

Herbert Marcuse and Marxism

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The 70 year-old philosopher Herbert Marcuse has passed through three more or less distinct stages in his intellectual development. His earliest works, such as his 1932 essay on the then recently discovered *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* of the young Marx show the overpowering influence of his teacher, the German existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger. During the years of exile from Nazi Germany - the 1930s - Marcuse gradually liberated himself from Heidegger's sway and moved closer to orthodox Marxism, albeit a Marxism with a strong Hegelian bent. This phase culminated in *Reason and Revolution* (1941), Marcuse's finest work and possibly the best book on Hegel yet written in English. Here Marcuse sees in the industrial working class the world-transforming "force of negativity".

His current phase - when Marcuse wrote the works which are most influential among young radicals today - is marked by two principal features. There is a growing concern with the possibilities of man as they might be realised in a genuinely human society. This is the central theme of *Eros and Civilisation* (1955), in which Marcuse, developing some concepts of Freud, projects the image of a "non-repressive civilisation". At the same time he exhibits growing doubt that the working class remains capable of playing the role assigned to it by Marxist theory, of fundamentally transforming basic social institutions so that these as-yet-unfulfilled possibilities of man could begin to be realised. In *Soviet Marxism* (1958), Marcuse misleadingly interprets Stalinist ideology as a Marxist response to a fundamentally changed world historical situation. He implicitly justifies the line of "building socialism in one country" as a necessity imposed on the Soviet Union owing to the inability of the working classes of the advanced capitalist countries to carry through socialist revolutions.

This stage of Marcuse's thought has found its most systematic formulation in *One Dimensional Man* (1964). There Marcuse develops the concept of a contemporary industrial society exempt from basic change, and seeks to explain how it has happened that the once revolutionary working class has become a prop of the existing order.

His proposition that the working class has become such a conservative element - not just temporarily and under specific conjunctural conditions but permanently and as a consequence of applying the Marxist method which earlier enabled Marcuse to recognise the working class as a revolutionary agent. His change of view comes from the fact that by and large for the past 20 years the working class in the most advanced capitalist countries has shown few signs of any revolutionary activity. By accepting this fact as the over-riding reality to guide his analysis of social phenomena, Marcuse departs from the method of historical materialism.

Marcuse himself apparently does not recognise his shift in method. He asserts in good faith that he remains a Marxist; that it is objective social reality and not his method of thought that has changed. In fact he does cling to the Marxist tradition in two important methodological respect as well as in one important theoretical conclusion. First of all his method is dialectical, in the sense that it is aimed at the discovery and exposure of contradiction. However - and this point is of decisive importance for the difference between Marcuse's present method and that of Marxism - the sphere within which he now seeks to lay bare contradiction is much narrower and even of another order than the sphere in which the Marxian dialectician pursues the moving forces of things.

Secondly, Marcuse shares with Marxism the mandate to unite theory with action. For him, the function of theory is to produce true consciousness where hitherto false consciousness prevailed, so that men can act against their enslaving social conditions. Marcuse frequently defends himself against charges of “quietism”, of cultivating a purely contemplative attitude. But his activist intention is continually frustrated by the image of the social world that is presented in his theory. That rests on the conception that the social world has become, in principle, unchangeable.

Finally, Marcuse shares with Marxists the conviction that the only potentially, ultimately world-transforming agency in the modern world is the working class. Only, contrary to Marxism, he holds that this force can no longer realise that potential. This is the source of his almost unrelieved pessimism: if the working class will not change the world, the world cannot be changed.

The difference in method between Marcuse and Marxists is detectable in a passage from *One Dimensional Man*, where Marcuse states his view on the difference in the “position” of social theory, that is, its relation to reality, today and at the time when Marx was first developing his doctrine:

At its origins in the first half of the 19th century, when it elaborated the first concepts of the alternatives [to the prevailing order], the critique of industrial society attained correctness in a historical mediation between theory and practice, values and facts, needs and goals. The historical mediation occurred in the consciousness and in the political action and in the political action of the two great classes which faced each other in the society; the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. In the capitalist world, they are still the basic classes. However, the capitalist development has altered the structure and function of these two classes in such a way that they no longer appear to be agents of historical transformation ... In the absence of demonstrable agencies of social change, the critique is thus thrown back to a high level of abstraction. There is no ground on which theory and practice, thought and action meet."

The working class, we are her told, not longer “appears” to be an agent of historical transformation. The question immediately arises, when and to whom did it ever “appear” to be an agent of historical transformation? Certainly to the old ruling classes of the first half of the 19th century it did not appear so; they viewed the “lower orders” rather, as dangerous and possibly pitiable potential agents of the total destruction of society who had to be held in check by all means possible or be “improved” by a condescending philanthropy. At the same time the working class was only beginning to appear to itself, in a still very sporadic and fragmentary fashion, as an agent of fundamental social change, as a distinct social grouping that bore within itself the seed of a wholly new social order, communism, and possessed the power to overthrow the existing order of the world and permit that seed to sprout.

Despite the rising of the Lyons weavers in France in 1831 and the Chartist movement of the English workers in the 1830s and 1840s, it was hardly so obvious that the working class was an agent of social change during the first half of the 19th century as it has frequently been during the first half of the 20th century. This revolutionary potential had to be demonstrated. One of the central tasks of Marx’s theory was precisely to demonstrate it.

If he had permitted his method to be determined by the immediate appearance of class relations during that period when the ascending bourgeoisie was celebrating one mighty achievement after another in all spheres of life, he could not have demonstrated the existence of the working class as a revolutionary force. The working class could have been perceived as a “demonstrable” agent of radical change only through a theory that was not haled by the superficial aspect of society.

This scientific demonstration in turn contributed significantly to the later appearance, both to itself and to other social classes, of the working class as a revolutionary force. The theories of Marxism

and the dissemination of these ideas among workers contributed in no small measure to the working class becoming what Marx had discovered it to be. The theory of Marxism, carried to the working class, helped to create the ground on which "theory and practice met" - the first momentous consummation of their fusion occurring in the October revolution of 1917.

What Marcuse sees as a difference in the "position" of theory vis-à-vis social reality is actually a difference between two methods of analysing social reality. On the one hand, Marxism refuses to be misled by the deceptive face of social reality and penetrates below the surface to find and demonstrate the existence of the decisive forces of "historical transformation". On the other hand, Marcuse's "critical social theory" begins by treating the superficial appearance as the fundamental reality and then finds itself "thrown back to a high level of abstraction" where "there is no ground on which theory and practice, thought and action meet".

For Marx, the demonstration of the existence of the proletariat as a revolutionary force began with an examination of the basic productive relations of bourgeois society. He investigated these structures as they had been disclosed and interpreted in false or inadequate form by bourgeois society, above all, in the works of the classical political economists. He proceeded from ideology, that is, from the reflection of social phenomena in the abstracting, classifying, analysing, theorising bourgeois mind, towards a thoroughly scientific comprehension of the contradictory nature of capitalism.

Anticipating, through his training in the dialectical mode of thought, contradictions everywhere, Marx found them implicit in the categories of bourgeois political economy and made them explicit. By clarifying and systematically refining and developing these categories, he discovered that they referred to an antagonistic society. Behind such abstract polarities as use value and exchange value, the commodity and money, labour and labour power, and above all wage labour and capital, Marx was able to discern whole areas of social conflict. These arose from the way the social relations of men were organised. The bourgeois thinkers had seen only natural laws behind their categories, which men in their folly or greed might try to evade, but to which they finally had to conform and could not alter.

Through the discovery of the contradictions in the basic features of bourgeois society; as these had been disclosed and concealed in classical political economy, Marx was able to return to the immediate empirical social phenomena and interpret them in the light of these dialectical concepts. In the pain and misery experienced by the workers, he could not see traces of contradictory social order becoming aware of its contradictoriness in that pain and misery. In the struggles and rebellions of workers, he could see evidence of an emerging conscious social force that would ultimately overthrow the society which produced it. In the agitation and organisation of workers around specific issues of living and working conditions and political rights, he could perceive the emergence of the consciousness and organisation of a social group that was the bearer of a totally new principle of organisation, communism.

The demonstration of the actuality of this specific agent of social transformation in Marx's theory depended on a method that was prepared to expose rather than to hide contradiction, conflict and antagonism in the real world. Marx was able to demonstrate the existence of the working class as a revolutionary force because he was looking for the traces of its existence in the historical reality.

Marcuse, on the other hand, starts from the methodological pre-supposition that the working class is no longer a revolutionary force; the "position" of social theory today is for him defined by this purported reality. Such a method is not likely to be able to discern the traces in empirical reality which testify to the contrary. He does not pose as fundamental questions: What are the mechanisms whereby the once revolutionary working class has been integrated as a conservative force into the

society? Just how bad is the existing social world? Or, how great is the difference between what it is and what it might have been if the working class had not lost its world-transforming capacity?

Such a sedative method will consistently regard the elements tending towards stability as essential and those tending towards disruption and the creation of something qualitatively new as inessential and incidental. As he encounters a grave conflict in social reality, rather than examining the possibility that the contradiction may contribute to exploding the existing social order, Marcuse tends to assume that the contradiction will be resolved within the existing order.

What happens to Marcuse's dialectic when he assumes that there are no real forces to fulfil it? He relapses from scientific sociology to pre-Marxist utopianism. Instead of unifying theory with reality, he constructs a second sphere, absolutely opposed to the world as it is, where all the unrealised possibilities and hopes of humanity find a habitation. This unearthly sanctuary then provides the standards against which the miserable world around us is judged. Instead of disclosing the contradictions within reality, Marcuse's dialectic establishes an insurmountable contradiction within reality, Marcuse's dialectic establishes an insurmountable contradiction between the real and the ideal, the actual and the possible. The only mediation between these unconnected extremes is Marcuse's own moralising on the theme that men might be happy if only things were otherwise. Such utopian moralising is a persistent feature of Marcuse's thought. It even seems to reinforce the initial estrangement between theory and action, as though to discover any possibility that the existing society could be changed would be to discover something good in it and thus to absolve it of its absolute evil.

Marcuse's central theme is that the two-dimensional society of the past has been converted into a one-dimensional apparatus. The basic dimension of previous society was the material domain of production and reproduction; its second dimension was a mental sphere where people could dream, think and imagine a better world and thereby recognise the misery of the existing circumstances. This dimension was potentially profoundly critical of the existing social world, because within it men could confront reality in the light of their unactualised possibilities. In this historical situation, the conditions of the revolutionary socialist movement were created. Philosophy found its material weapons in the proletariat, and the proletariat found its mental weapons in philosophy.

But today, in the emerging advanced industrial society, all this has changed. The two sources of two-dimensional life have been destroyed. Through compulsive consumption and the implanting and satisfaction of "false needs", through an erotic engineering, through the media which manipulate the mind, the instinctual drives which once tended to throw the individual into opposition to his society have been transformed into the very means of binding them to it. At the same time, the rising standard of living and the improved working conditions progressively diminish the misery suffered by the workers.

In such a one-dimensional society, the sense of alienation, hostility and aggression do not disappear. But they lose their potentially oppositional character and themselves become elements of manipulation, whether by the ruling social groups or by the autonomous functioning of the totalitarian administrative apparatus itself. Aggression is channelled against international communism - the permanent "enemy" - as well as against racial and cultural minorities: blacks, hippies and radicals. Through such diversion, hostility becomes a strong cement rather than a threat to the existing order.

Such a society tends to become an apparatus in which all humans, things and processes are objects of total, rational administration, and all social relations tend to become technical relations. Men are increasingly related to one another as parts of a co-ordinated and well-functioning mechanism rather than as conscious creators, co-operators and contestants. Spontaneity is liquidated, in consciousness

as well as in personal and social behaviour.

The theory of capitalist society, as developed by Marxism, and Marcuse's theory of industrial society are in contradiction at a basic point. Capitalism itself sets a limit to the trend towards total administration. In capitalist economy, one can only immediately administer what falls within the circle of one's private property, either as a thing one owns or as a person whose labour power has been purchased. Capitalist economy remains private and anarchic, not subject to an over-reaching administration, however much the scope of state intervention may have expanded. Yet Marcuse, while proclaiming that advanced industrial society is a specific and necessary stage of capitalist development, systematically ignores the regions of contradiction that arise from its very structure.

The sometimes extensive, but always limited, degree of control that monopolies have over their markets presupposes the basically unco-ordinated, anarchic character of the economy. The administrative efforts on the part of the state to regulate and control the crises caused by the anarchy of production presuppose this anarchy of production. And the conflict between capitalist nations, which is perennially reproduced, sometimes in the form of open military conflict, sometimes in more subdued and subtle forms, testifies to the contradictions that arise between antagonistic national capitalist interests.

But in Marcuse's theory, all these areas of conflict, which are beyond any central administrative control, national or international, appear as incidental "frictions" slightly disturbing the smooth functioning of the mechanism, or as archaic residues of a past society, which are only temporarily beyond the administrative reach of advanced industrial society.

In his discussion of the "prospects for containment" of potentially oppositional forces, for example, Marcuse, "projects contemporary developments" in order to arrive at the estimate that these prospects are virtually endless. The contemporary developments he projects are:

1. a continued rise in the standard of living.
2. permanent mobilisation against the "external enemy", that is, "communism", both made possible through:
 - a. the growing productivity of labour (technical progress).
 - b. the rise in the birth rate of the underlying population.
 - c. the permanent defence economy.
 - d. the economic-political integration of the capitalist countries and the building up of their relations with the underdeveloped areas.

One would expect a theory committed to dialectic to explore the relationship between these trends and to ask how far they are compatible with and reinforce each other and how far they may conflict with each other. Had Marcuse done so, he might have discerned an oppositional dimension in the making again.

For the past three years, real wages in manufacturing industries in the United States have been declining because of an accelerated "permanent mobilisation" and expanded "permanent defence economy" resulting from the war in Vietnam. The South-East Asian intervention itself is characteristic of the capitalist countries' "building up their relations with the underdeveloped areas." To hold otherwise is to fall into the liberal trap of believing that the invasion was some sort

of “blunder”. The systematic diversion of resources to the permanent war economy - which has accelerated the inflationary spiral - casts doubt on the long-term possibility of maintaining and raising the living standards of the masses.

In the face of these counter-developments, it doesn't require much dialectic to recognise that a theory which abstracts from possible conflicts between trends and simply projects them endlessly as they appear at one moment of historical time is not likely to lead to very secure conclusions.

Futhermore, it is striking that a work devoted to a study of ideology and which subjects philosophy and sociology to searching criticism, does not contain any critique of economic doctrine, especially since Marcuse makes the continued containment of oppositional tendencies, which for him is the defining characteristic of the advanced industrial society, contingent on the persistence of certain economic trends. Economics has been one of the most “ideological” of the social sciences, in the sense that false consciousness and true insight are more intricately intertwined in this field than elsewhere. But Marcuse simply accepts the prevailing economic orthodoxy; at least he assumes that it can endlessly deliver techniques capable of holding the economic contradictions of capitalism in suspense. This assumption accords well with his conception of the “totally administered society” and with his presupposition that there is no force capable of fundamentally transforming existing society. But it is hardly consistent with a dialectical theory of society that is obliged to disclose contradiction and expose false consciousness wherever they may occur.

This easy acceptance of bourgeois economic orthodoxy reveals the close kinship between Marcuse and such neoconservatives of the early 1950s as Daniel Bell and Kenneth Galbraith, who were participating in the “Great American Celebration”. They thought that American society is approaching a point of ultimate stability and equilibrium; that is the point of agreement between Marcuse and those neoconservatives. Only the latter approved and affirmed it while Marcuse disapproves and rejects it. That is the difference between them.

What are the links between Marcuse's theory and method and his political practice? In theory he takes the stance that since no forces of fundamental social change exist within “one-dimensional” society, decent human beings can only express their rejection as indignantly and vigorously as possible. Hoping against hope, they make the great refusal and indulge in “defiant gestures”. However, there still exists the realm of actual power where the destiny of humanity is presently being decided, and which sometimes compels the individual, however reluctantly, to take a stand. Marcuse is a public personality whose disciples insist that he state his views on matters of great concern. How has he responded?

Ironically, this mentor of the new student radicals expressed apprehension about their disruption of the universities as a sanctuary of objective scholarship and free thought. He advised the partisans of student power to limit the scope of their intervention.

In the 1968 presidential campaign, Marcuse spoke out in favour of Eugene McCarthy's bid (New York Review of Books, August 22, 1968). He did so as a member of the Democratic Party, one of the central institutions of the established order. Thus the very “radicalism” of his theory, the absoluteness of its rejection of the existing world and everything within it, served to “free” the critical theorist for the most opportunistic kind of practical politics.

The French events of this spring were a harsh test for competing social theories. There occurred the greatest general strike in the history of an industrially advanced country. This genuine revolutionary upsurge involved 10 million workers. But Marcuse's theoretical approach excluded such an event and was inadequate to explain it.

Speaking at the University of California in San Diego on May 23, 1968, thus certainly before he had an opportunity to analyse all the events of the French upheaval, Marcuse had this to say: "First, France is not yet an affluent society. The living conditions of the majority of the population are still far below the level of the American standard of living, which of course makes for a much looser identification with the Establishment that prevails in this country. Secondly, the political tradition of the French working class movement is still alive to a considerable degree. I might add a rather metaphysical explanation; namely, the difference between the prospects of a radical movement in France and in this country may also be summed up by remembering that France, after all, went through four revolutions within 100 years. This apparently establishes such a revolutionary tradition which can be sparked and brought to life and renewed when the occasion arises." (Liberation News Service, June 11, 1968)

Marcuse's first consideration is scarcely convincing. While it is true that the standard of living in France is lower than in the United States, it is incomparably closer to the standard of living that prevails here - even ignoring the widespread, grinding poverty of super exploited groups which lowers the US average - than it is to the abysmal poverty that prevailed in capitalist countries during the 19th century, to which Marcuse attributes the revolutionary potential of the working class at that time. If the qualitative change in the level of working class consumption destroys the revolutionary potential of the working class, then France surely stands today on the same side of the great divide as the United States.

The second explanation Marcuse adduces is scarcely more plausible. It is true that a traditional class consciousness is more widespread in France than in the United States and that France has a highly developed working class political party, the Communist Party. But that party did everything it could to destroy the revolutionary movement and must be assigned major credit for derailing it. The revolutionary working class tradition, so far as it was carried by the Communist Party and the trade union federations, was a zombie, not a living reality. The French working class rediscovered its revolutionary tradition under the impact of the student uprising and its own entry into the struggle. That it plunged into the struggle with such force and fervour can hardly be attributed to tradition alone.

On the other hand, the French events are fully consistent with the Marxist theory of capitalist society and without the necessity of any improvised hypotheses. These events testify to the revolutionary potential of the working class. That potential is there, not far below the surface, evident, if one knows how to look, in all the struggles conducted by the workers in their own interest. It is ever ready - given even slightly destabilising conditions, which are inevitable in the anarchic world of capitalist production and which require concrete analysis in each specific case - to break through the conservative crust of the "affluent society" with an intensity unsurpassed in earlier revolutionary struggles.

Theoretical impotence in the face of massive historical fact is shown in Marcuse's inadequate attempt to interpret the French upsurge. Absolute contradiction in practice, between his show of intransigence toward the capitalist regime and his opportunistic political adaptation to it, is manifested in Marcuse's support of McCarthy. These are the products of Marcus's method.

Power to comprehend great historical events; consistent, principled struggle against all reactionary ideological and institutional forces; and encouragement of the development to full independence and consciousness of all progressive forces, above all, the materially mighty working class - these are the concrete theoretical and practical products of Marxist method.

Marcusianism offers no reliable guide either to understanding or making history, above all, the history of our own time. Marxism does.

P.S.

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<http://members.optushome.com.au/spainter/Langston.html>