

“Be realistic, demand the impossible.”

Alan Dobson examines the ideas of a thinker whose ideas were a major influence upon the student radicals of 1968

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At many of the demonstrations which occurred in the course of 1968, especially those led by radical students, a curious banner was to be seen amongst the more usual peace signs, calls for an end to the war in Vietnam and calls to replace ‘war’ with ‘love’. On these banners was to be seen the corporate logo of the 3M paper and photocopying company together with the slogan ‘The Three M’s’. The banner might be considered curious for two reasons. First, to see a corporate logo amongst the equipment of demonstrators committed to the destruction of capitalism and all its works might be thought odd. A second curiosity might be the name referred to by the third ‘M’s’ of the banner.

Each of these ‘M’s’ named a thinker whom the radical students considered a profound influence upon their ideas and their vision of a better society. The first two ‘M’s’ were names familiar to anyone with a passing knowledge of nineteenth and twentieth century radicalism: these two were Karl Marx and Mao Tse Tung. So far, one might think, so predictable. The third ‘M’, however referred to a hitherto obscure, seventy year old German émigré philosopher living in the USA. This man was Herbert Marcuse; arguably the most unlikely and the most profound influence on the young radicals of 1968.

He was an unlikely influence in part because of his age. Marcuse was a septuagenarian by 1968 while most of the radicals involved in the protests which rocked so much of Europe and the rest of the world were in their twenties and younger. Not only this, the radicals were not only young but were proud of their youth; they believed that it was the older generation who were the purveyors of war, genocide and repression. Given this, it was most incongruous that they should turn to a person of Marcuse’s age as their inspiration. As well as his physical age, however, Marcuse’s background and career hitherto would appear to fit him badly to be an inspiration of a radical, utopian youth movement.

Marcuse was born in Berlin in 1898 into a bourgeois Jewish family. His early intellectual interests were in literature and he wrote his thesis on the German artist-novel, a form of literature in which the main protagonist is a writer. He was taught by Martin Heidegger, a philosopher whose reputation amongst radicals was fatally compromised by his support for Nazism. Indeed the work Marcuse submitted as the basis for a career as a University teacher was a study of Hegel utilising Heideggerian categories. Marcuse spent much of the rest of his career in relative obscurity as an academic with interests in Marxism, Hegelianism and cultural and philosophical analysis.

Behind this conventional path however can be found indications in Marcuse’s personal and intellectual biography of what was to come. During the uprisings in Berlin in 1918 Marcuse sided with the forces of revolution led by Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht. He became a member of the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, a group of radical scholars which became known as the Frankfurt School, and who were concerned to carry out critical social analysis using the ideas of Marx, Freud and other radical thinkers in an interdisciplinary fashion. When Hitler came to power the Institute and its members were forced to relocate, eventually to the USA. Hitler’s Germany was not a welcoming place for intellectuals inspired by Marx and Freud

most of whom were Jewish like Marcuse himself. Marcuse had also shown intellectual interests which were to suit his ideas to the 1960's also. In particular he had written one of the most penetrating reviews of Marx's Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts when they were discovered in the early 1930's and these writings presented a side of Marx which was very different to the 'scientific' Marx championed in the Soviet Union. Once installed in the USA he had also written, in English, a book celebrating the relationship between Marx and Hegel, another side of the former's work that the official Soviet view of Marxism was anxious to disclaim. When the young radicals were looking for an interpretation of Marx which distanced him from the repression evident in the Soviet Union, therefore, Marcuse had already outlined an understanding of Marx which emphasised aspects of his thought which might appeal to people attracted by Marx's revolutionary radicalism but repelled by its use in the Soviet Bloc.

It might still be considered a surprise that someone with Marcuse's pedigree should become the third 'M'. One explanation as to why this happened might be sought in some simple practical considerations. First, unlike Marx, Marcuse was still alive and could comment on contemporary capitalism and socialism rather than upon a nineteenth century version. Second unlike Mao who was busy running a country, Marcuse could write and lecture freely on the events of the 1960's and was accessible to the media as a figurehead and guru of the revolts (something he always denied being, however). Thirdly Marcuse gave critical but fulsome support to the revolutionaries of 1968. He spoke at rallies and conferences and would be seen at demonstrations and sit-ins supporting those who drew inspiration from his ideas. Undoubtedly his support for the radicals in turn led them to give him increasing recognition. Finally his appeal was increased by becoming a hate figure for many of those opposing the student radicals. He was persecuted in his University. The right-wing American Legion tried to end his teaching career by buying out his contract and death threats were issued against him by a variety of groups and individuals in the USA which led him to go into hiding for a period in 1968.

Fundamentally however it was Marcuse's *ideas* which made him such an inspiration on the revolutionaries of 1968. In a series of books, essays and lectures delivered between 1955 and 1972, Marcuse staked out a political, social and philosophical position which chimed in harmony with the radicals of this year. This position can be outlined under two headings: first was Marcuse's analysis of contemporary capitalism and Soviet Communism. Second was his vision of what a free, liberated society might be like. Marcuse thus provided reasons why revolution was necessary and an outline of what sort of society that revolution might create.

Marcuse focused his critical analysis on what he called Advanced Industrial Societies. These societies were to be found in the USA, Western Europe and the Soviet Union. Although he devoted much more time to the analysis of the USA and Western Europe, Marcuse was always at pains to emphasise that his analysis applied to the Soviet Union insofar as it exhibited the same structural tendencies as the US and Europe: that he was unambiguously critical of the USSR was given his work added appeal amongst the young radicals who were themselves equally critical of the western and the eastern models of social organisation.

However, it was Marcuse's critique of the USA and of Western Europe which most grabbed the attention of the revolutionaries of 1968 and in particular five aspects of his complex analysis were important to them. Firstly, Marcuse acknowledged the material *affluence* to be found in the USA and the West. What, Marcuse asked, are the consequences of the affluence which, by 1964 when Marcuse wrote his most important work *One Dimensional Man*, was characteristic of the USA in particular and Western Europe more generally. This affluence Marcuse argued had spread beyond the confines of the traditional elite and brought material prosperity to sections of

society who had previously been marginalized. In particular the working class, Marcuse claimed, were increasingly well rewarded and integrated into society enjoying a material standard of living never before dreamt of and increasingly sharing the life-style of the middle and upper middle classes. As a result although the working class remained the exploited base of capitalism they no longer experienced themselves as such. Thus, they were unlikely, in the foreseeable future, to act as the agents of revolutionary change. Occupied as they were with the desire to own their own home, have a car or a better car and to acquire a range of consumer durables, the working class were Marcuse believed increasingly integrated into the capitalist system. Marcuse was a sufficiently orthodox Marxist to believe that revolution required the consent of those at the base of the economic and social system but he held that this group no longer wanted revolution because they were increasingly satisfied by the benefits of capitalism. Hence, when the disaffiliated young began to revolt against affluence, Marcuse saw in their action the potentiality for radical action which might act as a catalyst for change.

And Marcuse believed that the most revolutionary change conceivable remained necessary. Despite the material affluence enjoyed by sections of the working class Marcuse believed that they remained exploited. He believed that many of the achievements of affluence satisfied needs which were false in the sense that they were manufactured by advertising and profitably satisfied by capitalist production but were unnecessary for a genuinely fulfilled human existence. The constant, created, desire to enjoy more and more of the characteristics of affluence, Marcuse held, embedded people ever more closely in a system over which they had no control and which systematically replaced the liberating human need for freedom with an enslaving greed for the pleasures of consumption. Marcuse was, moreover, one of the first thinkers to point to the environmental effects of the ever increasing consumption and production of consumer goods and to effects on mental health of the desire to identify with goods of consumption whose quality was poor and where fashion is constantly changing.

The second aspect of Marcuse's analysis from which the young radicals drew concerned an area often at the forefront of a young persons mind (radical or otherwise!) *sex*. In 1955 Marcuse had published a radical reevaluation of the ideas of Sigmund Freud in his book *Eros and Civilisation*. The book was a 'philosophical inquiry' into Freud, concerned particularly with the social and artistic aspects of the latter's work. In particular, Marcuse tackled Freud's claim that human civilisation required sexual repression. According to Marcuse, Freud had argued that human beings have a fixed amount of instinctual energy. If they are to preserve and improve their material conditions of existence and create a secure and civilised existence for themselves, they must divert sexual energy into the work that will enable such an existence to be built, preserved and improved upon. If this does not happen human life would be pleasurable but ultimately insecure. As a result of this requirement, most human energy is devoted to unpleasant labour. A small amount of energy remains to be discharged in the sexual sphere in the service of reproduction and has traditionally been permitted within the stable institution of marriage. The diversion of sexual energy into labour so as to build civilisation is called sublimation and is often experienced as repression.

After explaining Freud's argument, Marcuse goes on to speculate about what might be the case if the need to build and preserve civilisation, which led to the need for sublimation, might no longer exist. If, Marcuse suggests, society has become capable of providing a secure and satisfying standard of living for all its people, then might it not be possible to liberate sexuality or Eros in ways and to an extent regarded as inconceivable by Freud? All that prevents this, Marcuse concludes is the need of capitalism to produce ever expanding needs for (fundamentally unnecessary) material goods from which profits are derived. Such continued

production requires continued labour and continued erotic repression but if people could liberate themselves from this need to produce and consume they could also liberate themselves from sexual repression and live sexually as well as materially fulfilled lives. Thus, long before the youthful rebellion of 1968, Marcuse was calling for an end to capitalism not just to end exploitation, over-production and material enslavement but to liberate human sexuality also. Such a call can be seen to have had a profound appeal to the student radicals of 1968 expanding as it did the critical analysis of society beyond the material and into the personal and sexual sphere. Marcuse did, by 1968, of course recognise that some liberalisation of sexuality had occurred. He noted that this was however a repressive form of desublimation, linked as it was to advertising and the fashion industry and confined largely to limited heterosexual models of the erotic. In tune with the times, Marcuse required a more radical form of sexual liberation which would sever its links with commercialism and be 'polymorphous perverse' extending and deepening the role of the erotic to every aspect of human life.

Marcuse's critique of advanced industrial society which concentrated on its wasteful affluence and its unnecessary sexual repression contained a further strand which was calculated to appeal to the young radicals, especially in the USA. For Marcuse, one of the features of advanced societies which gave them stability and protected them against demands for the revolutionary change which would fulfil their potential was the existence of 'the enemy.' The enemy might take many forms: in the Soviet Union it was the USA, in the USA it was the Soviet Union. But these were not the only enemies. Ethnic minorities, feminist women, hippies, artists and radicals might all play this role. So also might the forces in a small Asian country, Vietnam, which were trying to liberate themselves from colonial rule and had the full might of the economic and military power of the USA directed against them. These enemies played both an economic and an ideological role for Marcuse. Economically the great national enemies justified the state spending on military goods which generated the jobs which helped give stability to the economy and contribute to the affluence which would forestall rebellion. Ideologically it provided a hated, alien 'other' against whom the masses could come together with a sense of shared identity promoting the social stability and closure to change which Marcuse called one dimensional. Marcuse had developed these ideas well before the student uprisings of 1968, but a brief glance at them might show why the radicals found Marcuse's ideas in this respect so appealing. He was personally and provided an intellectual justification for opposition to the Vietnam war. He and his writings championed the civil rights movement and a host of other radical black groups. Unlike many men on the left he was sympathetic to feminism and the hippies and students. And he was so not because it had suddenly become fashionable to support these causes but for reasons deeply embedded in his philosophical perspective: Marcuse was no opportunist.

A final strand of Marcuse's critique worth mentioning was his analysis of the role of modern technology. Marcuse developed ideas which Marx had originated on the alienating effects of working in a technological environment and gave them a contemporary slant. He argued that much of the success of modern societies in avoiding the radical change they so urgently needed was a result of the massive and increasing employment of technology in production and advertising. Technology made work less physically unpleasant and exhausting, he maintained reducing the desire amongst workers for radical change. It also enabled the production of new goods and services which could be made available to a mass market and which provided people with aspirations and satisfactions which could be profitably fulfilled by capitalism while diverting people's attention from the evident wrongs of the system. Technology also provided the means by which these goods and services might be sold; advertising, especially on television. Technology not only allowed the production of cars, boats, lawnmowers and innumerable other products. It enabled people to be persuaded to buy them also. It might be

noted as an aside that Marcuse was also one of the first people to point to the environmental damage caused by the growth of technology and consumerism, both physical and social.

Marcuse was thus a trenchant critic of the role of technology in modern society and yet at the head of his analysis was a paradox. Technology was one of the most powerful means deployed by the ruling elite of modern capitalism to maintain its profitability and its economic and ideological stability. At the same time, the productive capacities unleashed by this technology were one of the main reasons that Marcuse believed a radical, qualitative, utopian revolution was possible. If technology could be used to fulfil genuine human needs rather than needs created so that they could be profitably satisfied, time could be found for people to live lives free from much of the alienated labour they now have to carry out. Lives in which they could enjoy the freedom to choose their own priorities, fulfil themselves in their activities and their sex lives, and be free from the obligation to work and spend and work some more. Here was the hub of Marcuse's critique of advanced society. Behind the façade of a stable, affluent, increasingly free society was an unstable capitalism which purchased its stability by using its technology to generate and satisfy needs which were unnecessary and destructive of the human being. Its affluence was used to tie people into a system which genuinely benefited the few not the many and was bought at the price of war and constant preparation for war. Its freedom were tenuous; quickly withdrawn if the interests of the elite were threatened and it practised a repression of sexuality notwithstanding the 'permissive' era. And yet it need not be like this said Marcuse, and the students listened: the potential exists to use the achievements of this society to create a radically better, freer world in which people could enjoy a fulfilled and fully human existence. This was Marcuse's vision which captivated the radicals of 1968 just as much as his critique of the existing society.

One of Marcuse's attractions as a radical thinker was that he had a clear vision of what revolution was to be for. Many radicals who present convincing critiques of capitalism fail to give any real idea of what the new society will be like. Others give so much detail to their vision that it dates very quickly or, frankly, just becomes boring. Marcuse managed to negotiate a path between these extremes and to articulate a vision of a radically different society which had sufficient detail to give one a taste of what his new world might be like, but was not so detailed as to become either a historical curiosity or an aid to a good night's rest.

Marcuse was avowedly utopian in his approach to envisioning the new society. Since he believed that no immediate agent of change could be identified, the Marxian proletariat having been substantially integrated into the advanced societies, utopianism became necessary and inevitable. Marcuse accepted and embraced this need for the vision of a new society to be utterly radical, qualitatively different and for it to envision entirely new needs and aspirations from those dominating the existing society. This having been said, the first element in Marcuse's vision is the claim that the possibility of a radically different and better society is based on the achievements of the existing society. Marcuse remained a Marxian to the extent that, however utopian liberation might be, it had to be based upon trends in the existing society; otherwise it was not utopianism but fantasy.

Thus, Marcuse recognised that the very possibility of human liberation in the advanced societies was reliant upon the success of science and technology. These intellectual and social forces which served repression and suppression in the existing societies could become forces for freedom in a radically different world. If separated from the need to create profit and to tie people to the existing apparatus, science and technology, Marcuse believed could be used to create material abundance and to alter the labour process in such a way that people's needs could

be provided for with a minimum of labour and that that labour which remained necessary could be substantially changed to make it more agreeable, playful and enjoyable. Marcuse realised early on that the fantastic achievements of science and technology could play a major part in the process of liberation. Hence he talked of the 'end of utopia'; the aspiration to freedom and liberation which in the past was a fantastic dream had, by the achievements of science and technology, been turned into a real possibility.

Paradoxically, however, this possibility could never happen unless people were willing to liberate themselves from affluence. Marcuse argued that freedom could only be achieved if people were willing to discard the dubious pleasures of the consumer society. Marcuse was one of the first to see that the development of widespread consumerism was a deeply contradictory process. On the one hand it was pleasurable: for people deprived of it in the past luxury was enjoyable. Speeding in one's car, using power tools, being able to buy good quality clothes and watch TV were all fun. But the fun was purchased at a high price namely the need to work ever longer and harder to provide the means to buy these goods, renew them when planned obsolescence led them to break down and to replace them when one's neighbour got something better. In the end, Marcuse said the result of rampant consumerism would be increased mental illness and environmental degradation. Hence we must liberate ourselves from the affluent society, use technology and science to satisfy our basic needs and leave time to experiment with our physical, intellectual and sexual selves in the free time made available. Marcuse's utopia was to be a world of play, a world which held a special appeal to the youth of 1968. Not only that, Marcuse's vision of a society liberated from the dubious blessings of affluence was what led him to champion the student radicals in a way more traditional Marxists found difficult. Marcuse realised that it would be 'outsiders and outcasts,' people who were already free of the spirit of consumerism who must lead the revolution and most prominent amongst these transitional forces were the students and the urban poor.

Marcuse always emphasised, however, that neither the students nor the outcast urban poor could make the revolution alone. They needed the majority population and in particular the working class to participate also. Marcuse continued to believe that the working class remained the exploited basis of the advanced capitalist societies and that they must, therefore, be part of the process which made the liberated society and they must, too, be the beneficiaries of the creation of a classless society. This was why he was so excited by the May-June events in Paris of 1968. During this period radical students turned an educational dispute into a much more broadly based protest against the nature of advanced industrial society. Hot on their heels workers at some of the great Paris manufacturing sites and in the public sector went on strike in a way that suggested to Marcuse that the students had acted as catalysts to sections of the working class pursuing their own grievances. In addition to envisioning a radical break with the existing society and the end of class exploitation, Marcuse also believed that the liberated society must also bring an end to racial discrimination and to sexual inequality. Although these were not central themes in his writings, the personal support he gave to black radicals and to feminists in the USA suggests he took this aspect of his utopia very seriously.

Two further and final aspects of Marcuse's idea of a liberated society ought to be mentioned since they gave a coherent articulation to ideas which existed in a much less clear form amongst the young radicals of 1968. First Marcuse held that only in a post revolutionary society could the peace yearned for by supporters of CND [Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament] and opponents of the Vietnam war be achieved. This was because the need for aggressive feelings and for outright violence were, Marcuse believed, built into the instinctual basis of the system. Since the very real possibility of liberating people from capitalism existed, those who wished to maintain

it had to divert the aggression felt toward it to an acceptable enemy. Hence the need for cold and 'hot' wars. Only once people were liberated from the irrationality of capitalism would this need for instinctual aggression to be directed against an external 'other' be overcome and the risk of armed conflict dramatically reduced. For Marcuse his utopia would be a world of peace.

More than this, it would also be world of sex. Marcuse believed, as we have seen, that sexual repression was only necessary as a means of diverting instinctual energy into the process of building civilization so that people's material needs could be securely satisfied. But the achievements of civilization meant that these material needs could be satisfied without the need for sexual repression *if* people would forgo the desire for affluence and ever more affluence. If this were to happen energy could be diverted from work and into pleasure, in particular into polymorphous perverse sexuality. What he meant by this was not entirely clear but he did appear to envisage a sexualising of ordinary activities such that those spheres of human existence which had an erotic character would include activities which went beyond the genital and the procreative. Hot blooded young people in the throes of the sexual revolution, experiencing their youth and the freedom granted by the widespread availability of the pill alighted on Marcuse's ideas with gusto.

And perhaps herein lies the great weakness in Marcuse's critique and vision. Perhaps its appeal to the radicals of 1968 lies in the fact that it was of its time and place: that it was uniquely suited to a particular historical time and appealed to a particular group of young people (temporarily) radicalised by an unjust war and the desire to throw off the shackles of post war conformism. Maybe this is why Marcuse is today less read and less discussed than he was in 1968. As Marcuse himself would no doubt argue, however, the popularity of a critique and a vision is not a token of its truth. He might, further, go on to claim, with some justification, that his ideas are as relevant, perhaps more relevant, now than they were in 1968. The first world remains a realm of affluence; an affluence built upon the labour of the poor in these societies and increasingly on the labour of the poor in countries far away. Affluent capitalism still has its class basis and it is now more difficult to progress up the class ladder than it was in Marcuse's time and levels of inequality are greater. The affluent nations are still waging war on smaller and weaker nations and the 'war on terror' conjures up precisely the sort of enemy that Marcuse suggested was needed by advanced societies to bolster their support and stability. The disastrous environmental impact of affluence has now been acknowledged by all but a few; if the planet and the quality of human life are to be sustained, this affluence must be reined back. We must ditch some of our false needs and be more considerate of the world that sustains us. Perhaps the greatest pointer toward the continued relevance of what Marcuse has to say, however, is to be found in the ever increasing unhappiness, mental illness and self-harm recorded amongst the 'beneficiaries' of affluence. This band of people who desperately need 'liberation from the affluent society' provide the most urgent testimony that the relevance of Marcuse's ideas is not confined to a small group of youths in a famous year, but is embedded in the very structure of the societies we have created for ourselves.