

## **Marcuse's Legacies**

Angela Y. Davis

If we are to examine Marcuse's legacies – and I want to suggest that there are plural legacies – and suggest some future theoretical and practical directions, it seems to me that in seeking to understand the deep connection between his later writings and the political conflicts of the late sixties, we must simultaneously extricate his work from those linkages that have threatened to entomb and romanticize Marcuse's ideas. Academics and activists alike find it difficult to disassociate Marcuse from the era of the late sixties and early seventies. 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. Parenthetically, as those of us who came of age during the sixties and early seventies 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 sixties being viewed as a point of origin, an ordinary place, rather than an 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 eighties and nineties, 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 counterproductive 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 sixties 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 a sorry 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 transformative 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 thirties or early forties for a study on which they apparently planned to collaborate – „A History of the Doctrine of Social Change.“<sup>1</sup> While this study was not actualized as a result of the outbreak of World War II, 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 U.S. denazification policy. I urge you to read the recently published posthumous work,<sup>2</sup> especially because of the mystery surrounding Marcuse’s involvement with the State Department – including the absurd rumors that he was a C.I.A. 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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, Douglas Kellner (ed.), London and New York: Routledge, 1998, pp. 93-104.

Perhaps Marcuse's willingness to engage so directly in this antifascist project in the aftermath of World War II led him to later broaden his antifascist theoretical approach, drawing U.S. society into the frame of his analysis. In other words, precisely because he was so concretely and immediately involved in opposing German fascism, he was also able and willing to identify fascist tendencies in the U.S. Because Adorno's and Horkheimer's antifascism expressed itself on a more formal theoretical register, it remained entirely anchored in German history and tradition. When Marcuse wrote „The Struggle Against Liberalism in the Totalitarian View of the State,“<sup>3</sup> 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 U.S. 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 U.S. 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:

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2 Herbert Marcuse, *Technology, War and Fascism*.

3 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.

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.<sup>4</sup>

This is one of my favorite Marcuse passages: utopia and philosophical obstinacy. Obstinacy is certainly a quality that drives those of us who call ourselves veteran radicals, but not obstinacy in the sense that we need to hold on to obsolete theories, ideas and organizing practices, rather the obstinacy of maintaining that emancipatory promises are still entangled in the terrifying and ever-expanding system of global capitalism.

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

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<sup>4</sup> Herbert Marcuse, "Philosophy and Critical Theory," in *Negations*, p. 143.

conference.<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup>

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*.<sup>7</sup> I cite a passage from his essay on Aragon:

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<sup>5</sup> This paper was originally given at the conference “The Legacy of Herbert Marcuse,” held at the University of California, Berkeley in November 1998 [editors].

<sup>6</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation*, Middlesex, UK: Penguin, 1969, p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> 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, 157-79; *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist*

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.<sup>8</sup>

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

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*Aesthetics*, Boston: Beacon, 1978.

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. 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.

On my way back from Germany, during the summer of 1967, I attended a conference in London, *Dialectics of Liberation* organized by R.D. Laing and David Cooper. I was primarily interested in attending the conference because Herbert Marcuse was one of the major speakers and because I was on my way to the University of California, San Diego to study with him. As I prepared my notes for this talk, I discovered that my copy of the collection of presentations from that conference was missing from my bookshelves. So I embarked on a long and ultimately futile search for this book. The library at the University of California, Santa Cruz listed a copy in its collection, but a librarian finally discovered that it had been placed in storage in another city and that there was no way to retrieve it. No one could tell me what had happened to the four copies owned by the University of California, Berkeley library and still listed as part of its current collection. A librarian there speculated that the books had been discarded without removing them from the computer. This search for *Dialectics of Liberation* made me wonder whether other texts including Marcuse's writings have fallen into a similar state of disuse.

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



But allow me to make a few observations about the conference itself, which gathered an amazing collection of participants – from scholars and university professors to community activists and prominent figures in the black movement at that time. I attended the conference because I was about to resume my studies with Herbert Marcuse and wanted to hear his presentation, as well as those of R.D. Laing, David Cooper and Judith Mitchell. However, this was also my first opportunity to meet Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Toure) and Michael X – the leading black militant in Britain at the time, who was later executed in Trinidad.

Today such a gathering – which was at the same time a scholarly conference, an assembly of community activists and a “happening“ – what we now call performance art – would seem quite bizarre. It would clearly challenge our notions of community. But Marcuse felt very much at home in this environment, always pushing himself to communicate across the divides that usually define the language we use – across academic disciplines and across boundaries of race, class, culture and nation. Approximately one month ago, I was a co-convener of a conference that took place on this campus – *Critical Resistance: Beyond the Prison Industrial Complex*.<sup>9</sup> If Marcuse were alive and well today, no doubt he would have been a key figure in this conference, for we tried precisely to construct unpredictable conversations across those disciplinary divides. Academics talked with activists, advocates, artists, former prisoners and – with the aid of video-conferencing technology – people currently incarcerated in state prisons and county jails.

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<sup>9</sup> This took place at the University of California, Berkeley on September 25-27, 1998. For more information on the conference and for the current political activities of the group that emerged from it, see their website at [www.criticalresistance.org](http://www.criticalresistance.org) [editors].

Marcuse played an important role during the late sixties and early seventies 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 use their brains in order to figure out what he was saying in a public rally speech. 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.<sup>10</sup>

While Marcuse was specifically referring to the way Nixon’s law-and-order rhetoric conflated criminals and 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

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<sup>10</sup> *Essay on Liberation*, p. 76ff.

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 preeminent 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 terrains that he himself could never have imagined.