In Praise of Herbert Marcuse. The Scientific Study of Capitalism

Part I

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Criticised by orthodox Marxists for being a "pseudo-left" agitator, **Herbert Marcuse** *was nonetheless committed to a scientific study of the material conditions of industrial capitalism.*

Herbert Marcuse's theoretical development was rooted in his analysis of the relationship between civilisation and domination. His critique of the rule of the consumer society reflects a synthesis of such earlier theorists as Freud and Marx, and adds to a wealth of critical social theory by the Frankfurt school.

Marcuse argues that a process of alienation consists in consumer society that results in one's being alienated from nature and eros. He contends that capitalist and state communist societies dominate individuals and the whole citizenry through a one-dimensional productive apparatus, dominated from within by instrumental rationalities that suppress values that can't be validated by the status quo, thus integrating individuals into regulated modes of thought and behaviour. Marcuse worried that the hegemony of instrumental rationalities in all spheres of life denied oxygen to the alternative, critical rationalities necessary to stimulate visionary social change. All these elements coalesced to create an original and vibrant politics of liberation that ran deep through the culture of the sixties.

Capitalism and alienation

Like in Marx, **Marcuse's philosophy of liberation** argues that the central problem of modernity is that **class society and capitalism alienates the essence of our humanity.** As a critic of industrialisation, Marcuse was attentive to the fact that the consolidation of industrial society had created a mass of unhappy humans robbed of their full creative potential, whilst concurrently turning us into systematic abusers of nature. It is a development of Marx's argument that under the capitalist economic system the interests and wellbeing of the individual and wider society are lost in alienated labour.

According to Marx, wage labour demands subjection to specialised, menial tasks which may not be socially useful, which may even be socially harmful, and which tend to lack the meaningful, creative and self-expressive aspects of fulfilling labour. He argued alongside Engels that workers are alienated from their product because their product is appropriated in the agenda to extract profit from it, and that they are alienated from their own productive activity insofar as they have no control over it and it doesn't express their goals. On this view there is an antagonism between human instinct and the demands of capitalist society. The economic system permanently subjugates the instincts, the instincts we ought to

nurture in order to fully live.

Marx calls this process the alienation of "species being," the frustration of our intrinsically human capacity to engage in conscious and creative work. **It is precisely because capitalism frustrates the need for satisfying, gratifying work that it is an alienating system**. Moreover, capitalism creates alienation because it is an economic model in which the masses do not own the means of production, and thus have to survive by working within the capitalist system, selling their labour power at a rate that extorts them. In addition, under capitalism we find our lives dominated by faceless powers. In The German Ideology, Marx and Engels describe alienation as "the positing of social activity, the consolidation of our product as a real power over us, growing out of our control." Marcuse could see from the perspective of the twentieth century that Marx had been right, and if anything alienation had become more entrenched and extreme with time, with workers losing even more control over the direction of their lives and society.

In 1964, **reflecting on the alienation of man** in the planned waste and irrational affluence of the consumer society, Marcuse asked how man can end "his servitude on an exploitative apparatus, which in satisfying his needs, perpetuates his servitude." Developing Marx's line of thought on the alienation of the individual in commodity fetishism – the erotic identification of consumers with the objects they purchase – Marcuse added that their interests are lost in the alienated labour needed to create the products and services which constitute false, manufactured needs. At the basis of the consumer society is a means of production which superficially satisfies people by meeting their basic needs whilst avalanching them simultaneously with false, socially created needs.

Because false needs – those that are external to our basic, vital needs – are "superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression" the prospect of meeting everybody's needs and eliminating the cruel prevalence of toil and injustice to deal with scarcity is limited. Thus the social controls of wasteful production and consumption prevail whilst workers are too stultified by the avalanche of products and diversions to think critically, outside of the whole. To maintain the system we are needed as its consumers and we internalise the ethics (or lack thereof) of the system. We work in order to consume because we must keep buying. Our motivations and aspirations are created and shaped entirely within the system. The consumer society has perfected the manipulation of our innermost needs as it creates an unprecedented and extensive regime of control over our personal and social behaviour.

In *Eros and Civilisation* Marcuse declared that civilisation "is, generally speaking, founded on the suppression of instincts." Since alienated labour is hoisted to the demands of productivity and the performance principle, it eviscerates energies that might, in a non-repressive society, be applied to non-alienated libidinal work. Contrary to Freud, Marcuse argues that the need to repress instinct to deal with scarcity is now minimised by technological accomplishments. Freud had argued that the repression of eros by degrees of sublimation allowed for human energy to be applied fruitfully in labour to defeat resource scarcity, and he believed the pleasure principle ought to be denied in the interest of the performance principle.

Marcuse on the other hand reasoned that because technological advancements promised to provide for our basic needs, even to excess, scarcity was a void justification for repression, and he saw in society an avalanche of false needs and organised, managed scarcity to defend the reign of the performance principle. Instead of repressing eros in the interest of

control, growth and the status quo, he argued we ought to create a new society based on non-repressive relations, incorporating automation to provide for necessities whilst we use our free time to cultivate our human potentialities and liberate our consciousness.

An inextricable aspect of Marcuse's theory is the role that alienation of external nature also plays in a repressive civilisation. He detested the wasteful production and consumption of the industrialised world, lamenting the fact that human energies couldn't be harnessed for more socially and ecologically useful enterprises. According to Marcuse's ecological vision, the instrumental rationalities at the heart of advanced industrial civilisation rationalise domination over nature, resulting in the subsequent objectification of people and environments in extractivist economic systems. Marcuse sees the liberation of people and environments, their protection and preservation from organised exploitation, as a struggle with equal stakes. His work drew a decisive link between technological development and domination, reasoning that teleologies of modernity which conflate capitalism with progress were fundamentally flawed. Marcuse saw many problems with the ideology of the advanced industrial societies. According to his view oppression consists in industrialisation, which assimilates individuals and external nature into the totalising authority of the mode of production.

Marcuse argued that alienation occurs for all groups in society, not just the proletariat, with the advancement of scientism and technology pushing all towards a closed consciousness. Most Marxist consciousness of and reflection on the revolutionary subject had stayed within the parameters delimited by Marx's theory of the proletariat as a revolutionary agent, as able to overcome their alienation in a worker's revolution, but Marcuse's and the New Left's remediation of Marx was an attempt to temporise left theory with the realities of the twentieth century. Because, as Marcuse argued, negation of capitalist and state communist exploitation could only develop beyond the monolithic one-dimensional society and tightly regulated administration of needs and satisfactions, the assimilated proletariat could not necessarily be depended upon to foment revolution anymore. Marcuse argued the theory had become historically obsolescent because the working classes had been defused and deradicalised by their assimilation into the system of false, manipulated needs. Instead, Marcuse's theory of one-dimensionality and the Great Refusal argued, we ought to identify where negation of the whole might develop, namely amongst students, minorities and intellectuals. In his view, the Great Refusal was to be a conscious, active transformation of oneself and society, a drive for one's own liberation and the transformation of the world beyond, to transcend the limitations of the closed off universe, the stultifying conditions of one-dimensional life. It is to this visionary aspect of Marcuse's theory – the idea of one-dimensional society – that I will now turn.

One-dimensionality

Marcuse's star rose with the explosion of his study of advanced industrial society into the forefront of critical social theory and practice. First published in 1964, his best known work One-dimensional Man spoke to the anti-authoritarian zeitgeist of the sixties and ameliorated several strands of his thought on society and freedom, arguing that we find ourselves and all other living things to be parts of a vast being in which its entirety has the power to maintain our world as a ripe habitat for its project of domination. Marcuse's findings and conclusions were very much out of the step with the conventional political wisdom of the West when he published them. Cold War demonology had unequivocally cast communism as the oppressor against liberal democracy, but to Marcuse the truth was more nuanced and

complex.

The implication democracies could be oppressive in ways like communism was unwelcome news to those with a vested interest in the status quo, and ideas like that were discouraged to the point Marcuse received death threats. In sum, One-dimensional Man critiques the consumerist, technocratic society and the instrumental rationalities that dominate it from within, suppressing opposition to the irrational status quo and ultimately threatening the realisation of human and individual freedom. According to the theory, the technological administration of society under advanced capitalism (as well as state communism) had assimilated people into a one-dimensional universe, in which potentials for radical social change were curtailed by a subtle network of repression.

Referring to the "society without opposition" and its centralised yet diffused strategies of control and domination, Marcuse wrote that "the distinguishing feature of advanced industrial society is its effective suffocation of those needs which demand liberation," because the centralised production of needs and aspirations by the experts and administrators of society integrated individuals into the values of the establishment and its restrictive rules of thought and behaviour. Marcuse argued that one-dimensional infrastructure produces one-dimensional people and a cognitive dissonance which stultifies the transformative, restorative power of negative, dialectical thought and critical rationality. In the closed-off universe there is no space for such a thing as a revolutionary agent. Visionary utopian thinking is reduced to Marxist history, irrelevant, forgotten. It is against the repression of these values that Marcuse wrote, in the spirit of a genuinely radical critique.

Marcuse's flash of enlightenment was the thought that to keep society in stasis, there must be a dominating force regulating it, and that somehow the constellations of new economic, technical and military forces must be involved. One-dimensional Man presented an extensive analysis of the universal system he identified as the mainframe of technological societies, placing special emphasis on the role of the consumer economy in totalising the power of commodities over the collective, the individual psyche and the biological organism. Marcuse's writings reasoned that there had been a decline of the proletariat as an agent of radical social change, because the destructive engine of one-dimensional thought had successfully subjugated them to false consciousness. In light of these new methods of social control coalescing to contain social change, the relation between democracy and totalitarianism thus becomes much closer and more essential than is usually thought.

As well as reflecting Marcuse's independent research as a student of the new false consciousness, the theory of one-dimensionality also contributed to the Frankfurt school project which aspired to a critical theory of society and sought to explain the cooptation and subversion of politics, art and culture by the industrial society. The Frankfurt theorists recognised that changes in production and consumption in the twentieth century had had concurrent effects on society which had jeopardized utopian change. They argued that the extension of productivity, the growth of technological efficiency, and the distribution of goods to the masses had given the industrial society a new and disturbingly effective set of introjected social controls. The consumer economy, the "affluent monster", had created a society which integrated individuals into a system in which their needs and satisfaction were administered from a small island of experts. The purpose of Marcuse's philosophy was to ask how man can end "his dependence on an exploitative apparatus which, in satisfying his needs, perpetuates his servitude?"

Because it only validates thought and behaviour within its rationale, the one-dimensional society represses the emergence of a critical perspective on the problems created by the economic status quo. An avalanche of products, advertising and diversions distract people's focus from irrational spending on defence and the neglection of public policy to address systemic issues like racism and poverty. This notion of the closed-off universe is the crux of the theory of one-dimensionality and it is deserving of more consideration in order to understand Marcuse's analysis of the prospects for liberation. Although within the one-dimensional apparatus there is no tension between what is and what could be, his account of it provides grounds for both pessimism and optimism that alternatives may be formulated. In the introduction to One-dimensional Man Marcuse declares that the book will "vacillate throughout between two contradictory hypotheses: (1) that advanced industrial society is capable of containing qualitative change for the foreseeable future; (2) that forces and tendencies exist which may break this containment and explode the society."

According to the theory, society does contain within it the means for collapse of the internal system of domination. Marcuse reserves a privileged role for critical reason and its potential for criticising irrational forms of social life. Instead of using one-dimensionality as a metaphor for unending totalitarianism, Marcuse meant for it to have a more subtle meaning, as a way of describing the standardised, naturalised mode of thought and behaviour in the advanced industrial state, to which, crucially, there were real – but hidden – alternatives. One-dimensional Man uses comparisons against deficient conditions in society to throw light on alternative states that might be. The gap between the status quo and utopia opens in consciousness of and reflection on what is missing. From Marcuse's point of view the activity of genuine thinking about social transformation is a fight against democratic totalitarianism and fascism itself.

At the centre of the one-dimensional development was the slow and steady encroachment of instrumental rationalities in all spheres of life in the advanced industrial state. Marcuse wrote extensively on the complexly correlated relationship between technics and society. In an article in French he described his thesis that "technology has replaced ontology " as the primary means of defining subject-object relations, the basis of our understanding of the world. In other words, instrumental rationalities – rather than dialectical thought- replaced hitherto prevailing ontology, which posited a conscious, active subject confronting a world of controllable objects. The processes, protocols and algorithms of the dominant mode of production subordinated both subject and object to the means and ends of a pre-ordained industrial universe. It was a universe in which the people had next to no control or autonomy over their experience of the world.

On this view, imaginative capabilities become crucial to liberation.

The hegemony of instrumental reason gave rise to a version of social reality which describes itself as objective, neutral, unloaded by bias or value judgements. In truth, it reinforces the instrumental logic which justifies domination of the natural world and human bodies, affirming the value judgement that our worth consists in how much of ourselves we can sacrifice in service of economic growth and exchange value. Marcuse detested this objectivity as a false construct and one more irrefutable verity to do away with. He argued that potential for social transformation consisted in the ability of conscientious citizens to reclaim spaces for radical thought, to claim territories where 'negative' thought at odds with the prevailing positivism could flourish. The one-dimensional apparatus was a vicarious, unstable deception that had to militate to ensure it's own survival, as explosive forces of opposition and dissent began to shatter its foundations in the germination of the Great

Refusal, which sought to prefigure an alternative society based on non-repressive relations.

To be continued…

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