

HERBERT MARCUSE: AN IMMANENT CRITIQUE

I

In Marcuse's first published article (*Beiträge zur Phänomenologie des Historischen Materialismus* 1928),¹ he boldly declared in his opening paragraph that "Marxism comes to life in the inseparable unity of theory and practice; and every Marxist analysis must retain this unity as its most important guiding principle."² These words not only serve as a proper introduction to Marcuse's work, they can also serve as a standard for evaluating it. Marcuse's central concern has been to establish for our own time "the inseparable unity of theory and practice," and yet it is precisely in this project that he most dramatically fails. In my attempt to lay the argument to rest, I shall in this paper develop—as he might put it—an immanent critique. This critique judges his work by the guiding principle he enunciated in his first article, and which he has reiterated throughout his writings.

Marcuse started his theoretical explorations with a study not of Marx but of Hegel. His dissertation, *Hegels Ontologie und die Grundlegung einer Theorie der Geschichtlichkeit* (1932),³ which has not been translated into English, is his most serious and brilliant book. In his Hegel book and in the first part of *Reason and Revolution* (1941),⁴ Marcuse elaborated an exciting and total interpretation of Hegel. Although this interpretation was influenced by his early infatuation with Heidegger, Marcuse displays an unusual sensitivity to the critical and radical consequences of Hegel's thought, as opposed to the traditional understanding of Hegel picturing him as a political conservative with a quietistic philosophy bent on

rationalizing the status quo. *Reason and Revolution*, in particular, was written to demolish the myth that Hegel was the progenitor of Nazi ideology. According to Marcuse, the Nazis betrayed everything that was vital and fundamental for Hegel. We now know the falsity of the Hegel myth that Marcuse was attacking, but this is largely due to Marcuse's own Hegel interpretation as well as those of Dilthey, Lukács, and Kojève.

Marcuse's interest in Hegel has not been that of the detached scholar seeking to reconstruct the "historical" Hegel. As in his later treatment of Freud, Marcuse sought to make explicit the critical, negative, and radical aspects of Hegel's thought. The investigation of Hegel provided Marcuse with an orientation and the weapons that shaped his own understanding of critical theory. What Marcuse finds so central and appealing about Hegel is precisely that he is a negative philosopher. He was the last and the greatest of the negative philosophers—a tradition that has its roots in Greek philosophy, especially in the philosophy of Plato and Aristotle. Negative philosophy—for Marcuse this is the main tradition of philosophy from the Greeks until Hegel—is essentially critical. It refuses to accept what now exists as the mark of the genuinely real. It is a protest against the status quo and demands something higher, better, more beautiful, rational, and freer than the "given." The battle between the positive and the negative which Marcuse takes to be the great struggle of modern times is not a battle of two legitimate approaches to philosophy, it represents the life and death struggle of philosophy itself. Marcuse seizes upon the relentless oppositional element in Hegel and raises it

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into a first principle. Reason is by its very nature antagonistic to the existing state of affairs. Consider the famous formula from Hegel's preface to the *Philosophy of Right*: "What is rational is real and what is real is rational." [*Was vernünftig ist, das ist wirklich; und was wirklich ist, das ist vernünftig.*] This is not an empty tautology, nor an attempt to rationalize what presently exists. It has just the opposite meaning. It is a condemnation of the irrationality of what presently exists. It is a demand that Reason shape existing reality so that it may become rational and free. Marcuse tells us that "the realization of reason is not a fact but a task,"⁵—a task that may become reality only through human agency.

This use of "Reason" so characteristic of Marcuse, which draws upon the German tradition of *Vernunft*, has a strange sound to the ears of thinkers conditioned by British and American philosophy. Our more popular conception of reason has been shaped by the empiricist and positivist traditions. We tend to think of reason as cold and analytic, as an instrument for drawing out logical consequences. Reason by itself is presumably impotent. But, according to Marcuse, once we succumb to this conception of reason, we have abandoned Reason for a positive mode of thinking that is limited to describing and accepting what is—such a "reason" becomes the epitome of irrationality. Next to Hegel, Marcuse chiefly admires Aristotle, who also emphasized the autonomy, potency, and dynamic quality of *Nous*. Reason so understood is the key for understanding freedom, for freedom is rational self-determination. Although this union of Reason and Freedom also has its roots in Greek philosophy, Marcuse argues that it became fully explicit

in the tradition of German Idealism.

What is distinctive about Hegel for Marcuse, and gives Hegel the place of honor as being the culmination of philosophy, is the conscious application of Reason to history itself. It is not sufficient for the philosopher to articulate and cultivate Reason. Reason, according to Hegel, is an objective force which must and will be actualized in history. When this is finally achieved through the painful dialectical struggle of mankind, then for the first time Reason and Freedom will become fully concrete, fully actualized. The realization of freedom, the achievement of human liberation is the end—the telos—of man's historical development. This dialectic of freedom and human liberation is central to Hegel, and it is appropriated by Marcuse, who interprets Hegel's great error as his belief that the rational and free society was about to be realized: "Hegel's philosophy, however, which begins with the negation of the given and retains this negativity throughout, concludes with the declaration that history has achieved the reality of reason."⁶ But once Hegel made the move to make philosophy a concrete historical factor and to draw history into philosophy, the move beyond Hegel—the need to overcome (*aufheben*) philosophy and develop critical theory—became objectively necessary. The task, as Marx so acutely saw, was to turn to the practical, radical transformation of human institutions; to achieve concrete human emancipation.

One cannot underestimate the permanent influence of Hegel's thought on Marcuse. It characterizes his investigations from his earliest gropings to his most recent proclamations. The key motif of opposition, contradiction, negativity, refusal to accept what

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now exists in the name of a universal and objective Reason and Freedom is evidenced in all of Marcuse's work. It is this motif that explains the very meaning of one-dimensionality (lacking the negative critical dimension); it is at the heart of Marcuse's theory of art and imagination as the Great Refusal; and it is the basis for understanding Marcuse's interpretation of Freud.

Marcuse's criticism of Hegel, which closely follows the type of criticism elaborated by Marx in his early writings, is not a criticism that rejects Hegel, but rather one that seeks to affirm, negate, and transcend—*aufheben*—Hegel. The upshot of Hegel's philosophy is the demand for the concrete realization of Reason and Freedom. But following Marx, Marcuse claims that Hegel failed to understand existing social reality. He failed to understand that social reality itself harbors the very contradictions that need to be overcome if alienation is to be transcended and human freedom realized. We need to deontologize and demythologize Hegel and pass on to *critical theory*, which has as its objective *revolutionary praxis*. Marx's famous eleventh thesis on Feuerbach, "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is, to *change* it" has frequently been misread as an outright rejection of philosophy. But for Marx and Marcuse nothing could be further from the truth. On the contrary, what Marx meant and what Marcuse reaffirms is that the task of philosophy is to interpret the world. But with Hegel this task has been completed and what is now needed—indeed, demanded by the culmination of philosophy in Hegel—is to change the world. It is the dialectic of philosophy itself that requires us to pass beyond it to critical theory.

The 1930's were a period of spiritual and physical exile for Marcuse. From 1934 to 1940, Marcuse was associated with Max Horkheimer at the Institute for Social Research which had moved from Frankfurt to Columbia University. But Marcuse continued to write in German, publishing in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. Marcuse—in what must have appeared to be an intellectual and political vacuum—continued to sharpen the tools of critical theory. The essays written during this period are among the most important for understanding Marcuse's thought. A collection of these essays were published in Germany in two volumes in 1965 (*Kultur und Gesellschaft*)⁷ and a selection of the most important were finally translated into English in 1967 (*Negations*).⁸ The enormous popularity that Marcuse enjoyed among young German radicals during the later sixties was stimulated by the publication of these essays. For many they opened up a historical alternative to what had happened in Germany and pointed the way to what might still become a relevant historical possibility for the 1960's. A close reading of these essays reveals that little has been added to the conceptual backbone of Marcuse's thought in his more recent and popular writings. The outlines of Marcuse's conception of critical theory are stated with greater rigor and clarity than is to be found in any other place throughout his work. A brief look at two of these essays shows the general drift of his thought as well as the dilemmas he faced then and continues to face.

I have already mentioned Marcuse's first article, written while he was under the influence of Heidegger, and in which he

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attempted to work out a synthesis of Marxian and Heideggerian insights into the problem of historicity: "Following Heidegger's fundamental analysis set forth in his work *Being and Time* (1927), we will then attempt a phenomenological interpretation of historicity."⁹ But Marcuse soon came to realize the unhappy marriage he was trying to effect between Marxism and phenomenology. Phenomenology appeared to be impotent in the face of the rise of Nazism, and in the person of Heidegger there was active compliance. In his essay, "The Concept of Essence" (1936), Marcuse sought to settle his score with phenomenology by showing the bankruptcy of the concept of essence in Husserl, the founder of contemporary phenomenology and the teacher of Heidegger. The essential theme of negativity is developed in a historical overview of the role played by the concept of essence in the philosophic tradition: "A theory that wants to eradicate from science the concept of essence succumbs to helpless relativism, thus promoting the very powers whose reactionary thought it wants to combat."¹⁰ Surveying the history of philosophy from Plato to Hegel, Marcuse argues that it is in the concept of essence that one finds the basic oppositional element in philosophy. Although phenomenology continues to use the language of "essence," it has emptied this concept of its negative, critical, rational content. It thereby has become a form of positive thinking, limited to describing and accepting what is.

Thirty years later when Marcuse attacked contemporary analytic philosophy in *One Dimensional Man*, he articulates the same basic argument and criticism. For Marcuse "positivism" is not limited to a specific philosophic movement. It is the name he

uses for any style of thought that accepts the given and limits itself to describing and reporting what now exists.

The true beneficiaries of the philosophic concept of essence are the later framers of "materialist theory": "Hegel's conception of essence already contains all the elements of a dynamic historical theory of essence, but in a dimension where they cannot be effective."¹¹ Once again the hero is Marx, who makes the crucial transition to the practical realm and sets the task of critical theory: "In making this demand of the essence of man, theory points the way from the bad current state of humanity to a mankind that disposes of the goods available to it in such a way that they are distributed in accordance with the true needs of the community."¹² But Marcuse knows that critical theory in the spirit of Marx must do more than this; it must be united with practice: "These determinations of essence are distinguished from utopia in that theory can demonstrate the concrete roads to their realization and can adduce as evidence those attempts at realization which are already under way."¹³ In 1936, this claim must have seemed like pure fantasy and wish fulfillment. Where was theory to be linked with practice? What were the "concrete roads" leading to the fulfillment of human potentialities conceived in such a grand manner?

In another essay from this period, "Philosophy and Critical Theory" (1937), after arguing that critical theory replaces the philosophic concern with Reason and Freedom because it deals with the ways of extending these concepts to the material conditions of existence, Marcuse asks the hard question: "What, however, if the development outlined by the theory does not occur? What if the forces that were to bring

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about the transformation are suppressed and appear to be defeated?"¹⁴ Marcuse has been asking this question ever since, although he answers it with less honesty and more ambiguity. We know what the answer would be for Marx. If the "appear" in the above claim is what is really happening, then for Marx this would be sufficient evidence to show something is wrong with our theoretical understanding of what is happening. If the development outlined by theory does not occur, then the theory is disconfirmed and the unity of theory and practice would have broken down. But Marcuse waivers in his answer, and we find here the beginning of his moralism, which is essentially alien to the projects of Hegel and Marx. A similar moralism was ruthlessly attacked by Marx in the young Hegelians. In a passage containing all the ambiguities that have continually plagued Marcuse, he declares:

[Critical Theory] always derives its goals only 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 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 philosophic thought.¹⁵

If we strip away the rhetoric of this passage and follow the argument, we can see how Marcuse is retreating from and betraying what is supposedly the essence of critical theory. He begins by affirming the central

guiding principle of Marxism—the unity of theory and practice. Critical theory must derive its goals from present tendencies in the social process, and to do this it must become concrete and specific. This is the only way in which critical theory can realize itself and become a material force. But look where Marcuse ends up in this passage: implicitly he admits the failure to achieve his task. What is the consequence? Marcuse is left clinging to "obstinacy." Right here—despite his counterclaims—Marcuse is betraying his own Hegelian and Marxist heritage. For such a movement is a *regression*, an admission of the failure of critical theory. Ironically, Hegel and Marx themselves are the profoundest critics of a philosophic or moralistic obstinacy that fails to be integrated with actual historical tendencies.

It is difficult to assess how self-conscious Marcuse was of his own failure to achieve a genuine critical theory. We will see the same intellectual uneasiness and defensiveness about the role of critical theory when it appears to be defeated by history in *One-Dimensional Man*. The period of the thirties ended with the publication of Marcuse's first book in English, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*. The title is a misnomer, or at least it is incomplete for it tells us what Marcuse did in the first two parts of his book and fails to mention the crucial conclusion, "The End of Hegelianism." After an overview of Hegel's philosophy and how Hegelian negativity passes over into Marxist critical theory, the conclusion sketches the defeat of negativity and the rise of positivist thought. The book that starts so exuberantly ends on a note of despair. With the rise of Fascist Germany, everything that is most vital in the Hegelian tradition has been destroyed. In a sadly

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ironic way, Marcuse quotes and endorses the claim of Carl Schmitt, "the one serious political theorist of National Socialism," when he says that "on the day of Hitler's ascent to power 'Hegel, so to speak, died.'"¹⁶ A more appropriate subtitle for Marcuse's book would have been "The Rise and Decline of Social Theory."

III

Reason and Revolution completed one phase of Marcuse's intellectual career, a phase characterized by his serious articulation and vital defense of critical social theory. Despite his own demand for the necessity of unifying theory and practice, the rise of fascism, at least temporarily, *appeared* to defeat critical theory. Almost fifteen years lapsed before Marcuse published anything of importance. During the Second World War, Marcuse worked with the Office of Intelligence Research in the State Department and eventually became the Acting Head of the Eastern European Section. After the war, he eventually returned to Columbia and worked at the Russian institutes of Columbia and Harvard. He was finally appointed a professor at Brandeis. In the 1950's, it seemed as if Marcuse might have blended into the American academic establishment. *Eros and Civilization* appeared in 1955, and *Soviet Marxism* in 1958. When it first appeared the former caused a minor stir among American intellectuals, since its author had written on a subject that was of central concern to American intellectuals. But the latter book had almost no impact. Yet if we read these two carefully, especially against the background of Marcuse's earlier and later work, they take on a greater significance. They are already

provisional studies for the much more popular *One-Dimensional Man*.

For those unacquainted with Marcuse's early work and the attempts by Reich (and even Fromm) to work out a synthesis of Marxism and Freudianism, Marcuse's interest in Freud might have seemed perverse. After all, what could appear to be more foreign to Hegel's belief in the triumph of Reason and Marx's commitment to revolutionary change than the Olympian skepticism of Freud? Despite the emphasis on infantile sexuality and the mytho-historical apparatus used to explain the origin of the Oedipus Complex and taboos, Freud's outlook was essentially ahistorical. Every man faces the same latent conflicts, only their manifest forms change. A generation of so-called orthodox Marxists had condemned Freud as a bourgeois ideologist who had committed the worst of Marxist sins—reifying the conflicts of a decadent bourgeois society into an eternal war of unchangeable unconscious instincts. And when Freud turned to speculations about the development of civilization, he did not tell the story of the realization of Reason and Freedom, but rather that of the increased suffering, repression and heightening of the sense of guilt.

But Marcuse argued that Freud was the great negative thinker of the twentieth century. He seized upon what had been taken as the most reactionary, problematical and least empirical dimension of Freud's thought—the later theory of instincts, the struggle of Eros and Thanatos. Just as at an earlier time, Marcuse sought to draw out the radical, negative, critical consequences of Hegel's thought, so he now attempted to do the same for Freud. The theory of instincts could serve as an Archimedian point, a transhistorical norm for judging and ulti-

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mately condemning existing culture and civilization. It was the "explosive" (a favorite Marcusean expression) consequences of Freud's thought that Marcuse emphasized. Freud's theory of instincts and metapsychology embodied the "Great Refusal"—"the protest against unnecessary repression, the struggle for the ultimate form of freedom—"To live without anxiety." ¹⁷

The outlines of the argument that Marcuse developed in his interpretation of Freud are already anticipated in another rich essay of the 1930's—"On Hedonism." In German Idealism, Marcuse had found the essential linkage between Reason and Freedom. In this essay he sought to show how the demand for happiness as the full realization of human potentialities is tied to the demand for Reason and Freedom: "The reality of happiness is the reality of freedom as the self-determination of liberated humanity in its common struggle with nature."¹⁸ Quoting Hegel as his authority, Marcuse claims that "For idealism freedom was also reason: 'the substance of' and 'that alone which is true of spirit.' In their completed form both happiness and reason coincide."¹⁹ But while Reason, Freedom, and Happiness became the essential trinity for Marcuse, it is only in *Eros and Civilization* that he spelled out the meaning of the demand of happiness as instinctual gratification—holding out for us the utopian ideal of the union of reason and instinct.

Marcuse was fully aware that he was going "beyond" Freud, just as he had done with Hegel, and that Freud himself might have shuddered at the consequences being drawn out in his name. But with the application of the quasi-Marxist category of "surplus-repression" Marcuse argued for the possibility of moving beyond Freud's under-

standing of the "reality principle" to a form of society where, while we might not eliminate all repression, we would eliminate all the "surplus-repression" and guilt that is the source of so much human unhappiness. The psychoanalytic "'claim for happiness,' if truly affirmed, aggravates the conflict with a society that allows only controlled happiness, and the exposure of the moral taboos extends this conflict to an attack on the vital protective layers of society."²⁰ Freud, as Marcuse reads him, is the greatest subversive thinker of our time—unmasking (as Marx had done earlier) the hidden forms of human alienation, repression, and misery. Consequently, Marcuse viciously attacks the neo-Freudians for castrating what is most vital and explosive in Freud, for substituting an ideology of adjustment for genuine radical understanding. The consequence is still another form of positive thinking which stands helpless before the domination and surplus repression of contemporary society. With *Eros and Civilization*, the inextricable union of instinctual sexual liberation with political liberation that has proved so attractive and seductive to the youth of the sixties was firmly established in Marcuse's thought.

There is little talk in *Eros and Civilization* of critical theory and the way in which it can "demonstrate the concrete roads" for the achievement of present historical potentialities. Marcuse seemed to retreat to the position of the "Great Refusal." And this would seem to be further confirmed by the publication of *Soviet Marxism* in the eminently respectable series of the Russian Institute of Columbia University. The book is a scholarly study of the development and rationale of Soviet Marxism. It starts with the theoretical premises of Soviet Marxism and evaluates the consequences of these in

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terms of the historical stresses and problems faced in Soviet society. Unlike many other scholars of Soviet Marxism, Marcuse refuses to treat this body of thought as mere ideology, nakedly promulgated to rationalize existing policies. The result is a much more intelligible account of what at first appears to be an ideological swamp. But at a deeper level there is much more going on in this study. Together with *Eros and Civilization*, *Soviet Marxism* can be read as a proto-study for *One-Dimensional Man*. In his analysis of Soviet society and his frequent comparisons with western capitalism, Marcuse sketches for us the emergence of a form of society in which all negativity, all two-dimensionality is being systematically and efficiently crushed.

We can illustrate this with a discussion that may appear to be incidental to the main analysis but has always been central for Marcuse—his theory of art and imagination. Marcuse's conception of the role of art in society represents a variation on the general motif of negativity. It is frequently the only form of negativity that can be expressed. The more repressive a society becomes, the more art, fantasy, and imagination become the vehicles for the expression of the demand for freedom.

Art as a political force is art only insofar as it preserves the images of liberation; in a society which is in its totality the negation of these images, art can preserve them only by its total refusal, that is, by not succumbing to the standards of the unfree reality, either in style, or in form, or in substance. The more totalitarian these standards become, the more reality controls all language and all communication, the more unrealistic and surrealistic will art tend to become, the more it will be driven from the concrete to the abstract, from harmony to

dissonance, from content to form. Art is thus the refusal of everything that has been made part and parcel of reality.²¹

But Marcuse goes on to point out that "The Soviet state by administrative decree prohibits the transcendence of art; it thus eliminates even the ideological reflex of freedom in an unfree society. Soviet realistic art, complying with the decree, becomes an instrument of social control in the last still nonconformist dimension of human existence."²² We have here a specific illustration of the thesis that Marcuse explores on a larger canvas in *One-Dimensional Man*. As long as there is genuine art, and the genuine possibility that art can become politically efficacious, there is still the hope and possibility of realizing the liberation expressed in art. But what is happening in our time is that this vital function of art is being subverted and eliminated—either by "administrative decree" or by the more subtle and more efficacious way of the Western world, where art is quickly absorbed into mass society and is robbed of any explosive role it might play. For Marcuse this is the ultimate horror and degradation of a one-dimensional society.

IV

There are strange paradoxes in the role that Marcuse came to play in the late 1960's. It is not so much that Marcuse caught up with the times, but the times caught up with (and surpassed) him. From a relatively obscure, genial professor with a small but dedicated group of followers, who was almost totally ignored by the academic establishment—Marcuse suddenly became the guru of the New Left, cheered by students in Germany, Yugoslavia, and

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America. His books became best sellers among those who considered themselves the new intelligentsia. Praised and condemned in the most extreme terms, his life has been threatened, and rightists in California sought (unsuccessfully) to have him fired from the University of California. Marcuse has played out one of the scenarios sketched for us in *One-Dimensional Man*. He is a victim of the bitch goddess of success.

On the American scene the basis for this popularity has been the publication of *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) and the essay "Repressive Tolerance" (1965) which coincided with and has been read as a justification for the transition from non-violent civil rights work to confrontation with the "pigs."

Law and order are always and everywhere the law and order which protect the established hierarchy; it is nonsensical to invoke the absolute authority of this law and this order against those who suffer from it and struggle against it—not for personal advantages and revenge, but for their share of humanity. There is no other judge over them than the constituted authorities, the police, and their own conscience. If they use violence, they do not start a new chain of violence but try to break an established one. Since they will be punished, they know the risk, and when they are willing to take it, no third person, and least of all the educator and intellectual, has the right to preach them abstention.²³

But in all the furor created by the publication of *One-Dimensional Man*, it is questionable whether it has been seriously read and understood. It is a deeply ambivalent book whose main theme is the very opposite of what many have taken it as saying. Viewed against the background of Marcuse's intellectual development, it was

not *intended* to be a revolutionary tract, but an obituary on the fate of critical theory. Marcuse's main argument—insofar as there is any argument in the book—is that advanced technological society, both West and East, has evolved into the hell where critical theory with its demand for revolutionary praxis is no longer possible. This is perhaps an overstatement because Marcuse cannot quite give up the hope, the mere "chance" that the "historical extremes may meet again: the most advanced consciousness of humanity, and its most exploited force."²⁴ Marcuse concludes with a lament that comes close to the cry of Christian despair: "The critical theory of society possesses no concepts which could bridge the gap between the present and its future; holding no promise and showing no success, it remains negative. Thus it wants to remain loyal to those who, without hope, have given and give their life to the Great Refusal."²⁵

That this is the main conclusion of *One-Dimensional Man* can be detected in the titles of some of the chapters: "The Paralysis of Criticism: Society Without Opposition," "The Closing of the Political Universe," "The Closing of the Universe of Discourse," "Negative Thinking: The Defeated Logic of Protest," "The Triumph of Positive Thinking: One-Dimensional Philosophy." There is little that is new in Marcuse's critique of contemporary society. Old themes are played out in a more bombastic and irresponsible style. What is *new* is the despair about critical theory itself—the giving up of the "inseparable unity of theory and practice" and the retreat to Obstinacy and the Great Refusal which is threatened by impotence.

But Marcuse can't quite face up to the

conclusions of his own analysis. It is fascinating to compare Marcuse's introduction to *One-Dimensional Man*, where he discusses the nature and role of critical theory, with his treatment of the same issues thirty years earlier in the essay "Philosophy and Critical Theory." Thirty years have not sharpened the issues nor made them more concrete; they have obscured the central issues in a vacillating hazy prose. The old litany is repeated: "the theoretical concepts [of critical theory] terminate with social change."²⁶ But Marcuse immediately goes on to say,

But here, advanced industrial society confronts the critique with a situation which *seems* to deprive it of its very basis. Technical progress, extended to a whole system of domination and coordination, creates forms of life (and of power) which *appear* to reconcile the forces opposing the system and defeat or refute all protest in the name of the historical prospects of freedom from toil and domination. Contemporary society *seems* to be capable of containing social change—qualitative change which would establish essentially different institutions, a new direction of the productive process, new modes of human existence. (italics added)²⁷

But what does this "appear" and "seems" really mean? Marcuse can't quite make up his mind and tries to cover himself by declaring that the situation is "ambiguous." But it would *appear* that the situation is not really so ambiguous for Marcuse when he declares "There is no ground on which theory and practice, thought and action meet."²⁸ No statement could be more explicit about the failure of a critical theory that takes the inseparable unity of theory and practice as its guiding principle. But Marcuse still hedges. He adds "And yet: does this absence refute the theory?"²⁹ Marcuse knows better than most that the answer

ought to be—and certainly would be for Marx—yes. But Marcuse's answer is, No: "In the face of apparently contradictory facts, the critical analysis continues to insist that the need for qualitative change is as pressing as ever before."³⁰ Marx and the early Marcuse know that theory can only be practical and radical when it actualizes the *needs* of the masses. Even Marcuse is aware that the conditions for the actualization of critical theory no longer *seem* to exist: "Confronted with the total character of the achievements of advanced industrial society, critical theory is left without the rationale for transcending this society. The vacuum empties the theoretical structure itself, because the categories of a critical social theory were developed during the period in which the need for refusal and subversion was embodied in the action of effective social forces."³¹

This seesawing attitude of Marcuse, where the logic of his position leads to a conclusion he cannot quite accept and where he drives himself into the corner of empty Great Refusal and Obstinacy, is a smokescreen for what has been his main failure. With all his talk of the need for critical theory to become historically relevant, to analyze the tendencies within existing society that can lead to radical change, and to be concrete and specific, Marcuse has never fulfilled the demands of his own basic conception of critical theory. For forty years Marcuse has brought us to the brink, has told us over and over again what must be done if critical theory is not to remain an empty abstraction—"abstract" in the sense in which Hegel and Marx persistently condemned. It is as if Marcuse has been frozen in the logic of his position at that precise stage where the young Hegelians stopped and were surpassed

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by Marx. There is the shrill exhortation to unite theory and practice, science and action, but Marcuse is just as vague and as confused as were the young Hegelians in knowing how to achieve this.

But Marcuse's failure here is not the most distressing feature of *One-Dimensional Man*; others have failed in their attempts to unite theory and practice for our time. There is a deeper betrayal of what is most vital and central in the Hegelian-Marxist tradition. "Reason," "Freedom," "Critique," "Alienation," were not slogans or incantations for Hegel and Marx. These concepts demanded patient, detailed analysis and justification. And in Marcuse's early writings there was at least the attempt to carry on this task of explication and clarification. But it is difficult to find any consecutive analysis and explication in *One-Dimensional Man*. Marcuse's prose apes the corruption of language characteristic of the mass media he so severely criticizes.

In *Soviet Marxism*, Marcuse made some acute observations about the decline of language and communication in the age of mass societies.

The value of these statements [those of Soviet Marxism] is pragmatic rather than logical, as is clearly suggested by their syntactical structure. They are unqualified, inflexible formulas calling for an unqualified, inflexible response. In endless repetition, the same noun is always accompanied by the same adjectives and participles: the noun "governs" them immediately and directly so that whenever it occurs they follow "automatically" in their proper place.

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The decline of independent thought vastly increases the power of words—their magical power, with whose destruction the process of civilization had once begun.³²

Marcuse fails to realize how apt these words have become of his *own* prose—how his words take on this magical character in which the "cognitive content" of what he is saying takes on a secondary value.

Let me illustrate this by reference to one typical passage from *One-Dimensional Man*:

The transformation of ontological into historical dialectic retains the two-dimensionality of philosophic thought as critical, negative thinking. But now essence and appearance, "is" and "ought," confront each other in the conflict between actual forces and capabilities in the society. And they confront each, not as Reason and Unreason, Right and Wrong—for both are part and parcel of the same established universe, both partaking of Reason and Unreason, Right and Wrong. The slave is capable of abolishing the masters and of cooperating with them; the masters are capable of improving the life of the slave and of improving his exploitation. The idea of Reason pertains to the movement of thought and of action. It is a theoretical and a practical exigency.³³

The first two sentences, although cryptic, can be deciphered. They summarize the movement that Marcuse has previously sketched for us in tracing the development from Hegel to Marx, from philosophy to critical theory, from the concept of essence as a philosophic concept to the transference of this concept to materialist theory. But the prose here rapidly degenerates; there is hardly the semblance of any logical development. The repetition of "Reason" and "Unreason," "Right" and "Wrong," "slave" and "master" culminating in "thought" and "action," "theoretical" and "practical" has a mesmerizing, magical effect on the reader creating the illusion of profundity with virtually no substance. Like all "successful" ideology in a mass age, Marcuse's prose has had its ritualized pragmatic effect.

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V

The tone and substance of Marcuse's essays, lectures, and pamphlets published since *One-Dimensional Man* are at once pathetic and desperate. After the final lament of *One-Dimensional Man*, "It is only for the sake of those without hope that hope is given to us,"³⁴ Marcuse now writes as if the apocalypse is upon us. He blows hot and cold, at one time seeing the imminent collapse of repressive technological society, and then again warning us not to be overly "optimistic." In Vietnam, Cuba, the Third World, the student movement, the hippies, the call for "flower power," Marcuse sees the signs of a beginning of a new era—the creation of the melange of forces which might just bring about the realization of critical theory and usher in the new utopia of liberation. He urges (whatever happened to the critique of positive thinking?) that "we must each of us generate in ourselves and in others, the instinctual need for a life without fear, without brutality, and without stupidity."³⁵ But then again like the charioteer in Plato's famous myth in the *Phaedrus*, Marcuse pulls back hard on the reins of the black horse that desperately seeks gratification. He informs us that "we are no mass movement. I do not believe that in the near future we will see such a mass movement."³⁶ Nevertheless we must prepare ourselves for the final liberation. This is the role of the educators. He sees the student uprisings of May and June 1968 in Paris as a "turning point."

They have again raised the specter (and this time a specter which haunts not only the bourgeoisie but all exploitative bureaucracies): the specter of a revolution which subordinates the development of productive

forces and higher standards of living to the requirements of creating solidarity for the human species, for abolishing poverty and misery beyond all national frontiers and spheres of interest for the attainment of peace. In one word: They have taken the idea of revolution out of the continuum of repression and placed it into its authentic dimension: that of liberation.³⁷

In his lectures delivered before the Free University of Berlin and recently translated in *Five Lectures*,³⁸ Marcuse answers questions as if he were the reincarnation of Zarathustra, who has come down from the mountain to tell us how it is.

In light of all this, it is no wonder that there are signs of an intellectual backlash. Philosophers who for so long simply ignored Marcuse have now begun a counter attack. Walter Kaufmann sees in the phenomenon of Marcuse a revival of Manicheism and characterizes him as a philosopher who "without spoiling the simplicity of this ancient scheme, had brought it up to date with suitable references to Marx and Freud, adding enough jargon and obscurity to make everything seem very academic and profound."³⁹ And Alasdair MacIntyre, who has excellent credentials for writing a serious critique of Marcuse, has recently published a stinging polemic in the *Modern Masters* series edited by Frank Kermode. Although subtitled "An Exposition and a Polemic," it is written as an exposé: "It will be my crucial contention in this book that almost all of Marcuse's key positions are false."⁴⁰ In a breathtaking survey we are informed that Marcuse misinterprets Hegel, Marx, and Freud. He fails to understand Soviet Marxism and Soviet society. He has given us a perverse analysis of advanced technological society. His positive program is pretentious and dangerous. To the many ills that have

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befallen language in advanced societies, MacIntyre adds one that Marcuse does not note: "It is the taste for pretentious nostrums described in inflated language which induces excitement rather than thought. To this corruption of language Marcuse's prose has made a major contribution."⁴¹ And MacIntyre concludes his "exposition and polemic" with a statement that echoes Kaufmann's, "The philosophy of the Young Hegelians, fragments of Marxism and revised chunks of Freud's metapsychology: out of these materials Marcuse has produced a theory that, like so many of its predecessors, invokes the great names of freedom and reason while betraying their substance at every important point."⁴²

It is difficult to resist the temptation of joining the intellectual dissection of Marcuse and closing the chapter on the phenomenon of Marcuse. For he is largely responsible—especially in his writings of the last decade—in bringing about this critique. So much of what Marcuse has written is not an invitation for serious reflection but an insult to one's intellectual powers of analysis. Marcuse too frequently has been willing to get away with rhetoric where patient argument is demanded. And yet to write him off as a "fraud"—as MacIntyre seems all too ready to do—is to do Marcuse and ourselves a grave injustice. For there is something essentially right in what Marcuse has been telling us—even when one senses that he is betraying this.

For forty years Marcuse has been warning us about the decline of critical thought. Although his characterization of contemporary philosophy and social science frequently results in caricature, Marcuse is right in detecting the tendency of our intellectual life to avoid serious rational, critical discus-

sion of political and social issues. The thrust of contemporary philosophy has been toward description even when it turns to issues of politics and morals. Philosophers feel comfortable in talking *about* normative judgments, not in making them. It is no accident of omission that analytic philosophy has almost nothing to say about political philosophy. And in the social sciences, Marcuse is right in detecting the ways in which social scientists have embalmed themselves in the ideology of value neutral discourse and the demand for cool "objectivity" at all costs. The consequence has been the creation of an intellectual vacuum that lacks any weapons for struggling with the complex political and moral judgments that confront us all.

Marcuse has not only pointed out this sensitive intellectual failing, already thirty-five years ago he noted how this leads to the mindless helpless relativism that ends by acquiescing in and then promoting the very forces of repression. Nobody can any longer doubt that the cultural and political crises that have resulted from the triumph of positive thinking and the decline of serious critique are upon us. To ignore, to write off, or to bury Marcuse is to do so at our own peril. He has failed to supply us with the critical theory that he so cherishes, and at times he has covered this failure with bluff and bombastic prose. He has been guilty of all the temptations that Marx noted would result from the failure to unify theory and practice. He has lapsed into moralism.

But even when all this is admitted, Marcuse has been *right* in pointing us towards what needs to be done—to develop a tough minded critical theory that takes as its guiding principle the unity of theory and practice, a theory directed toward a concrete understanding of historical possibilities and

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aims toward radical transformation. And Marcuse has clearly seen what can happen and is happening when we give up the attempt to be critical and negative, when we succumb to the seduction of positive thinking. To have focused on the powerful, efficient destructive and repressive tendencies of advanced industrial society, to have

consistently opposed these, to have relentlessly emphasized the project of critical theory, and to have done all this when for so long no one would listen, surely qualifies Marcuse as one of the most acute and persistent negative thinkers of our time.

Richard T. Bernstein
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NOTES

- 1 *Philosophische Hefte*, no. 1 (1928), pp. 45-68. An English translation of this article has been published in *Telos*, no. 4 (Fall, 1969), pp. 3-34.
- 2 "Contribution to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism," *Telos*, no. 4 (Fall, 1969), p. 3.
- 3 Frankfurt am Main: V. Klostermann Verlag, 1932.
- 4 New York: Oxford University Press, 1941.
- 5 *Reason and Revolution*, p. 26.
- 6 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 7 Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1965.
- 8 Boston: Beacon Press, 1968.
- 9 "Contributions to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism," p. 4.
- 10 "The Concept of Essence," in *Negations*, p. 45.
- 11 *Ibid.*, p. 68.
- 12 *Ibid.*, p. 73.
- 13 *Ibid.*
- 14 "Philosophy and Critical Theory," in *Negations*, p. 142.
- 15 *Ibid.*, p. 143.
- 16 *Reason and Revolution*, p. 419.
- 17 *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 149.
- 18 "On Hedonism," in *Negations*, p. 199.
- 19 *Ibid.*
- 20 *Eros and Civilization*, p. 244.
- 21 *Soviet Marxism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), pp. 132-33.
- 22 *Ibid.*, p. 133.
- 23 "Repressive Tolerance," in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), pp. 116-117.
- 24 *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 257.
- 25 *Ibid.*, p. 257.
- 26 *Ibid.*, p. xii.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 *Ibid.*, p. xiii.
- 29 *Ibid.*

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- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 *Ibid.*, p. xiv.
- 32 *Soviet Marxism*, p. 87; p. 91.
- 33 *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 142.
- 34 *Ibid.*, p. 257.
- 35 "Liberation From the Affluent Society," in *The Dialectics of Liberation*, ed. by David Cooper (Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1968), p. 189.
- 36 *Ibid.*, p. 191.
- 37 *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. ix.
- 38 Boston: Beacon Press, 1970.
- 39 "Black and White," in *Survey: A Journal of Soviet and East European Studies*, no. 73 (Autumn, 1969), p. 33.
- 40 Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marcuse*, ed. by Frank Kermode (Fontana Modern Masters; Longon: Fontana Collins, 1970), p. 7. Curiously, the subtitle "An Exposition and a Polemic" appears in the American edition published by Viking Press but not in the original English edition.
- 41 *Ibid.*, p. 86.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 92.

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