

Although I was on the verge of receiving a degree in French Literature, what I really wanted to study was philosophy. I was interested in Marx, his predecessors and his successors. Over the last years, whenever I could find the time, I read philosophy on the side. I didn't really know what I was doing, except that it gave me a feeling of security and comfort to read what people had to say about such formidable things as the universe, history, human beings, knowledge.

During my second year at Brandeis, I had picked up *Eros and Civilization* by Herbert Marcuse and had struggled with it from beginning to end. That year he was teaching at the Sorbonne. When I arrived in Paris the following year, he was already back at Brandeis, but people were still raving about his fantastic courses. When I returned to Brandeis, the first semester of my senior year was so crowded with required French courses that I could not officially enroll in Marcuse's lecture series on European political thought since the French Revolution. Nevertheless, I attended each session, rushing in to capture a seat in the front of the hall. Arranged around the room on progressively higher levels, the desks were in the style of the UN General Assembly room. When Marcuse walked onto the platform, situated at the lowest level of the hall, his

presence dominated everything. There was something imposing about him which evoked total silence and attention when he appeared, without his having to pronounce a single word. The students had a rare respect for him. Their concentration was not only total during the entire hour as he paced back and forth while he lectured, but if at the sound of the bell Marcuse had not finished, the rattling of papers would not begin until he had formally closed the lecture.

One day, shortly after the semester began, I mustered up enough courage to put in a request for an interview with Marcuse. I had decided to ask him to help me draw up a bibliography on basic works in philosophy. Having assumed I would have to wait for weeks to see him, I was surprised when I was told he would be free that very afternoon.

From afar, Marcuse seemed unapproachable. I imagine the combination of his stature, his white hair, the heavy accent, his extraordinary air of confidence, and his wealth of knowledge made him seem ageless and the epitome of a philosopher. Up close, he was a man with inquisitive sparkling eyes and a fresh, very down-to-earth smile.

Trying to explain my reasons for the appointment, I told him that I intended to study philosophy in graduate school, perhaps at the university in Frankfurt, but that my independent reading in philosophy had been unsystematic—without regard for any national or historical relations. What I wanted from him—if it was not too much of an imposition—was a list of works in the sequence in which I ought to read them. And if he gave me permission, I wanted to enroll in his graduate seminar on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*.

"Do you really want to study philosophy?" Professor Marcuse asked, slowly and placing emphasis on each word. He made it sound so serious and so profound—like an initiation into some secret society which, once you join, you can never leave. I was afraid that a mere "yes" would ring hollow and inane.

"At least, I want to see if I am able," was about the only thing I could think of to answer.

"Then you should begin with the Pre-Socratics, then Plato and Aristotle. Come back again next week and we will discuss the Pre-Socratics."

I had no idea that my little request would develop into stimulating weekly discussions on the philosophers he suggested, discussions which gave me a far more exciting and vivid picture of the history of philosophy than would have emerged from a dry introduction-to-philosophy course.

Shortly after the Nazi seizure of power in Germany, Marcuse had emigrated to the United States, along with a group of intellectuals who had established the Institut für Sozialforschung. Among them were Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. They had continued their work for a number of years in this country, but after the defeat of the fascists, they reestablished the Institute as a part of the regular university in Frankfurt. I had first become acquainted with the work of the Institute through Manfred Clemen, the German student I had met my first year at Brandeis. During the summer after my studies in France, I had spent several weeks in Frankfurt attending a few of Adorno's lectures, and getting to know some of the students there. At that time, my knowledge of German was minimal, but the people around me translated the essential points of the lectures into English or French. Later I read all of Adorno's and Horkheimer's works that had been translated into English or French, in addition to Marcuse's writings. In this way I had acquainted myself with their thought, which was collectively known as Critical Theory.

During that last year at Brandeis, I made up my mind to apply for a scholarship to study philosophy at the university in Frankfurt. Marcuse confirmed my conviction that this was the best place to study, given my interest in Kant, Hegel and Marx. The remaining months of the school year were consumed by intensive preparation in philosophy, German language and the final requirements for my B.A. degree, including a year-long honors project on the Phenomenological Attitude, which I thought I had discovered in the works of the contemporary French novelist Robbe-Grillet. The most chal-

lenging and fulfilling course was the graduate seminar that Marcuse conducted on the *Critique of Pure Reason*. Poring over a seemingly incomprehensible passage for hours, then suddenly grasping its meaning gave me a sense of satisfaction I had never experienced before.

My parents were not overjoyed at the idea of my leaving the country again, particularly since I had not yet decided how long I wanted to remain in Germany. Nevertheless, they were extremely proud to attend the graduation ceremony, where they heard my name called among the Phi Beta Kappas and magna cum laudes. I gave my mother the diplomas, certificates and medals and we packed up the things I had accumulated over the last four years, dropped off my friend Celeste in Providence and headed down the highway for Birmingham.

Along the way, we stopped at a liquor store where my father bought several bottles of bourbon to take home with him—in Alabama's state-controlled liquor stores, the only brands available were the ones approved by the government. (We always thought that one of Wallace's relatives must be the owner of the factory producing all the off-the-wall brands of alcohol, which you never saw anyplace except in Alabama.) We crossed over into Tennessee very late that night, and because we knew that we'd never find a motel run by Black people where we could spend the night, we decided to drive straight through to Birmingham.

In one of those towns along the highway in Tennessee, around two in the morning, we heard a siren screaming behind us. The fat, tobacco-chewing cop, letting his white Tennessee drawl tumble out of a grotesque smile, said to my father, "Y'all know y'all driving too fast. Git out of the car." All the time he was fingering the holster strapped to his waist. I thought about the stories I had heard about Black people or Northern whites disappearing for weeks, sometimes forever, in these small-town jails. The cop searched the front of the car and told my father to open the trunk. When he saw all the

suitcases, he seemed startled and immediately asked where we were coming from. After my father said that he had just attended his daughter's college graduation, the cop assumed a less slovenly posture and became more official. But when he saw the bourbon, his eyes lit up.

"This is a dry county, y'all know. No liquor allowed nowhere in the jurisdiction."

"The bottles are unopened and we're only passing through," my father insisted.

"Don't make no difference. The county is dry and ain't no liquor allowed no kind of way. Y'all can do thirty days in jail for this. And the judge ain't even in town—won't be back till next week. Look like y'all gone have to stay in jail till he get back."

When my father talked about getting in touch with his lawyer, the cop said, "I tell you what. I'm gon do you a favor. Treat ya like I treat my boys around here. Git back in the car and follow me into town." He took the whiskey to the patrol car.

Thinking we were headed for the police station, and knowing that it would be fatal to try to get away, we followed the police car through the dark streets. When it came to a halt, there was nothing around which bore the faintest resemblance to a police station. We were in an unpaved alley and the cop was opening a garage door. Although this wasn't the first time we had been trapped into a situation like this, we were all silently nervous.

"Davis," my mother said, "I don't think you should go in there. There's no telling what he might try to do." But there wasn't the slightest trace of fear in my father—in fact, I have never seen him afraid of anything. He went on in while we waited on tenterhooks in the car. After what seemed like hours he came out with a wry smile on his face. Starting up the car, he told us, chuckling, "All the man wanted was the liquor and twenty dollars." It was a small-time racket which he probably pulled whenever he caught up with Black people driving



through the town. The alternative to giving him the twenty dollars would probably have been much more terrible than the thirty days in jail.

When I boarded the boat sailing for Germany, Watts was burning. I felt again the tension of the Janus head—leaving the country at that time was hard for me. But in a little more than a week, I was on the other side of the ocean.

My stipend consisted of the boat fare and a hundred dollars a month—for rent, food, tram fare to and from the university, books, and whatever else I needed. As I searched the city for a room, the agencies kept telling me, "*Es tut uns leid, aber wir haben keine Zimmer für Ausländer.*" "Sorry but we don't have rooms for foreigners," their attitude clearly implying, "Our rooms are only for good Aryans."

In historical time, twenty years is not very long—half the people I saw on the streets, and practically all the adults, had gone through the experience of Hitler. And in West Germany, unlike the German Democratic Republic, there had been no determined campaign to attack the fascist and racist attitudes which had become so deeply embedded.

Eventually, after days of reading the fine print of the *Frankfurter Allgemeiner*, I found a little room near the zoo, on the top floor of a postwar apartment building—like the *chambre de bonne* I had lived in in Paris. The family to whose apartment the room was attached seemed to be exceptional, as far as the masses of West Germans were concerned. They were curious and concerned about the condition of Black people in the United States and they never failed to draw the appropriate parallels between the Nazi oppression of the Jews in their country and the repression of my people in the United States. They repeatedly invited me to their apartment for dinner and discussions. In the beginning when my German was not very polished, these discussions helped me orient myself to the language.

During the first few weeks, I didn't understand a word of what Adorno was saying. Not only were the concepts difficult to grasp, but he spoke his own special aphoristic variety of German. It was a consolation to discover that most German students attending his lectures for the first time were having almost as much trouble understanding Adorno as I.

I saw old friends from previous trips to Europe, and entered into new friendships as well. It was a great relief to find that not too far from me lived a young Black man from Indiana who had been stationed in Frankfurt as a GI and had decided to stay on to pursue his studies in literature at the university. We were good friends throughout my stay in Germany. I was friendly with a group of Haitian students, a Black South African and two couples who, like myself, had come from the United States to study with Adorno.

I was paying eighty marks a month for my room—practically a quarter of the hundred dollars I had to live on. Almost inevitably, when the end of the month approached, I was eating nothing but *Quark* (something between yogurt and cottage cheese), and writing my parents for a few dollars to tide me over until the next check came in. I was very relieved to find a room on Adalbertstrasse, near the university, which cost only a few marks a month. It was in a massive old building of crumbling red brick, an abandoned factory which the owner rented out I imagine in order to avoid paying a watchman.

The three floors of one side were occupied by a sculptor who fashioned huge abstract metal forms which he kept in the courtyard. The side I moved into had been taken over by a group of students, all as poor as I. The entire place cost us seventy-five marks (less than twenty dollars) a month, and it could comfortably accommodate up to five people in the little nooks that had served as offices when the factory was in operation.

It was a dilapidated old abandoned building with dirty cement floors, no showers—not even hot water—and no cen-

tral heating, only potbellied coal stoves. But paying only about five dollars a month for rent and a few more dollars for coal during the winter months, I could afford to eat a little better—even buying meat a couple of days a week—and was able to buy more books and a new blouse once in a while. As throughout Europe, cultural events could always be attended by students at a great discount, so for about fifty cents, I could see a movie or go to the theater, the opera, the ballet or a museum.

During the spring of my first year there, all the students who had received scholarships from the exchange program were given a trip to Berlin from whatever section of Germany they happened to be living in. Anxious to see Socialist Germany, I spent most of the time in Berlin, the capital of the German Democratic Republic. Each day, I walked across at Checkpoint Charlie—the border point for people with passports from capitalist countries. Crowds of white tourists from the United States would be standing in line, probably waiting to cross the border in order to tell people they had seen the other side of the “wall”—so they could say, in Kennedy’s war-filled words, “*Ich bin ein Berliner*,” that is, I am ready to fight communism. The tourists were always complaining about the wait. But I never had any trouble—each time I went across, I would receive the signal to go on only a few moments after I had shown my passport. This was their way of showing their solidarity with Black people.

Claudia and Margaret Burnham’s stepbrother Bob had recently come through Frankfurt, stayed a while at the “factory” and then gone on to study at the Brecht Theater in Berlin. Through him, I was introduced to several people in the GDR who showed me around the city. Living in Bob’s apartment building was a group of Cubans—the national director of the ballet and several of his assistants. I was amazed at their youth—the director was in his early twenties and the rest around the same age. They talked about their efforts to more fully integrate the African element of Cuban culture into their classical dances and described the way in which they were

developing the old Yoruba dances which, before the revolution, had been restricted to the remote areas of the country where Black people still retained African customs.

Esther and James Jackson, old friends of my parents from Birmingham, were in Berlin at the time. Jim, the International Affairs Director of the Communist Party, U.S.A., was representing the party at the May Day celebration. I spent an evening with them. We talked about the old days when Jim had been underground, and how puzzled I had been as a child, seeing those sinister white men following us all over New York looking for him; Jim was one of the lucky ones whom the FBI never succeeded in tracking down. We discussed the socialist transformation of the GDR and its active campaign against the remnants of fascism in the mentality of the people. The next day I watched the parade, participated in the May Day Festivities and then went on back through Checkpoint Charlie to catch my plane for Frankfurt.

When the West German police said they were going to detain me at the airport, I was certain they were going to accuse me of being too friendly with the people in the GDR—and, of course, they would have been correct. But, according to them, the reason they wouldn’t let me board the plane had to do with my failure to check out with the Frankfurt police when I had moved, some months before, out of the room near the zoo, and had not registered with the police station near the factory. I could never get used to the incredible bureaucracy in which one must become embroiled merely as a prerequisite for living an ordinary life. Everyone, citizen or foreigner, not registered at the nearest police station—and there was no lack of them—was technically liable to arrest, including those visiting with friends for only a few days. Although I had registered when I moved into the first place (the process is called *Anmeldung*—announcing one’s arrival), it had not crossed my mind to tell them I was leaving (called *Ausmeldung*) and to go through the *Anmeldung* at the Adalbertstrasse police station. The West Berlin police were serious: they were talking about deporting me. It took several hours before I could per-

suade them that my failure to register had been an innocent omission. After it was all over and they had left the threat of deportation hanging over me unless I cleared myself the next day with the Frankfurt police, I was still positive that the harassment was a little retaliatory action for my trip to the GDR.

Frankfurt was a very intensive learning experience. Stimulating lectures and seminars conducted by Theodor Adorno, Jürgen Habermass, Professor Haag, Alfred Schmidt, Oscar Negt. Tackling formidable works, such as all three of Kant's Critiques and the works of Hegel and Marx as well (in one seminar, we spent an entire semester analyzing about twenty pages of Hegel's *Logic*).

Most of the students living in the factory studied either philosophy or sociology. Many were members of S.D.S.—Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund, the German Socialist Student League. And they were very seriously striving to arrive at some form of practical resistance capable of ultimately overturning the enemy system. Aside from the concern with the social contradictions inside their own country, they consistently tried to force an internationalist awareness among their members. I participated in rallies and demonstrations directed against U.S. aggression in Vietnam. Those of us who were not citizens had to be especially careful because an arrest would mean a sure deportation. One demonstration, which took place outside the U.S. Embassy, was particularly dangerous. Chanting "*U.S. raus, U.S. raus, U.S. raus aus Vietnam!*" and "*Ho, Ho, Ho Chi Minh!*" the crowds of demonstrators were attacked almost immediately by mounted police. One young woman was trampled under the hooves of the horses. Since it had been decided beforehand that we would resist this expected attack, the agreed upon hit-and-run, disruptive tactics were put into operation. The idea was to move along the main street leading to the center of the city, disrupting the functioning of the tramway. As the crowds of demonstrators

marched down the main street on the sidewalks on both sides of the street, some would periodically separate from the group and sit down on the tramway tracks. Watching the approach of the police, they waited until the very last moment to run into the refuge of the crowd. Not all of us made it. When it was my turn to do the sitting and running, I had to make sure I was fast enough to reach the safety of the crowd, not wanting to have a case foisted upon me by the West German courts. After several hours of sitting and running, and a sizeable number of arrests, we made it to the Hauptwache, the center of the city, and listened to an arousing speech by Rudi Dutsche, the Chairman of S.D.S., who was later shot in the head by a would-be assassin who said he was inspired by the assassination of Martin Luther King.

Toward the end of my second year, a mass student demonstration, organized by S.D.S. in Berlin protesting the visit by the Shah of Iran, was attacked by the Shah's security, aided by the West Berlin police, with such terrible force that it ended in the death of a student—Ben Ohnesorge, who was attending his first political protest. The response throughout West Germany was swift and intense. In Frankfurt, there were mass gatherings, demonstrations and teach-ins.

I was most impressed by the consciousness of the student movement when I heard about the Berlin campaign led by S.D.S. against the movie *Africa Adio*, directed by two Roman playboy-types, dealing with the ousting of the colonialists from Africa. Not only was this movie thoroughly racist in that it depicted the African Liberation Fighters as aggressors against the pure, educated, civilized whites, but the directors went so far as to stage actual killings in order to do on-the-spot documentary coverage of Africa. S.D.S. members in Berlin tore up a theater which refused to boycott the film.

Students and workers were being drawn en masse into the arena of political protest in Germany. At the same time, great upheavals were taking place in the States.

My decision to study in Frankfurt had been made in 1964, against the backdrop of relative political tranquillity. But

by the time I left in the summer of 1965, thousands of sisters and brothers were screaming in the streets of Los Angeles that they had observed the rules of the game long enough, too long.

Watts was exploding; furiously burning. And out of the ashes of Watts, Phoenix-like, a new Black militancy was being born.

While I was hidden away in West Germany the Black Liberation Movement was undergoing decisive metamorphoses. The slogan "Black Power" sprang out of a march in Mississippi. Organizations were being transfigured—The Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, a leading civil rights organization, was becoming the foremost advocate of "Black Power." The Congress on Racial Equality was undergoing similar transformations. In Newark, a national Black Power Conference had been organized. In political groups, labor unions, churches and other organizations, Black caucuses were being formed to defend the special interests of Black people. Everywhere there were upheavals.

While I was reading philosophy in Frankfurt, and participating in the rearguard of S.D.S., there were young Black men in Oakland, California, who had decided that they had to wield arms in order to protect the residents of Oakland's Black community from the indiscriminate police brutality ravaging the area. Huey Newton, Bobby Seale, li'l Bobby Hutton—those were some of the names that reached me. One day in Frankfurt I read about their entrance into the California Legislature in Sacramento with their weapons in order to safeguard their right (a right given to all whites) to carry them as instruments of self-defense. The name of this organization was the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense.

The more the struggles at home accelerated, the more frustrated I felt at being forced to experience it all vicariously. I was advancing my studies, deepening my understanding of philosophy, but I felt more and more isolated. I was so far away from the terrain of the fight that I could not even analyze the episodes of the struggle. I did not even have the

knowledge or understanding to judge which currents of the movement were progressive and genuine and which were not. It was a difficult balance I was trying to maintain, and it was increasingly hard to feel a part of the collective coming to consciousness of my people.

I am certain that what I was feeling was a variation and reflection of the same feelings that were overwhelming larger and larger numbers of Black people abroad. Many others of us must have felt pained, when reading about some new crisis in the struggle at home, to be hearing about it secondhand.

I had thought mine was the perfect dilemma: the struggle at home versus the need to remain in Frankfurt until the completion of my doctorate, for I was certain that Frankfurt was far more conducive to philosophical studies than any other place. But each day it was becoming clearer to me that my ability to accomplish anything was directly dependent on my ability to contribute something concrete to the struggle.

Adorno had readily agreed to direct my work on a doctoral dissertation. But now I felt it would be impossible for me to stay in Germany any longer. Two years was enough. I arranged for an appointment with Adorno at the Institute and explained to him that I had to go home. In my correspondence with Marcuse, he had already agreed to work with me at the University of California in San Diego, where he had accepted a position after having been practically pushed out of Brandeis for political reasons. I wanted to continue my academic work, but I knew I could not do it unless I was politically involved. The struggle was a life-nerve; our only hope for survival. I made up my mind. The journey was on.