

# Herbert Marcuse, 1898–1979

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An article on Herbert Marcuse published in "Workers' Action" at the time of his death in 1979.

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The influence of Herbert Marcuse, who recently died at the age of 81, on the student movements of the late '60s was greatly exaggerated by the bourgeois press. In France, after the events of May-June 1968, a newspaper asked radical student activists about books that had influenced them: they hardly mentioned Marcuse.

Even in West Germany, where Marcuse had more influence, his ideas were not a guide to the movement's action. When Rudi Dutschke came out with the strategy of a "long march through the institutions" - the revolutionary students, after establishing a base in the universities, were to build bases in other spheres of society, one after the other - Marcuse (in *Counterrevolution and Revolt*) just passively endorsed the idea. Marcuse frankly acknowledged that for him, "There is no ground on which theory and practice, thought and action meet" (*One-dimensional man*).

Marcuse did not give answers. But his ideas gained some currency because he spoke more directly than others to the feelings and frustrations of the radical students. The students, exploding into political activity, found that the official socialism of the Stalinist and social-democratic parties was petty-minded, conservative, and content with the most minimal definition of socialist aims. The revolutionary Marxists were small minorities, and even those small minorities were often clumsy and awkward in their relation to the radical students.

Marcuse spoke directly of the stifling of humanity by capitalist commercialism, the hollowness of bourgeois democracy and tolerance, the subtle conservatism of bourgeois objectivity, the futility of politics that was whittled down to constructive reforms within the existing system.

He told the students that Socialism was not just the nationalisation of the means of production, that it needed "the disappearance of the State, the Party, the Plan etc. as independent powers superimposed on the individuals".

The only future worth fighting for, he insisted, was one of radical human liberation, including sexual liberation.

For some, Marcuse's critique of bourgeois society and of reformism, despite its mystified form, was a stepping stone to Marxism. Elsewhere, the irrationalist streak in Marcuse was fused into the worst by-products of the student radicalisation, especially Mao-Stalinist sects.

At the age of 20, Marcuse took part in the German revolution of 1918-9. His active political involvement ended there. but the basic Marxist programme of self-liberating working-class revolution, which he lived and experienced then, structured the framework of his thought for the rest of his life, though often in curious and almost unrecognisable ways.

He returned as an academic Marxist in the 1930s, a member of the so-called 'Frankfurt School' together with Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer. Like many other radical intellectuals at the time, they were distanced from the workers' movement. To accept bourgeois society, wallowing in depression and sliding towards fascism, was unthinkable; but the major force in apparent revolutionary opposition to bourgeois society, the Stalinist movement, was dominated by crude bureaucratism which repelled all independent and critical thought.

Most of the uncommitted left intellectuals eventually gave some sort of support to Stalinism, seeing it as the expression, for better or for worse, of actual socialism and actual class-conscious politics. Distinctively, Marcuse and his colleagues refused to bow before the accomplished fact in this way. As early as the 1930s, Marcuse denounced Stalinism's narrowing-down of the content of socialism:

“Without freedom and happiness in the- social relations of men, even the greatest increase of production and the abolition of private property in the means of production remain infected with the old injustice” (Philosophy and Critical Theory).

The condemnation of Stalinism was not a condemnation of Bolshevism. For Marcuse, Lenin represented “the dialectical method. with its uncompromising ‘spirit of contradiction’ ”, against the revisionism of Bernstein and Kautsky (Reason and Revolution).

However. the way that Marcuse and his colleagues resolved their dilemmas was by radically denying Marx’s and Lenin’s idea of the unity of theory and practice - indeed, by raising the disunity of theory and practice to a principle.

In 1965, looking back over his intellectual development, Marcuse wrote: “Precisely at that time [in the '30s], beaten or betrayed, the social forces in which freedom and revolution were joined were delivered over to the existing powers... The new period saw the suppression, crippling, and neutralisation of the classes and forces that, due to their real interests, embodied hope for the end of inhumanity” (Negations). But his conclusion was that theory should speak out all the more angrily against existing reality.

“Theory will preserve the truth even if revolutionary practice deviates from its proper path” (Reason and Revolution). This was what Marcuse and his colleagues meant by the name they gave to their work, "critical theory".

After Hitler's victory in Germany, Marcuse and his colleagues moved to the USA. They bitterly detested American capitalist civilisation, and expressed that hatred in their writings - though, it must be said, in sufficiently speculative form to allow them to maintain a comfortable existence through the fiercely anti-communist late '40s and '50s.

Marcuse worked for the State Department, on Intelligence Research, and then held university posts.

Marcuse and his colleagues first set about analysing fascism. For them, “the fascist state was fascist society, and totalitarian violence and totalitarian reason came from the structure of existing society, which was in the act of overcoming its liberal past and incorporating its historical negation... This abolition was not restricted at all to the totalitarian states and since then has become the reality in many democracies (and especially ‘the most developed ones)’” (Negations).

They saw the way “bourgeois freedom became unfreedom” as a direct reflection of the economic transition from free enterpriseto monopoly capitalism, thus failing to grasp the importance of specific political forms and specific political struggles. Their special task, as they saw it, was to trace the reflection of this transition in culture. Adorno wrote a massive study on ‘The Authoritarian Personality’.

The whole school believed advanced capitalism was developing a culture able to integrate or neuter all protest and discontent.

While his colleagues went off into aesthetics (Adorno) or epistemology (Jurgen Habermas), Marcuse, however, focussed on current social questions.

He wrote a book on Soviet Marxism, analysing the way the Russian bureaucracy had turned Marxist phrases into socially conservative incantations. Marcuse's view of the social nature of the USSR, however, always remained vague: sometimes he took up the bourgeois theory of a ‘convergence’ of the USSR and advanced capitalism, in One-dimensional Man he wrote that “Inasmuch as this change [the overthrow of the ruling strata] would leave the material base of society (the nationalised productive process) intact, it would be confined to a political revolution”.

More importantly for his later influence, Marcuse wrote Eros and Civilisation, an attempt to construct a revolutionary perspective of sexual liberation on a Freudian basis; One-dimensional Man, on “the ideology of advanced industrial society”; and an essay on Repressive Tolerance.

Freud argued that all civilisation is necessarily built on repression of sexual instincts. In Eros and

Civilisation Marcuse coined a distinction between a basic repression or modification of the instincts which is indeed necessary for any civilisation, and surplus repression enforced by a society of exploitation and class domination.

He linked surplus repression to alienated labour: "Men do not live their own lives but perform pre-established functions. While they work, they do not fulfil their own needs and faculties but work in alienation. Work has now become general, and so have the restrictions placed on the libido".

After the abolition of alienated labour, Marcuse argues, work as free creative cooperation can become an expression of "non-repressive sublimation" of sexual instincts. This means "a change in the character of work by virtue of which the latter would be assimilated to play - the free play of human faculties." Marcuse also argues that forms of sexuality today seen as 'perversions' would be an integral part of a liberated sexuality.

In Repressive Tolerance Marcuse denounced bourgeois objectivity: "...if a newscaster reports the torture and murder of civil rights workers in the same unemotional tone he uses to describe the stockmarket or the weather, or with the same great emotion with which he says his commercials, then such objectivity is spurious..." He defended the violence of the oppressed: "...the violence emanating from the rebellion of the oppressed classes broke the historic continuum of injustice, cruelty, and silence for a brief moment, brief but explosive enough to achieve progress in civilisation." He drew vague and thus politically dangerous conclusions about "intolerance" against the Right being necessary as an "emergency measure".

In One-dimensional Man he argued that modern capitalist civilisation was transforming all protest into containable technical problems within the system. Given the economic expansion of capitalism (which he saw as likely to continue smoothly, unless perhaps automation subverted the capitalist economy of labour-time), this containment could continue indefinitely. The working class was snugly incorporated within the system.

Against this background, Marcuse insisted on the duty of Reason (capital R) to uphold critical concepts of freedom, happiness, justice, against the demand of bourgeois culture that all concepts be defined precisely and "operationally".

In the closing paragraphs of the book, and only there, Marcuse points to one prospect of action. "The traditional ways and means of protest" are "ineffective" and may serve only to strengthen illusions. "However, underneath the conservative popular base is the substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colours, the unemployed and unemployable.

"They exist outside the democratic process; their life is the most immediate and the most real need for ending intolerable conditions and institutions. Thus their opposition is revolutionary even if their consciousness is not...

"The critical theory of society possesses no concepts which could bridge the gap between the present and the future; holding no promise and showing no success, it remains negative. Thus it wants to remain loyal to those who, without hope, have given and give their life to the Great Refusal."

For Marcuse, critical theory was tied to objective reality to the extent that it had to reflect "real possibilities". Yet the definition of "real possibilities" becomes very arbitrary when it is divorced from any concept of how the possibilities can be made realities. Thus when Marcuse speaks of Reason, he means himself. Only Marcuse's commitment to (his interpretation of) classical Marxism serves as a check on his speculations.

The analysis of the supposed integration of the working class shows the scientific deficiencies of Marcuse's method. Uncritically he lists bourgeois sociologists' evidence on this theme, then glibly generalises to a sweeping conclusion.

Engels once pointed out that in the construction of his system, Hegel typically resorted to forced

arguments, sometimes mere word-play. With Hegel, “not only a creative genius but a man of encyclopaedic erudition”, these false arguments are only the outworks of a series of powerful insights. For German philosophers after Hegel, however, the system building sophistry often loomed larger than any real insight. Martin Heidegger, Marcuse's teacher in the 1920s, is an example: his writings are endless speculations on Being, in which references to the Greek or other ancient roots of words play the role of decisive arguments.

Marcuse imbibed that tradition, and often he is like the German philosophical socialists ridiculed by Marx and Engels in the Communist Manifesto: “beneath the French [socialist] criticism of the economic functions of money, they wrote ‘Alienation of Humanity’, and beneath the French criticism of the bourgeois State, they wrote ‘Dethronement of the Category of the General’, and so forth... [they saw themselves as] representing, not true requirements, but the requirements of Truth; not the interests of the proletariat. but the interests of Human Nature, of Man in general, who belongs to no class, has no reality, who exists only in the misty realm of philosophical fantasy.”

The student revolt was not a confirmation of Marcuse’s views on “the outcasts”. Indeed, it was precisely because the students were not outcasts, because snug integration into bourgeois society was so much a reality for them, that some of them found Marcuse relevant.

But the conclusion, which a few students drew was that they should mimic being outcasts. Through them, Marcuse’s ideas flowed into the worst forms of elitist and pseudo-populist politics.

Despite his ideas on ‘repressive tolerance’, it seems that Marcuse did not deny the important difference between bourgeois democracy and fascism: “By and large, Marxian theory has a positive evaluation of the role of bourgeois democracy in this transition -- up to the stage of the revolution itself...it would be fatal to abandon the defence of civil rights and liberties within the existing framework” (Essay on Liberation). Yet some radicals went on from Marcuse’s vagueness to conclude that societies like the USA or West Germany were fascist, and also to adopt Stalinist forms of intolerance.

Marcuse did not regard any sort of wild lashing-out as valid revolutionary activity. He retained, for example, a classical Marxist attitude to individual terrorism. By critical theory, he did not mean irrational opposition to all existing reality. “What is to be abolished is not the reality principle; not everything, but such particular things as business, politics, exploitation, poverty” (Love Mystified). Yet some students concluded that action must be negative at all costs, disrupting the system and shocking the Establishment.

Marcuse believed that “the working class is still the historical agent of revolution”. “The radical transformation of a social system still depends on the class which constitutes the human base of the process of production. In the advanced capitalist countries, this is the industrial working class”. Believing that the working class had been neutered, he concluded: “a revolution is not on the agenda”, and “the student movement is not a revolutionary force, perhaps not even an avant-garde”.

Young people unwilling to accept Marcuse’s programme of opposition without hope, however, concluded that the students and the outcasts were the new revolutionary class. Turning away from the working class, they were diverted into all sorts of wild projects.

After denouncing the lack of revolt against the system for thirty years, some of Marcuse’s colleagues shied away from that revolt when it came. Jurgen Habermas, for example, denounced the revolutionary students as “left-wing fascists”. Marcuse, on the contrary, sided clearly with the student rebels. That will always stand to his credit. But his ideas and his writings (with the possible exception of Eros and Civilisation) will not live on.