Herbert Marcuse

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Herbert Marcuse gained world renown during the 1960s as a philosopher, social theorist, and political activist, celebrated in the media as "father of the New Left." University professor and author of many books and articles, Marcuse won notoriety when he was perceived as both an influence on and defender of the "New Left" in the United States and Europe. His theory of "one-dimensional" society provided critical perspectives on contemporary capitalist and state communist societies and his notion of "the great refusal" won him renown as a theorist of revolutionary change and "liberation from the affluent society." Consequently, he became one of the most influential intellectuals in the United States during the 1960s and into the 1970s. And yet, ultimately, it may be his contributions to philosophy that are most significant and in this entry I shall attempt to specify Marcuse's contributions to contemporary philosophy and his place in the narrative of continental philosophy.

Heidegger, Marxism, and Philosophy

Marcuse was born in 1898 in Berlin and after serving with the German army in World War I, he went to Freiburg to pursue his studies. After receiving his Ph.D. in literature in 1922, and following a short career as a bookseller in Berlin, he returned to Freiburg in 1928 to study philosophy with Martin Heidegger, then one of the most influential thinkers in Germany. Marcuse's first published article in 1928 attempted a synthesis of the philosophical perspectives of phenomenology, existentialism, and Marxism, a synthesis which decades later would be carried out again by various "existential" and "phenomenological" Marxists, such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as well as American students and intellectuals in the New Left.

Marcuse argued that much Marxist thought had degenerated into a rigid orthodoxy and thus needs concrete lived and "phenomenological" experience to revivify the theory; at the same time, Marcuse believed that Marxism neglected the problem of the individual and throughout his life he was concerned with individual liberation and well-being in addition to social transformation and the possibilities of a transition from capitalism to socialism.

Marcuse continued to maintain throughout his life that Heidegger was the greatest teacher and thinker that he had ever encountered. The Marcuse archives contain a full set of his lecture notes from the late 1920s until he left Frieburg in 1933 that document the intensity of his interest in Heidegger's philosophy and his devotion to his lectures. Yet Marcuse was highly dismayed concerning Heidegger's political affiliations with national socialism and after completing a "Habilitations Dissertation" on *Hegel's Ontology and the Theory of Historicity*, he decided to leave Freiburg in 1933 to join the *Institut fur Sozialforschung* (Institute for Social Research) which was located in Frankfurt, but which would soon open branch offices at Geneva and then at Columbia University, both of which Marcuse would join.

His study of *Hegel's Ontology and Theory of Historicity* (1932) contributed to the Hegel

renaissance that was taking place in Europe by stressing the importance of Hegel's ontology of life and history, as well as his idealist theory of spirit and his dialectics. Moreover, Marcuse published the first major review in 1933 of Marx's just published _Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844_; the review anticipated the tendency to revise interpretations of Marxism from the standpoint of the works of the early Marx. These works revealed Marcuse to be an astute student of Germany philosophy and he was emerging as one of the most promising theorists of his generation.

Critical Theory of Society

As a member of the Institute for Social Research, Marcuse soon became deeply involved in their interdisciplinary projects which included working out a model for critical social theory, developing a theory of the new stage of state and monopoly capitalism, articulating the relationships between philosophy, social theory, and cultural criticism, and providing a systematic analysis and critique of German fascism. Marcuse deeply identified with the "Critical Theory" of the Institute and throughout his life was close to Max Horkheimer, T.W. Adorno, and others in the Institute's inner circle.

In 1934, Marcuse -- a German jew and radical -- fled from Nazism and emigrated to the United States where he lived for the rest of his life. The Institute for Social Research was granted offices and an academic affiliation with Columbia University, where Marcuse worked during the 1930s and early 1940s. His first major work in English, *Reason and Revolution* (1941), traced the genesis of the ideas of Hegel, Marx, and modern social theory. It demonstrated the similarities between Hegel and Marx, and introduced many English speaking readers to the Hegelian-Marxian tradition of dialectical thinking and social analysis. The text continues to be one of the best introductions to Hegel and Marx and one of the best analyses of the categories and methods of dialectical thinking.

In 1941, Marcuse joined the OSS (Office of Secret Services) and then worked in the State Department, becoming the head of the Central European bureau by the end of World War II. After serving in the U.S. government from 1941 through the early 1950's, which Marcuse always claimed was motivated by a desire to struggle against fascism, he returned to intellectual work and published *Eros and Civilization* in 1955 which attempted an audacious synthesis of Marx and Freud and sketched the outlines of a non-repressive society. While Freud argued in *Civilization and Its Discontents* that civilization inevitably involved repression and suffering, Marcuse argued that other elements in Freud's theory suggested that the unconscious contained evidence of an instinctual drive toward happiness and freedom. This evidence is articulated, Marcuse suggests, in daydreams, works of art, philosophy, and other cultural products. Based on this reading of Freud and study of an emancipatory tradition of philosophy and culture, Marcuse sketched the outlines of a non-repressive civilization which would involve libidinal and non-alienated labor, play, free and open sexuality, and production of a society and culture which would further freedom and happiness. His vision of liberation anticipated many of the values of the 1960s counterculture and helped Marcuse to become a major intellectual and political influence during that decade.

Marcuse argued that the current organization of society produced "surplus repression" by

imposing socially unnecessary labor, unnecessary restrictions on sexuality, and a social system organized around profit and exploitation. In light of the diminution of scarcity and prospects for increased abundance, Marcuse called for the end of repression and creation of a new society. His radical critique of existing society and its values, and his call for a non-repressive civilization, elicited a dispute with his former colleague Erich Fromm who accused him of "nihilism" (toward existing values and sociedty) and irresponsible hedonism. Marcuse had earlier attacked Fromm for excessive "conformity" and "idealism" and repeated these charges in the polemical debates over his work following the publication of *Eros and Civilization* which heatedly discussed Marcuse's use of Freud, his critique of existing civilization, and his proposals for an alternative organization of society and culture.

In 1958, Marcuse received a tenured position at Brandeis University and became one of the most popular and influential members of its faculty. During his period of government work, Marcuse had been a specialist in fascism and communism and he published a critical study of the Soviet Union in 1958 (*Soviet Marxism*) which broke the taboo in his circles against speaking critically of the USSR and Soviet communism. While attempting to develop a many-sided analysis of the USSR, Marcuse focused his critique on Soviet bureaucracy, culture, values, and the differences between the Marxian theory and the Soviet version of Marxism. Distancing himself from those who interpreted Soviet communism as a bureaucratic system incapable of reform and democratization, Marcuse pointed to potential "liberalizing trends" which countered the Stalinist bureaucracy which indeed eventually materialized in the 1980s under Gorbachev.

Next, Marcuse published a wide-ranging critique of both advanced capitalist and communist societies in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). This book theorized the decline of revolutionary potential in capitalist societies and the development of new forms of social control. Marcuse argued that "advanced industrial society" created false needs which integrated individuals into the existing system of production and consumption. Mass media and culture, advertising, industrial management, and contemporary modes of thought all reproduced the existing system and attempt to eliminate negativity, critique, and opposition. The result was a "one-dimensional" universe of thought and behavior in which the very aptitude and ability for critical thinking and oppositional behavior was withering away.

Not only had capitalism integrated the working class, the source of potential revolutionary opposition, but they had developed new techniques of stabilization through state policies and the development of new forms of social control. Thus Marcuse questioned two of the fundamental postulates of orthodox Marxism: the revolutionary proletariat and inevitability of capitalist crisis. In contrast with the more extravagant demands of orthodox Marxism, Marcuse championed non-integrated forces of minorities, outsiders, and radical intelligentsia and attempted to nourish oppositional thought and behavior through promoting radical thinking and opposition.

One-Dimensional Man was severely criticized by orthodox Marxists and theorists of various political and theoretical commitments. Despite its pessimism, it influenced many in the New Left as it articulated their growing dissatisfaction with both capitalist societies and Soviet communist societies. Moreover, Marcuse himself continued to defend demands for revolutionary change and defended the new, emerging forces of radical opposition, thus winning him the hatred of establishment forces and the respect of the new radicals.

The New Left and Radical Politics

One-Dimensional Man was followed by a series of books and articles which articulated New Left politics and critiques of capitalist societies in "Repressive Tolerance" (1965), *An Essay on Liberation* (1969), and *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (1972). "Repressive Tolerance" attacked liberalism and those who refused to take a stand during the controversies of the 1960s. It won Marcuse the reputation of being an intransigent radical and ideologue for the Left. *An Essay on Liberation* celebrated all of the existing liberation movements from the Viet Cong to the hippies and exhilarated many radicals while further alienating establishment academics and those who opposed the movements of the 1960s. *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, by contrast, articulates the new realism that was setting in during the early 1960s when it was becoming clear that the most extravagant hopes of the 1960s were being dashed by a turn to the right and "counterrevolution" against the 1960s.

In 1965, Brandeis refused to renew his teaching contract and Marcuse soon after received a position at the University of California at La Jolla where he remained until his retirement in the 1970s. During this period -- of his greatest influence -- Marcuse also published many articles and gave lectures and advice to student radicals all over the world. He travelled widely and his work was often discussed in the mass media, becoming one of the few American intellectuals to gain such attention. Never surrendering his revolutionary vision and commitments, Marcuse continued to his death to defend the Marxian theory and libertarian socialism. A charismatic teacher, Marcuse's students began to gain influential academic positions and to promote his ideas, making him a major force in U.S. intellectual life.

Marcuse also dedicated much of his work to aesthetics and his final book, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1979), briefly summarizes his defense of the emancipatory potential of aesthetic form in so called "high culture." Marcuse thought that the best of the bourgeois tradition of art contained powerful indictments of bourgeois society and emancipatory visions of a better society. Thus he attempted to defend the importance of great art for the projection of emancipation and argued that cultural revolution was an indispensable part of revolutionary politics.

Marcuse's work in philosophy and social theory generated fierce controversy and polemics, and most studies of his work are highly tendentious and frequently sectarian. Although much of the controversy involved his critiques of contemporary capitalist societies and defense of radical social change, in retrospect, Marcuse left behind a complex and many-sided body of work comparable to the legacies of Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukacs, T.W. Adorno, and Walter Benjamin.

Marcuse's Legacy

Since his death in 1979, Herbert Marcuse's influence has been steadily waning. The extent to which his work has been ignored in progressive circles is curious, as Marcuse was one of the most influential radical theorists of the day during the 1960s and his work continued to be a topic of interest and controversy during the 1970s. While the waning of the revolutionary movements with which he was involved helps explain Marcuse's eclipse in popularity, the lack of new texts

and publications has also contributed. For while there have been a large number of new translations of works by Benjamin, Adorno, and Habermas during the past decade, few new publications of untranslated or uncollected material by Marcuse have appeared, although there have been a steady stream of books on Marcuse (see References and Further Writings below). In addition, while there has been great interest in the writings of Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard, Lyotard, and other French "postmodern," or "poststructuralist," theorists, Marcuse did not fit into the fashionable debates concerning modern and postmodern thought. Unlike Adorno, Marcuse did not anticipate the postmodern attacks on reason and his dialectics were not "negative." Rather he subscribed to the project of reconstructing reason and of positing utopian alternatives to the existing society -- a dialectical imagination that has fallen out of favor in an era that rejects totalizing thought and grand visions of liberation and social reconstruction.

The neglect of Marcuse may be altered through the publication of a wealth of material, much of it unpublished and unknown, that is found in the Herbert Marcuse archives in the Stadtsbibliothek in Frankfurt. During the summers of 1989 and 1991, and the Fall of 1990, I went through the archival material and was astonished at the number of valuable unpublished texts. The Marcuse archive is a treasure house and plans are shaping up for Routledge to publish many volumes of this material. Some extremely interesting manuscripts on war, technology, and totalitarianism from the 1940s and some unpublished book manuscripts, articles, and lectures from the 1960s and 1970s may lead to a Marcuse Renaissance, or at least awaken interest in his work.

Such a return to Marcuse is plausible, first, because he addresses issues that continue to be of relevance to contemporary theory and politics and the unpublished manuscripts contain much material pertinent to contemporary concerns which could provide the basis for a rebirth of interest in Marcuse's thought (for examples of the contemporary relevance of Marcuse, see the studies in Bokina and Luke, 1994). Secondly, Marcuse provides comprehensive philosophical perspectives on domination and liberation, a powerful method and framework for analyzing contemporary society, and a vision of liberation that is richer than classical Marxism, other versions of Critical Theory, and current versions of postmodern theory.

Indeed, Marcuse presents rich philosophical perspectives on human beings and their relationship to nature and society, as well as subtantive social theory and radical politics. In retrospect, Marcuse's vision of liberation -- of the full development of the individual in a non-repressive society -distinguishes his work, along with sharp critique of existing forms of domination and oppression, and he emerges in this narrative as a philosopher of forces of domination and liberation. Primarily, a philosopher, Marcuse's work lacked the sustained empirical analysis in some versions of Marxist theory and the detailed conceptual analysis found in many versions of political theory. Yet he constantly showed how science, technology, and theory itself had a political dimension and produced a solid body of ideological and political analysis of many of the dominant forms of society, culture, and thought during the turbulent era in which he lived and he constantly struggled for a better world.

Thus, I believe that Marcuse overcomes the limitations of many current varieties of philosophy and social theory and that his writings provide a viable starting-point for theoretical and political concerns of the present age. In particular, his articulations of philosophy with social theory,

cultural criticism, and radical politics seem an enduring legacy. While mainstream academic divisions of labor isolate philosophy from other disciplines -- and other disciplines from philosophy --, Marcuse and the critical theorists provide philosophy with an important function within social theory and cultural criticism and develop philosophical perspectives in interaction with concrete analyses of society, politics, and culture in the present age. This dialectical approach thus assigns philosophy continued functions and important in the theoretical discourses of our era.

In addition, Marcuse emerges as a sharp, even prescient, social analyist. He was one of the first on the left who both developed a sharp critique of Soviet Marxism and yet foresaw the liberalizing trends in the Soviet Union (see Marcuse, 1958). After the uprisings in Poland and Hungary in 1956 were ruthlessly suppressed, many speculated that Khrushchev would have to roll back his program of de-Stalinization and crack down further. Marcuse, however, differed, writing in 1958: "The Eastern European events were likely to slow down and perhaps even reverse de-Stalinization in some fields; particularly in international strategy, a considerable 'hardening' has been apparent. However, if our analysis is correct, the fundamental trend will continue and reassert itself throughout such reversals. With respect to internal Soviet developments, this means at present continuation of 'collective leadership,' decline in the power of the secret police, decentralization, legal reforms, relaxation in censorship, liberalization in cultural life" (Marcuse, 1958, p. 174).

In part as a response to the collapse of Communism and in part as a result of new technological and economic conditions, the capitalist system has been undergoing disorganization and reorganization. Marcuse's loyalty to Marxism always led him to analyze new conditions within capitalist societies that had emerged since Marx. Social theory today can thus build on this Marcusean tradition in developing critical theories of contemporary society grounded in analyses of the transformations of capitalism and emergence of a new global economic world system. For Marcuse, social theory was integrally historical and must conceptualize the salient phenomena of the present age and changes from previous social formations. While the postmodern theories of Baudrillard and Lyotard claim to postulate a rupture in history, they fail to analyze the key constituents of the changes going on, with Baudrillard even declaring the "end of political economy." Marcuse, by contrast, always attempted to analyze the changing configurations of capitalism and to relate social and cultural changes to changes in the economy.

Moreover, Marcuse always paid special attention to the important role of technology in organizing contemporary societies and with the emergence of new technologies in our time the Marcusean emphasis on the relationship between technology, the economy, culture, and everyday life is especially important. Marcuse also paid attention to new forms of culture and the ways that culture provided both instruments of manipulation and liberation. The proliferation of new media technologies and cultural forms in recent years also demands a Marcusean perspective to capture both their potentialities for progressive social change and the possibilities of more stream-lined forms of social domination. While postmodern theories also describe new technologies, Marcuse always related the economy to culture and technology, seeing both emancipatory and dominating potentials, while theorists like Baudrillard are one-dimensional, often falling prey to technological determinism and views of society and culture that fail to see positive and emancipatory potentials.

Finally, while versions of postmodern theory, like Baudrillard, have renounced radical politics, Marcuse always attempted to link his critical theory with the most radical political movements of the day and to thus politicize his philosophy and social teory. Thus, I am suggesting that Marcuse's thought continues to provide important resources and stimulus for radical theory and politics in the present age. Marcuse himself was open to new theoretical and political currents, yet remained loyal to those theories which he believed provided inspiration and substance for the tasks of the present age. Consequently, as we confront the theoretical and political problems of the day, I believe that the works of Herbert Marcuse provide important resources for our current situation and that a Marcusean renaissance could help inspire new theories and politics for the contemporary era, providing continental philosophy with new impulses and tasks.

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