Towa could not just uncritically receive Hegel’s definition of philosophy. In fact, he also criticises it from a perspective somewhat similar to that of Horkheimer.

Formulated in the terms of Horkheimer’s Critical Theory, Marcién Towa does not subscribe to Hegel’s reconstruction of history from the point of view of a transcendent reason that it would be enough to discover in the concrete history of peoples. In other words, although he accepts Hegel’s definition of philosophy, Towa categorically rejects the *interpretation* of world history that follows from it on the ground that it is based on a set of prejudgements that assume the superiority of Europe over non-European peoples,²¹ a particular perspective that Hegel masterfully rationalises. Therefore, notes Towa, Hegel’s definition of philosophy plays an ideological role, namely that of justifying the status quo, which is in favour of Europe, hence the conservatism of his doctrine. In fact, Towa argues that Hegel betrays his own concept of philosophy, as suggested by his dictum that “the distinctive character of the discipline of philosophy does not allow it to accept presuppositions” (Hegel 2011: 83). Now, according to Towa, the presupposition of which Hegel’s theory is the skillful rationalisation is the idea that “thought and philosophy are the monopoly of the West” (Towa 1971: 15), a standpoint he shares, as Towa argues, with George Gusdorf and Martin Heidegger, whom the author describes as “guardians of Western orthodoxy” (Towa 1971:

20 Towa writes, “What a philosopher retains and proposes is always, at least in right, the conclusion of a contradictory debate, that is to say of a critical and absolutely free examination” (Towa 1971: 31).

21 Towa reads Hegel’s Lectures on the History of Philosophy in conjunction with the first volume of his Lectures on the Philosophy of World History.

10).²² Thus, like Horkheimer, Towa maintains a dialectical relationship with Hegel: on the one hand he endorses Hegel's definition of philosophy, and on the other, he dismisses the social consequences Hegel draws from it, notably his biased and conservative philosophy of history. Similar to Horkheimer, Towa's resistance to Hegel is also informed by Karl Marx, or more precisely by Marxism, and a specific type of Marxism, namely Nkrumahism.

It is difficult to speak of a direct influence of Karl Marx on Marcien Towa,²³ whereas the influence of Kwame Nkrumah is patent. Towa's first lengthy discussion of Nkrumah appeared in 1968 in the journal *Abbia*. In this article, which can be best described as a very long book review, Towa asserts his sympathy for Nkrumah's theory and presents *Consciencism* as a work that testifies to "the philosophical age of modern Africa" (Towa 1968b: 5). In fact, the book is considered by Towa as "a work of African philosophy: the first" (Towa 1968b: 5). The reason for this fascination is that Nkrumah has succeeded in formulating a genuinely philosophical question in a way that combines theory and practice in the critical understanding of the African situation and the no less critical anticipation of the African being-in-the-world. A key concept in Nkrumah's articulation of his programme in a way that connects philosophical theory to political activism is that of ideology. This concept is of primary importance to Marcien Towa²⁴ because it enables him not only to conceive of philosophy as a social – or socially informed – practice but to justify such a conception by appealing to Nkrumah's authority and companionship. And *ideology* – for which Towa has been intensively criticised (see, among others, Towa 1979: 77–78, 108–111; Hountondji 1996: 174) – is the term that takes on the Marxian concept of *praxis* in his theory and that of Nkrumah, from which it is inspired.

22 With this remark, we are faced with a difficulty that has not been sufficiently examined by Towa's critics, namely the question of explaining how Towa, who situates Hegel, Heidegger, and Gusdorf in the same ideological vein, and who criticizes the latter, nonetheless considers the former to be immune from his criticism. This difficulty vanishes if one assumes – which is in fact consistent with Towa's argument – that they all undergo the same treatment and are therefore subject to the same fate in Towa's *Essai sur la problématique philosophique dans l'Afrique actuelle*.

23 In fact, there is no systematic discussion of Karl Marx in Towa's writings. In his first book, for example, Marx is mentioned in a paragraph in passing; Towa refers to a well-known book, namely *The German Ideology*, which, interestingly, he attributes solely to Marx (Towa 1971: 52). In *Identité et transcendance*, Towa refers to *The Capital* in defining the nature of labour (Towa 2011: 210, 214), to the *Critique of Political Economy* for the critique of Hegel's idealism (Towa 2011: 250), and again, to *The German Ideology* for the definition and critique of ideology (Towa 2011: 303–304). However, none of these references to Marx can be considered technical or systematic. At best, their primary function seems to be the minimal scholarly requirement for the justification of Towa's Marxist phraseology in what was originally an academic work.

24 The primacy of ideology in Towa's understanding of Nkrumah's *Consciencism* is attested by the way he proposes to reconstruct Nkrumah's argument (see Towa 1968b: 6 ff).

Nkrumah has argued that philosophical speculation is not separated from human life, and even the most abstract philosophies – such as that of Thales – are either connected to or inspired by practical interests. Therefore, philosophy has “living roots in human life and human society” (Nkrumah 1970: 29). This particular interest in human life, whereby philosophical speculation is linked to determined social goals and interests, is precisely what Nkrumah means by ideology. In a more direct sense, ideology is the set of principles, ideas, and values on which a society is organised or seeks to be organised. In the first sense, ideology is conservative; in the second, it is revolutionary. In any case, for a given society, ideology is total and “displays itself in political theory, social theory and moral theory” (Nkrumah 1970: 59), which are its “instruments” (Nkrumah 1970: 59). Now, this approach to ideology is more Lenin’s than Marx’s, and this probably explains why Towa devotes almost an entire section in *Identité et transcendance* to a detailed discussion of Lenin’s concept of ideology (see Towa 2011: 312–326).²⁵ However, Towa rarely claimed filiation with Lenin but took almost every opportunity to remind the reader or the audience of his admiration for Nkrumah (see among other works, Towa 1971: 5, 47, 53–54, 1979: 110, 2013: 77, 2015: 208–210).

Conclusion

I am fully aware that many aspects of the philosophies of Max Horkheimer and Marcien Towa are missing from this essay, and to humbly give the unfamiliar but enthusiastic reader a sense of the territory that has been left uncovered, I must say that I have not addressed the question of interdisciplinarity that was at the heart of Horkheimer’s programme and how this perspective intersects with that of Towa; nor have I said anything also on the respective meanings of the concepts of reason used by Horkheimer and Towa. I have been equally silent on the difficulties of their theories, mainly related to their receptions and fates. Similarly, a central aspect of this comparison, which deserves such attention that it must be addressed separately, has been left aside, namely the question of method and, in particular, the understanding of what materialism means and entails as a method of thinking both for Towa and Horkheimer. This aspect is inevitably linked to the comparison of Towa with other Frankfurt theoreticians, notably Theodor W. Adorno. This latter comparison would have allowed me, for example, to provide essential details about Towa’s relationship to Hegel, especially concerning the concept of dialectics. I therefore readily acknowledge that this article merely introduces the reader to a much larger and, I hope, exciting subject.

25 Towa primarily discusses *What Is to Be Done?* (Lenin 1978).

Despite these lacunae, which, in my opinion, represent as many research possibilities for the future, I hope to have provided the interested reader with enough elements to counter what some of Towa's most devoted followers maintain, regrettably in a form of expression that does not favour the critical examination of their opinions, namely that Marcién Towa's philosophy radically differs from the speculation of the Frankfurt thinkers. With this pioneering attempt, the perplexed reader can now start judging for themselves.

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