

Praxis and Poiesis: Toward an Intellectual Biography of Herbert Marcuse [1898–1979]*

by Barry M. Katz

The affluent, assimilated Jewish bourgeoisie of pre-World War I central Europe has proved to be an almost predictable source of some of the century's most radical political ideas: the elder Lukács managed the largest bank in Szeged, Walter Benjamin's father was a wealthy Berlin art dealer, Horkheimer's was a prosperous member of the Stuttgart textile trade, and the list goes on. From rather modest beginnings, Carl Marcuse (the name, incidentally, is genealogically identical to that of Karl Marx) also established himself in the flourishing German textile industry, but prudently transferred his holdings to real estate before the war. The Marcuse family moved from Berlin to the fashionable suburb of Charlottenburg, and Herbert Marcuse, like so many of his future colleagues, grew up in circumstances which enabled him to take for granted the material achievements of industrial capitalism and set his sights elsewhere.

Herbert Marcuse's early education also followed a familiar pattern: the humanistic, civic and religious ideas of the Prussian and Jewish cultures were presented in their "official" form, purified of their subversive or transcendental content, only to return with vengeance later in his life. Even at that time, however, a rebellious instinct could be discerned: his rabbi once took it upon himself to assure Herbert that it was most unlikely that he would ever become a productive member of society (not a bad prophecy), and the public Gymnasium instruction in the German classics was being undermined by his early attraction to the writers of the French avant-garde (especially Gide), the esoteric works of Stefan George and his circle, and the early novels and stories of Thomas and especially Heinrich Mann. When his interests began to outstrip the means of a schoolboy to satisfy them, Herbert negotiated an elaborate system of credits with his father, by which he would be permitted to forego his place at the family's sumptuous supper table in return for money with which to buy books. His one early link with the Marxian proletariat: he was indeed driven to his work "by the lash of hunger."

*This essay is part of a forthcoming intellectual biography of Herbert Marcuse; sources of the material are discussions with Marcuse and his published and unpublished writings.

The war shattered the promises of this secure and comfortable *Berliner Kindheit*. Marcuse finished his Gymnasium studies abruptly in 1916 with the emergency wartime *Notabitur* and was drafted. But now his late-night readings of the European avant-garde paid off handsomely: he had ruined his eyesight and had to sit out his entire military service in the homeland, mostly in Berlin where he managed to secure permission to attend lectures at the university, while still on active duty.

In fact, a more “inactive duty” could hardly be imagined during the last catastrophic years of the war, and here the anecdotal becomes decisively historical. After his military training in Darmstadt, Marcuse was transferred to the *Luftschiffer Ersatz-Abteilung* — loosely, the Zeppelin Reserves — stationed outside the city of Potsdam. The airships had been virtually grounded in the last two years of the war, after they had begun to succumb to new British air defenses, and the military regime of the enlisted men here, as in other reserve units stationed throughout Germany and in the High Seas Fleet permanently moored in Kiel and Hamburg, was considerably relaxed. The drudgery of endless, pointless drilling, the humiliating subordination to the excesses of the military-feudal officers’ corps, and the obscenely visible parallel between the privileges enjoyed by the upper strata of the military and the profiteering in elite civilian circles were the greatest factors in catalyzing the wave of soldiers’ and sailors’ revolts which swept across Germany from the North Sea to Bavaria in the first week of November, 1918.

About a year earlier, Marcuse had joined the conservative “Majority” wing of the Social Democratic Party. More radical options had existed: the oppositional Independent Socialists, still diffuse enough to accommodate a range of political and theoretical positions from Haase and Ledebour on the Left, through Kautsky, to Bernstein on the Right, and the fledgling *Spartakusbund* of Karl Liebknecht and Rosa Luxemburg — but it should not be surprising that Marcuse’s political initiation was a gradual one. He had first to break with his own past, and identifying himself with the workers’ party, which his family had disdained more out of class snobbery than for political reasons, was a first step. He paid dues and read *Vorwärts*, but was not anything like a party activist.

Still, his political decision indicated that he was no longer able to see his experience in purely individual terms. He engaged increasingly in political discussion with his fellow soldiers, and when the sailors’ revolt in Kiel added to the military defeat and the deteriorating conditions in German cities, signalled the onset of the Revolution, Marcuse was elected to represent the newly-formed Soldiers’ Council in the northern working-class suburb of Berlin-Reinickendorf. Although this had less to do with his own political sophistication than with the political naiveté of his comrades, the fact remains that as a soldier, a socialist, and an elected delegate to the Berlin *Soldatenrat*, Marcuse found himself in the political storm-center of the country.

The German Revolution, or, as Max Weber put it, “the enormous collapse

which is customarily called the Revolution," was a rather short-lived affair for Marcuse: he attended meetings, rallies, and street demonstrations (some called by the Spartacists), and as part of the security force mobilized to defend against the incipient counter-revolution, was assigned to stand with a rifle in the Berlin Alexanderplatz and return the fire of snipers. He was discharged in September, by which time an element of disillusionment had already begun to set in. The SPD was already discussing naval rearmament, and the fatal alliance between the ruling socialists and the deposed military command which was struck in those days was apparent in the election of former officers to the Reinickendorf and other Councils. Liebknecht and Luxemburg were among its first victims.

The abortive Revolution actually propelled Marcuse out of active political life rather than into it. In fact, only one episode struck a chord that was really to resonate throughout his life: in Munich, an Independent Socialist faction headed by the visionary poet and political idealist Kurt Eisner had stepped into a momentary political vacuum and proclaimed a Bavarian Socialist Republic. Eisner, who was eulogized after his assassination as a "dreamer," and at the same time a tireless student of reality," attracted a highly suspect following of young poets, philosophers, artists, and littérateurs whose attempt to transform revolutionary politics into an ethic and an aesthetic ended in murder, prison, and ridicule. Marcuse nevertheless regarded the Bavarian Socialist Republic with admiration, and linked the episode directly with the most progressive of the tendencies he saw during the May-June events of Paris, a half-century later.

Marcuse had by this time grown quite radical in his questioning of the social and cultural foundations of bourgeois society, but was less certain of how this was to be translated into political action. By March, 1919, when the final, desperate rising of the opposition left 1,200 dead in the streets of Berlin, he had already quit the Party in disgust. He now allowed the question of political practice to lapse and prepared to resume his studies, enrolling for two years at the Humboldt University in Berlin, and then, when it proved too politically and intellectually confining, transferred to the Albert-Ludwigs University in Freiburg.

From the beginning, his first love was modern European literature, and it was within this faculty that he prepared his doctoral dissertation on the German *Künstlerroman*, focusing on the possible accommodation between the artistic existence and the mundane life-forms of the surrounding world. Drawing upon the early (pre-Marxist) literary studies of Lukács and, above all, the *Aesthetics* of Hegel, Marcuse interpreted the existence of this dualism as both a symptom of a reality estranged from its own potentialities and a concrete anticipation of the negation and transcendence of this estrangement. The very alienation of the artist from an artless world — from Werther to Tonio Kröger — guaranteed a refuge of transcendent ideals against a hostile and deficient reality, and in the detailed textual studies which make up the body of the dissertation, Marcuse identified two literary

tactics for grappling with the antagonism of *Künslertum* and *Bürgerlichkeit*: the “realistic” and the “subjectivistic,” the practical and the poetic transformation of the prosaic reality of everyday life. Although the implicit critique of the “bourgeois way of life” is still a long way from an explicit critique of the capitalist mode of production which sustains it, the notion of the aesthetic as a transcendent standard of criticism already suggests the course of his later intellectual development.

Marcuse returned to Berlin late in 1922, where he began to follow Lukács’ path out of Hegelian literary criticism to Marxist political criticism. The path was an indirect one, however, leading him through the experimental culture of the city, and collaboration in a publishing venture of his own: *Das Dreieck*, a three-cornered expressionist monthly with a diffusely leftist slant. He lived precariously in Charlottenburg in those years, supporting himself and his wife Sophie through his partnership in a Berlin *Antiquariat*, voting communist, and privately studying Marx, Freud, phenomenology, and Gestalt psychology. The publication in 1927 of Heidegger’s *Being and Time* was a decisive event: Marcuse and his closest friend studied it together line by line, and where other German students found a *völkische Lebensphilosophie*, they saw what they thought was the missing dimension of Marxism. Thus, he left Berlin again in 1928 to work with Heidegger.

The year in which Marcuse returned to Freiburg to study with Heidegger was one of the most promising in the history of the Weimar Republic; four years later, Germany’s first experiment in democratic rule lay in ruins, and he and his family were in exile. The German intellectual milieu reflected the confusion and the uncertainty of the later years of the Republic: Marxism appeared to have reached an impasse, as evidenced by its failure to provide theoretical guidance to German socialism in the post-war decade, and on a parallel course, academic philosophy appeared to be equally immobilized. Reflecting the disproportionate successes of the natural sciences in the preceding half-century, it aspired either toward scientific rigor (logical empiricism) or engaged in a headlong flight from it (*Lebensphilosophie* and certain obscurantist currents of neo-idealist metaphysics) — with elements of the dominant neo-Kantian schools serving both tendencies.

In both radical and academic thought, however, there had been decisive challenges during the 1920s. The neo-Hegelian reinterpretations of Marx undertaken by Lukács and Korsch had demonstrated to Marcuse the central role that philosophy has to play in a Marxism that is more than mere tactics and strategy; and in Freiburg there were Husserl’s relentless efforts to penetrate “to the things themselves” and Heidegger’s attempt to break through to a concrete existential ontology.

While still in Berlin, Marcuse had written the first of a series of essays which sought to fuse these two most promising currents. His outline of a dialectical phenomenology — which he called the “Concrete Philosophy” — has been subjected to extensive analysis, and here it may suffice to

suggest that his overall project was to delimit a "transcendent dimension of truth" immune to the vicissitudes and variegations of history; this external standpoint could provide a critical standard against which social reality may be judged, and could serve as a regulative idea to guide the political action that would radically transform it. His writings were admittedly beginning to take on a somewhat metaphysical cast when, just as he was completing his *Habilitationschrift* in 1932, the radical ontology that he had been looking for in Heidegger turned up in Marx. The publication of the *1844 Manuscripts* revealed that Marx had constructed the critique of political economy upon ontological foundations and confirmed Marcuse in his belief that philosophy could indeed provide the basis for a truly radical theory of revolution.

To the best of Marcuse's knowledge, Heidegger never read the *Habilitationschrift* on *Hegels Ontologie*. However, it was read elsewhere. From Frankfurt Adorno chided Marcuse "who usually held to Heidegger's public dogma with the rigor of a disciple," and expressed the wish that Marcuse would have severed the link with the ontological dimension altogether; still, he and his colleagues at the Institute for Social Research were interested. This was fortunate because Marcuse's academic career was about to end, although it had not yet begun. By 1932 the *Habilitation* was a useless formality to him: he was Jewish and a Marxist, and the Nazis, with 230 deputies in the Reichstag, thousands of SA-men in the streets, and millions of unemployed voters throughout the country, were preparing to take over the fate of Germany.

Heidegger's conduct at this time was entirely unpolitical, and Marcuse's relations with him remained cordial but formal to the end. Heidegger's notorious entry into the Nazi Party was in the *Revolution-Semester* (Spring, 1933), by which time Herbert, Sophie, and Peter Marcuse had been safely out of the country for several months. The news came as a great shock. Relations with Husserl (who had no use for either Hegel or Marx) were always much more personal, and it is likely that it was he who interceded on Marcuse's behalf to secure his appointment to the inter-disciplinary Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. The Institute had been preparing its evacuation since 1931, "when the clouds had already begun to gather," and Marcuse and his family joined them in New York — via Zurich, Geneva, and Paris — Independence Day, 1934. He immediately took out American naturalization papers.

The primary focus of the exiled Institute (now housed at Columbia University) was on the relation between totalitarianism and its liberal past in the passage of European capitalism into its monopolistic stage. For Marcuse as philosopher and *Ideologiekritiker*, the overriding question was, "did intellectual culture prepare its own liquidation?" His interrogation of the distinguished tradition of Enlightenment liberalism indeed revealed its defenselessness: "Ideas such as essence, happiness, or theory bore evidence of inner disunity. In an authentic way they revealed the genuine potentialities of man and nature; thus they were eminently critical concepts. At the same

time, however, they invalidated this contradiction by giving it ontological stability." Again he turned to Hegel (*Reason and Revolution* — 1941), for a clarification of the link between the most progressive part of the idealist legacy and the materialist goals of the European labor movement, whose future was now "clouded with uncertainty."

During the 1940s, Marcuse lived in Washington where he worked for three agencies of the U.S. government in a (then) unprecedented "united front" of anti-fascist scholars with the Departments of War and of State. Is it still necessary to refute the scurrilous charges of the Progressive Labor Party? It can be stated quite unequivocally, on the basis of his official reports and his unpublished philosophical writings on art and politics in the totalitarian era, that his leftward movement continued unabated during this period, and certainly outstripped that of his intellectual allies Horkheimer and Adorno. In the Research & Analysis Branch of the Office of Strategic Services (1943-45) he was a member of a team of leftist scholars in which he identified Nazi and anti-Nazi groups and individuals in fascist Germany and, in the last year of the war, assisted in the preparation of the denazification program of the occupation authorities. When the R&A Branch was transferred relatively intact into the State Department's Division of Research for Europe in 1945, Marcuse and his few remaining friends represented a dissident position, challenging the assumptions behind the drift of U.S. policy into the politics of the Cold War. It may be worth recalling that the O.S.S. was under constant attack from the right-wing, isolationist press during the war ("too many professors," in the words of one astute journalist), and McCarthyite forces were not alarmed by the presence of fascists in the State Department.

Throughout the period dominated by the Spanish Civil War, the Moscow Purge Trials, fascism, and war, Marcuse had been haunted by one particular paradox: the greater the potentialities for a hitherto-unimagined degree of emancipation seemed, the greater the mobilization of the forces of political and psychological repression seemed to be arrayed against them. Consequently, he allowed his thought to be pressed to the margins of the established society in his search for an "anticipatory memory" of future liberation, for a political base from which to resist the totalitarian controls: surrealism, but also the classical art of the bourgeois era, hedonism but also the distant removes of idealist philosophy. The distinctive insight drawn from the postwar period, however, was that the conclusion of peace did not substantially lift totalitarian controls.

In his work of this period, written at Columbia, Harvard, and Brandeis, Marcuse pursued this notion of a transcendent refuge "of the liberation that failed, of the promise that was betrayed." While this Archimedean standpoint came increasingly to be identified as an "aesthetic dimension," he never abandoned the concrete ground of social critique and political *praxis*: *Eros and Civilization* (1955), the great interpretation of "the hidden trend in psychoanalysis," *Soviet Marxism* (1958), his examination of the limitations

as well as the surviving potentialities of Soviet society as reflected in its official theory, and *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), the now-classic analysis of the extension of the technological base into the supposedly autonomous realms of art, science, and philosophy.

In a great American tradition, Herbert Marcuse moved to California and became a "star." Within five years of its publication, *One-Dimensional Man* had sold over 100,000 copies in the United States and been translated into 16 languages, and its author withstood attacks from the Kremlin and the Vatican, the Minutemen and the Weathermen, the American Legion and the Progressive Labor Party. In 1965 he accepted a senior position in philosophy at the University of California at San Diego, and at an age (67) at which any academic might have looked forward to a tranquil retirement and perhaps a concluding *opus*, devoted the remainder of the decade to his teaching, writing, and to the clarification and development of his theoretical position before an international audience of scholars and activists.

Marcuse rarely responded to his academic critics and apparently did not return the correspondence he received from the Minutemen, the Ku Klux Klan, and the American Legion in the later 1960s. To a third audience, however, he was inordinately responsive: the New Left, especially the student anti-war movement as it had begun to take shape in Europe and America. To be sure, he never recognized any "agent" of socialist revolution other than the industrial proletariat of the advanced capitalist countries, but like Marx, he knew that one of the objective determinants of a revolutionary class is that it represent the "determinate negation" of capitalist society, which the American working class manifestly did not. In such pre-revolutionary (counter-revolutionary?) circumstances, the "anticipatory consciousness" of the New Left could permit it to break with the administered system of one-dimensional needs and gratifications, and perform an essential catalytic function.

The prospects of the Left under the present period of "preventive counter-revolution" was the central theme of his work during the last phase of his life. He continued to lecture, to agitate, and to write at his customary, voluminous rate — the *Essay on Liberation* (1969), *Counter-Revolution and Revolt* (1972) as well as important essays on feminism (thematic for him at least since the 1940s), theory and practice, topical political issues, and, of course, the concluding essay which he wrote with Erica Sherover — "Mitarbeiterin, Freundin, und Frau" — in which he returned to the political significance of *The Aesthetic Dimension*.