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MARCUSE'S LEGACIES

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Any attempt to identify the plural legacies of Herbert Marcuse's life and work must seriously engage the political contexts of his writings as well as the discourse that has entombed his theoretical contributions within the history of radical activism during the 1960s. Academics and activists alike find it difficult to disassociate Marcuse from the era of the late 1960s and early 1970s. His persona and his work are often evoked as a marker of a radical era, our primary relationship to which tends to be defined by nostalgia. Consequently, the mention of the name Herbert Marcuse elicits a sigh; many of my generation and older tend to treat him as a sign of our youth – wonderful, exciting, revolutionary, but meaningful only within the context of our reminiscences. As those of us who came of age during the 1960s and early 1970s grow older and older, there seems to be a tendency to spatialize "the sixties." Recently I have noticed that many people of my generation like to introduce themselves by saying "I come from the sixties" – the 1960s being viewed as a point of origin, an originary place, rather than a historical moment. It is a place that we evoke with wonder and joy, but one that is forever beyond our reach. Ironically, the very era during which we were encouraged by Herbert Marcuse to think about the radical potential of utopian thought has itself survived in our historical memory as utopia – as a place that is no place.

It is no less ironic that the most well-known and most widely read thinker associated with the Frankfurt School thirty years ago became the least studied in the 1980s and 1990s, while Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and Walter Benjamin are extensively studied in the contemporary era. As Marcuse himself acknowledged, his celebrity had both productive and counter-productive aspects. But we can say that the historical conjuncture that linked his own intellectual development with the search for a new political vocabulary during the late 1960s allowed many of us to understand the extent to which he took seriously the charge of critical theory to develop interdisciplinary approaches, anchored in the emancipatory promise of the philosophical tradition within which he worked, that would signal the possibility and need for transformative interventions in the

real, social world. And many of Marcuse's ideas during that period evolved in conversation with the contemporaneous social and cultural movements. When he addressed gatherings of young people from California to Paris to Berlin, he spoke as a philosopher who was perennially struggling with the challenges of critical theory to engage directly with contemporary social issues. He was received as a philosopher who urged participants in radical social movements to think more philosophically and more critically about the implications of their activism.

Despite my chronic critiques of nostalgia as an inadequate substitute for historical memory, I want to ask you to permit me to engage in what I would like to think of as a bit of productive nostalgia. Because I do long for the days of interminable philosophical discussions about such subjects as the historical agents of revolution, when the participants in such discussions might be students and professors, as well as organic intellectuals who were workers and organizers. Marcuse's interventions as a public intellectual helped to stimulate such discussions. Did the working class still have a revolutionary potential? What role could students play? I imagine that I am nostalgic today because so few people seem to believe that anybody has any revolutionary potential left .

The thinkers associated with the Frankfurt School were motivated in many of their intellectual endeavors by the desire to develop oppositional – which at that time meant anti-fascist – theoretical work. Herbert Marcuse and Franz Neumann (whose work should also be more seriously read today) were more interested in exploring more immediate oppositional possibilities than their colleagues Adorno and Horkheimer. The first volume of Herbert Marcuse's collected papers, edited by Doug Kellner, contains a prospectus, written in the late 1930s or early 1940s, for a study on which they apparently planned to collaborate – "A History of the Doctrine of Social Change."[2] While this study was not actualized as a result of the outbreak of the Second World War, both Neuman and Marcuse were active in the denazification program after the war – Neuman in the prosecution of Nazis, Marcuse in his work with the State Department helping to develop the US denazification policy. I urge you to read the recently published posthumous work,[3] especially because of the mystery surrounding Marcuse's involvement with the State Department – including the absurd rumors that he was a CIA agent. The first volume of the unpublished papers Kellner has made available allows us to see the important work he did on the cultural impact of Nazism.

Perhaps Marcuse's willingness to engage so directly in this anti-fascist project in the aftermath of the Second World War led him to later broaden his anti-fascist theoretical approach, drawing US society into the frame of his analysis. In other words, precisely because he was so immediately involved in opposing German fascism, he was also able and willing to identify fascist tendencies in the US. Because Adorno's and Horkheimer's

anti-fascism expressed itself on a more formal theoretical register, it remained anchored in German history and tradition. When Marcuse wrote "The Struggle Against Liberalism in the Totalitarian View of the State,"[4] arguing that fascism and liberalism were not political opposites – that, indeed, they were closely linked ideologically – he had already established the foundation for his later analysis of US society. When Horkheimer and Adorno returned to Frankfurt and refused to permit the publication of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Marcuse's critical theory would explore the one-dimensional society in the US and would later identify the prominent role of racism, encouraging students like myself to attempt to further develop the emancipatory promise of the German philosophical tradition.

One of the most salient and persistent aspects of Marcuse's work is his concern with the possibilities of utopia. This powerful philosophical concept (which meant that he had to contest the orthodox equation of Marxist notions of socialism with the "scientific" as opposed to a "utopian" socialism à la Fourier) was at the core of his ideas. In his important 1937 essay, "Philosophy and Critical Theory," he wrote:

> Like philosophy, [critical theory] opposes making reality into a criterion in the manner of complacent positivism. But unlike philosophy, it always derives its goals from present tendencies of the social process. Therefore it has no fear of the utopia that the new order is denounced as being. When truth cannot be realized within the established social order, it always appears to the latter as mere utopia. This transcendence speaks not against, but for, its truth. The utopian element was long the only progressive element in philosophy, as in the constructions of the best state and the highest pleasure, of perfect happiness and perpetual peace. The obstinacy that comes from adhering to truth against all appearances has given way in contemporary philosophy to whimsy and uninhibited opportunism. Critical theory preserves obstinacy as a genuine quality of philosophical thought.[5]

This obstinacy is most productive, I believe, when it travels from one generation to the next, when new ways of identifying those promises and new oppositional discourses and practices are proposed. In this context, I want to acknowledge the important intergenerational character of this conference.[6] In a passage from the introduction to an *Essay on Liberation* that many of you – old as well as new Marcuse scholars – have probably committed to memory, Marcuse writes that

> what is denounced as "utopian" is no longer that which has "no place" and cannot have any place in the historical universe, but rather that which is blocked from coming about by the power of the

> established societies. Utopian possibilities are inherent in the technical and technological forces of advanced capitalism and socialism: the rational utilization of these forces on a global scale would terminate poverty and scarcity within a very foreseeable future.[7]

Marcuse's life-long insistence on the radical potential of art is linked to this obstinate insistence on the utopian dimension. On the one hand, art criticizes and negates the existing social order by the power of its form, which in turn creates another universe, thus hinting at the possibility of building a new social order. But this relationship is highly mediated, as Marcuse continually emphasized – from "The Affirmative Character of Culture" (1937), to the recently published "Some Remarks on Aragon: Art and Politics in the Totalitarian Era" (1945), to the ninth chapter of *Eros and Civilization* (1955), to the last book he published before his death, entitled, like the ninth chapter of *Eros and Civilization*, *The Aesthetic Dimension*.[8] I cite a passage from his essay on Aragon:

> Art does not and cannot present the fascist reality (nor any other forms of the totality of monopolistic oppression). But any human activity which does not contain the terror of this era is by this very token inhuman, irrelevant, incidental, untrue. In art, however, the untruth may become the life element of the truth. The incompatibility of the artistic form with the real form of life may be used as a lever for throwing upon the reality the light which the latter cannot absorb, the light which may eventually dissolve this reality (although such dissolution is no longer the function of art). The untruth of art may become the precondition for the artistic contradiction and negation. Art may promote the alienation, the total estrangement of man from his world. And this alienation may provide the artificial basis for the remembrance of freedom in the totality of oppression.[9]

On the other hand, emancipatory possibilities reside in the very forces that are responsible for the obscene expansion of an increasingly exploitative and repressive order. It seems to me that the overarching themes of Marcuse's thought are as relevant today on the cusp of the twenty-first century as they were when his scholarship and political interventions were most widely celebrated.

At this point in my remarks I would like to make some comments about my own development. I have often publicly expressed my gratitude to Herbert Marcuse for teaching me that I did not have to choose between a career as an academic and a political vocation that entailed making interventions around concrete social issues. In Frankfurt, when I was studying with Adorno, he discouraged me from seeking to discover ways of linking my seemingly discrepant interests in philosophy and social activism. After the founding of the Black Panther Party in 1966, I felt very much drawn back

to this country (the US). During one of my last meetings with him (students were extremely fortunate if we managed to get one meeting over the course of our studies with a professor like Adorno), he suggested that my desire to work directly in the radical movements of that period was akin to a media studies scholar deciding to become a radio technician.

In the summer of 1967, I was present when Herbert Marcuse delivered one of the major addresses during the Congress of the Dialectics of Liberation convened in London and organized by four British psychiatrists (including David Cooper and R.D. Laing) associated with the anti-psychiatry movement. Other presenters included Paul Sweezy, Lucien Goldmann, and Stokeley Carmichael. Having spent the two previous years studying at the University in Frankfurt with Marcuse's colleagues, scholars affiliated with the Frankfurt School, I attended this heterogenous gathering of radical scholars, students, activist leaders and organizers from black communities in the United States and Britain on my way back to the United States. The congress took place at the Roundhouse in Chalk Farm, which, originally a locomotive turntable, served as an overarching metaphor for the gathering's collective ambitions – to turn the motive power of radical intellectuals and activists in the direction of social revolution, or what Marcuse called "qualitative change."

Many of the young participants in the two-week conference decided to set up camp in the building, turning the congress into a brief utopian experiment in collaborative theorizing buttressed by cooperative living arrangements. In this sense it reproduced, in abridged format, the radical experiments in communal living that characterized the era of the hippies. Marcuse opened his own address by acknowledging the numerous flowers people had brought into the Roundhouse. But, he said, "flowers, by themselves, have no power whatsoever, other than the power of men and women who protect them and take care of them against aggression and destruction."[10] Later, he spoke pointedly about the hippies, identifying the more politically radical formations among them – the Diggers and the Provos – as uniting sexual, moral, and political rebellion, as encouraging new sensibilities, as exhibiting "a non-aggressive form of life: a demonstration of an aggressive non-aggressiveness which achieves, at least potentially, the demonstration of qualitatively different values, a transvaluation of values."[11]

I evoke this Congress on the Dialectics of Liberation because it took place during a historical moment of immense promise. The presence at this gathering of such diverse figures as economist Paul Sweezy, philosopher Jules Henry, anthropologist Gregory Bateson and activist Stokeley Carmichael, accentuated the gathering's mandate to explore contradictions for their productive, dialectical and transformative potential. Marcuse himself pointed out that liberation is necessarily dialectical and dialectics is necessarily liberatory. Precisely because of the absence of homogeneity and unity among the participants, their political strategies, their ideas, their lifestyles, the congress was animated by palpable imaginings of the possibility of forging alliances

across these diverse and contradictory intellectual and activist oppositions precisely for the purpose of changing the direction of history. David Cooper's introduction to the conference proceedings, *To Free a Generation: The Dialectics of Liberation*, concluded with this observation: "Hope has to have another appointment. Not now and not then, but some other time, its own time – which is our time. We have to take over time and own it."[12]

Entitled "Liberation from the Affluent Society," the tone of Marcuse's lecture was in keeping with the overarching optimism of the conference. In his enthusiastically received remarks, he made reference to Walter Benjamin's allusion to the fact that during the Paris Commune:

> In all corners of the city of Paris there were people shooting at the clocks on the towers of the churches, palaces and so on, thereby consciously or half-consciously expressing the need that somehow time has to be arrested, and that a new time has to begin – a very strong emphasis on the qualitative difference and on the totality of the rupture between the new society and the old.[13]

Anyone familiar with Marcuse's life and work would not expect him to embrace a simple and untheorized assumption that the world – or at least some aspects of it – was on the cusp of radical transformation, as many of us believed at that time. However, he spoke encouraging words to those who took seriously the project of liberation:

> Our role as intellectuals is a limited role. On no account should we succumb to any illusions. But even worse than this is to succumb to the wide-spread defeatism which we witness. The preparatory role today is an indispensable role. I believe I am not being too optimistic – I have not in general the reputation of being too optimistic – when I say that we can already see the signs, nor only that They are getting frightened and worried but that there are far more concrete, far more tangible manifestations of the essential weakness of the system. Therefore, let us continue with whatever we can – no illusions, but even more, no defeatism.[14]

Marcuse's political interventions were always tempered with warnings about the limits of their own efficacy, but he was never one to chose silence and inaction. He insisted on possibility and hope, the power of negation, even there – or precisely there – where human possibility was obscured by exploitation and oppression, there where hope seemed nowhere to be found.

Marcuse played an important role during the late 1960s and early 1970s in encouraging intellectuals to speak out against racism, against the Vietnam War, for student rights. He emphasized the important role of intellectuals within oppositional movements, which, I believe, led more intellectuals to

frame their work in relation to these movements than would otherwise have done so. And Marcuse's thought revealed how deeply he himself was influenced by the movements of his time and how his engagement with those movements revitalized his thought.

Today, it seems inconceivable that crowds of people at a political rally would be willing to enthusiastically applaud a philosopher trained in the classical tradition, who might just as easily evoke Kant and Hegel as Marx, Fanon, or Dutschke. It seems inconceivable that people did not complain when this philosopher compelled them to think deeply – and even philosophically – in order to engage with ideas he proposed in the context of a public rally. The lesson I draw from these reminiscences is that we need to recapture the ability to communicate across divides that are designed to keep people apart. At the same time we need to substitute a nostalgic attitude toward Marcuse with one that takes seriously his work as a philosopher and as a public intellectual.

One of the great challenges of any social movement is to develop new vocabularies. As we attempt to develop these vocabularies today, we can find inspiration and direction in Marcuse's attempts to theorize the politics of language. In *An Essay on Liberation* he wrote:

> Political linguistics: armor of the Establishment. If the radical opposition develops its own language, it protests spontaneously, subconsciously, against one of the most effective "secret weapons" of domination and defamation. The language of the prevailing Law and Order, validated by the courts and by the police, is not only the voice but also the deed of suppression. This language not only defines and condemns the Enemy, it also *creates* him…This linguistic universe, which incorporates the Enemy (as *Untermensch*) into the routine of everyday speech can be transcended only in action.[15]

While Marcuse was specifically referring to the way Nixon's law-and-order rhetoric conflated criminals, radicals, and communists in the former Soviet Union and freedom fighters in Vietnam and defenders of the revolution in Cuba, the challenge he presents is very much a contemporary one, particularly with respect to the need to create a "rupture with the linguistic universe of the Establishment" and its representation of crime and criminals, which has helped to imprison almost two million people – which has facilitated the horrifying pattern of the prison as the major institution toward which young Black men, and increasingly Black women, are headed.

While this is another topic entirely – and this is what I usually speak and write about, so I must restrain myself from beginning another talk – I do want to conclude by suggesting how important it is for us to consider the contemporary relevance of Marcuse's ideas within this context. How do we draw upon Marcuse's critical theory in our attempt to develop new vocabularies of resistance today, vocabularies that effect a rupture with the equation of

affirmative action and "reverse racism," vocabularies that reflect a utopian vision of a society without prisons, at least without the monstrous, corporatized system that we call the prison-industrial complex?

I am not suggesting that Marcuse should be revived as the pre-eminent theorist of the twenty-first century. He, more than anyone, insisted on the deeply historical character of theory. It would certainly militate against the spirit of his ideas to argue that his work contains the solution to the many dilemmas facing us as scholars, organizers, advocates, artists, and, I would add, as marginalized communities, whose members are increasingly treated as detritus and relegated to prisons, which, in turn, generate astronomical profits for a growing global prison industry. An uncritical and nostalgic version of Marcuse, which, for example, fails to acknowledge the limits of an aesthetic theory that maintains a rigid distinction between high and low art, one that is not willing to engage seriously with popular culture and all its contradictions, would not be helpful to those who are seeking to forge radical political vocabularies today. But if we abandon our Marcuse nostalgia and attempt to incorporate his ideas into a historical memory that draws upon the useful aspects of the past in order to put them to work in the present, we will be able to hold on to Marcuse's legacies as we explore terrain that he himself could never have imagined.

Notes

1 This is a lightly revised transcript of the talk given by Angela Y. Davis at the "Legacy of Herbert Marcuse" conference at the University of Berkeley, CA, 1998.

2 Herbert Marcuse and Franz Neumann, "A History of the Doctrine of Social Change," in Herbert Marcuse, *Technology, War and Fascism: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, vol. 1, ed. Douglas Kellner, London and New York: Routledge, 1998, pp. 93–104.

3 Marcuse, *Technology, War and Fascism*.

4 Herbert Marcuse, "The Struggle Against Liberalism in the Totalitarian View of the State," in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro, Boston: Beacon, 1968, pp. 3–42.

5 Herbert Marcuse, "Philosophy and Critical Theory," in *Negations*, p. 143.

6 This paper was originally given at the conference "The Legacy of Herbert Marcuse," held at the University of California, Berkeley, in November 1998 [editors].

7 Herbert Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation*, Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1969, p. 13.

8 Herbert Marcuse, "The Affirmative Character of Culture," in *Negations*, pp. 88–133; "Some Remarks on Aragon: Art and Politics in the Totalitarian Era," in *Technology, War and Fascism*, pp. 199–214; "The Aesthetic Dimension," in *Eros and Civilization*, New York: Vintage, 1962, pp. 157–79; *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, Boston: Beacon, 1978.

9 *Technology, War and Fascism*, p. 214.

10 David Cooper, ed. *To Free A Generation: The Dialectics of Liberation* (New York: Collier Books, 1969), p. 175.

11 Cooper, p. 190.

12 Cooper, p. 11.

13 Cooper, p. 177.

14 p. 191-2.

15 *Essay on Liberation*, pp. 76ff.