

## *The Critical Spirit of Herbert Marcuse\**

by Jeffrey Herf

Herbert Marcuse's last public address was delivered in Frankfurt on May 17, 1979. He spoke at the "Romergespräche," an annual symposium sponsored by the city of Frankfurt. This year the theme of the "Romergespräche" was the social and political implications of scientific and technological progress. The vigor with which he spoke, the absence of the slightest hint of political resignation, and his openness to the political and cultural currents of the last decade-and-a-half made it apparent that we were listening to a great old man whose critical spirit remained young. The talk was quintessential Marcuse — a distillation of themes he had developed since the 1930s combined with a spirited defense of the New Left, feminism and ecological concerns.

Just as Marcuse insisted that the oft pronounced "collapse" of the New Left was a case of conservative wishful thinking, so it should be said now that the oft mentioned obsolescence of the philosopher of one-dimensional society and of its oppositional forces is nonsense. The greatest tribute we can render to Marcuse is to read him again, to develop his thought further, and to remember how very important "Marcusian" ideas are for us today. In the following remarks, I want to touch on some of the themes Marcuse mentioned in his last public address and in his speeches and interviews of the last several years. In particular, I will refer to his comments on the historical significance of the New Left, and on technology and the domination of nature.

Ten years ago large segments of the New Left abandoned their utopian, cultural critical, anti-authoritarian, that is Marcusian components, for the certainties of sectarian Marxism. As Paul Breines said at that time: "The weight of its (the New Left's) own originality was too great to bear." In the same year, 1969, Marcuse published *An Essay on Liberation*, in which he defended precisely those ideas that had become an embarrassment within the Left. Whatever our generation may think of its own past, Marcuse remained loyal to it. He said that the New Left had "redefined the concept of revolution" so that it would be appropriate to the possibilities presented by advanced industrial society. It had pointed to "new dimensions" of social

---

\*This talk was delivered at a memorial service for Herbert Marcuse in Boston on August 30, 1979 during the annual convention of the American Sociological Association.

change that could no longer be grasped in political and economic categories alone. Instead this redefinition in theory and practice was “above all a revolution of the dominant system of needs” as well as of the modes of satisfaction of these needs. The New Left, he claimed, rediscovered a “suppressed dimension” of Marxist theory and practice, the dream of a qualitatively different society, one in which the relations between individuals and between human beings and nature were completely transformed. This dimension, suppressed by the productivism of both existing capitalist and socialist theory and practice must be operative now, he argued, in the means chosen to achieve the good society. In being the first radical movement to transcend Marxism’s fetishism of the productive forces, the New Left was a “cultural revolution” which “totalized” the opposition by connecting domination anchored in the individual unconscious to conscious social domination.

He spoke of the “emancipation of sense and sensuality” of a new morality, of the fusion of aesthetics and politics that left far behind the Puritan ethic of capitalism and orthodox Marxism. Yes, anti-intellectualism, political repression, the authoritarian ritualization of dogma, and cults of violence had taken their toll. But “in spite of all that,” Marcuse insisted that the New Left “marked a turning point in the history of capitalism and socialism.” It was, in embryonic form, the prefiguring of a revolution whose impulse would derive less from material suffering than in the revolt against inhuman forms of labor and free time, against enforced needs and their pseudo-satisfaction. It concretized a notion that had remained abstract for far too long, namely, that Marx’s impulse to change and not only interpret the world did not mean replacing one system of domination with another. Rather it entailed making the leap to “a qualitatively new level of civilization in which individuals are able to develop their own needs in solidarity with one another.”

As he had for the last decade, Marcuse stressed the importance of feminism. The organization of production on the basis of Eros would “take the ground out from under masculine aggressiveness in its most repressive, productivist form — namely the form of capitalism.” What had appeared as the feminine antithesis to masculine qualities would “emerge as the suppressed, historical alternative, the socialist alternative” to contemporary self-destructive productivity.

But when the New Left did turn against its own originality and towards terrorism, Marcuse’s response was clear — a pragmatic rejection of terrorist violence was insufficient. “Socialist morality,” the idea that the goal of a liberated society must be apparent in the means chosen to achieve that end, was equally necessary. If he rejected Max Weber’s notion of a value-free social science, he was equally adamant in rejecting a value-free concept of instrumentalized radical political opposition.

The ability to think in terms of a unity of opposites was embedded in Marcuse’s every utterance. “Does not the threat of an atomic catastrophe

which could wipe out the human race also serve to protect the very forces which perpetuate this danger?" This is the opening sentence of *One-Dimensional Man*. Progress and destruction, liberation from manual labor along with growing domination over men and nature, a growing possibility of an end to unnecessary instinctual repression together with the growth of repressive forms of instinctual release to ward off the spectre of happiness — these conceptual opposites continued to confound his critics, who simultaneously labeled him a technological determinist, on the one hand, and a backward-looking romantic, on the other. He was neither. He simply took the word "dialectic" very seriously, as the following anecdote illustrates. In the course of a recent conversation it was suggested to Marcuse that, obscene as it may sound, the introduction of the guillotine during the French Revolution was "progress" because it was more humane than methods of execution practiced by the monarchy. He responded by saying: "Of course, in bourgeois society that is what progress looks like."

"Progress?" was the title and theme of his Frankfurt talk. It was not a world-weary sigh of the conservative cultural critic he had often been accused of being. Rather it was an urgent insistence that capitalism's "ever more threatening spiral of progress and destruction, domination and subjection" can be halted only if the radical Left succeeds in keeping open the new dimensions of theory and practice it had initiated in the 1960s. The alternative was still that of "socialism or barbarism" — and so soon after the near catastrophe on Three Mile Island he meant this very literally.

Of the many controversial ideas Marcuse put forward, few met with more criticism from sympathetic and hostile critics than his views on modern technology. This is not the occasion to give them an adequate recapitulation. Suffice to say, his remarks in Frankfurt were fully in the spirit of the following sentences from *One-Dimensional Man*: "It is my purpose to demonstrate the internal instrumentalist character of this scientific rationality by virtue of which it is a priori technology and the a priori of a specific technology — namely, technology as a form of social control and domination. . . technology has become the great vehicle of reification, reification in its most mature and effective form" (pp. 158, 168-169). For putting forth such notions, for questioning the "neutrality" of technological rationality, for calling for a "new science and technology" and for a new and "pacified" relation between human beings and nature, Marcuse had been repeatedly criticized for committing the sin of indulgence in romantic backward-looking irrationalism. In Frankfurt he once again committed this "offense" against common sense, obviously convinced that he had been fundamentally right all along. He stressed his loyalty to the hopes of the 1960s and to his fundamental theoretical positions developed over half a century. But he recalled terror as well as hope. He concluded his speech in Frankfurt by referring to the terror of Auschwitz.

In the last decade, as the political struggle shifted from one for revolution to one for tenure, a more or less pervasive mood in our generation has

implied that Herbert Marcuse and his analysis of advanced capitalism and communism was a sign of the times, and with the fracturing of our "affluent society," the entry of a decade of double-digit inflation and high unemployment, of the job and energy shortage, the philosopher of the rebellion against the one-dimensional society had become a museum piece — as had our own political past. As I listened to him in Frankfurt so soon after Three Mile Island, after the China-Vietnam war, after a decade of "scientific Marxism" in American sociology — during which time it should be said that American sociology has proved itself to be remarkably immune to Marcuse's influence — I reflected that Marcuse's thought was as timely today as it was when he first articulated it. The legacy he has bequeathed to us means that Marcuse's critical spirit — if such a sad occasion as this allows a hopeful note — is very much alive. Marcuse was the last of a great generation of Western Marxist philosophers, but hopefully for all of our sakes, not the last of an endangered species — the politically engaged and deeply cultured intellectual. In his last speech Marcuse displayed the pessimism of the intellect and optimism of the will, the instinctual impulse to a reasoned Great Refusal or more simply the effort to fuse social theory and emancipatory political practice that informed his whole life and work.

# **THEATER Magazine** (formerly yale/theatre) **Spring 1979**

---

## *Special Issue on Politics and Satire*

---

Featuring the first English translation of Dario Fo's  
*ACCIDENTAL DEATH OF AN ANARCHIST*

Also, Jan Kott on Giorgio Strehler's *THE TEMPEST*

And essays on Mayakovsky, Piscator, Valdez.

Cost of single copy: \$3. Available in March. Order from  
THEATER Magazine, Box 2046 Yale Station, New Haven,  
Ct. 06520