

# Marcuse's Theory of Toleration

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*Professor Wolff's explication of Herbert Marcuse's theory of toleration is especially helpful in its clarification of the concept of "surplus repression," that is, Marcuse's development of Freudian analysis of the unconscious to facilitate political analysis. The fantasy of complete freedom is the necessary means to arouse people to struggle against the surplus, unnecessary repression with which they are burdened. Repressive tolerance accepts the oppositional act easily but leaves the surplus repression untouched, and thus "robs the psychic forces of liberation of the means by which they can be tapped and translated into politically effective energies." This leads to the Marcusean argument for quite limited tolerance where limitation serves liberation, but Wolff ends with a distinctly personal, if unphilosophical, commitment to toleration.*

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Herbert Marcuse's theory of toleration is, in my understanding of it, a specific consequence of, or application of, the general theory set forth in his *One-Dimensional Man*. The essay on repressive tolerance in the volume which he, Barrington Moore, Jr., and I published is in fact a piece of text which originally was intended for *One-Dimensional Man*. I find much of Marcuse's analysis profound and persuasive, even though in the end I cannot endorse his conclusion.

The classical critical analysis of industrial capitalist society is that it is irrational in two different ways. First of all, it is instrumentally irrational—that is to say, it is inefficient in its organization of the system of production and distribution. Secondly, it is substantively irrational, which is to say it is destructive of the full and satisfying development of human potentiality. Using the broadened logical categories developed by Hegel, Marx speaks

of capitalist society as exhibiting "contradictions," or internal incoherences, as Michael Oakeshott might call them.

The principal "contradictions" are two in number: in the sphere of instrumental rationality, there is a contradiction between the system of production and the system of distribution. As the technology grows ever more productive, the system for distributing its product becomes less and less efficient. The natural, uncontrollable famines and blights which periodically struck pre-industrial society are replaced by artificial famines, caused not by a lack of food but by an inability of the market system to distribute what has been produced. In the sphere of substantive rationality, a contradiction grows between the progressive development of man's nature, which is to be a collectively productive creature, and the outcome of that development, which is the progressive dehumanization of industrial man. Marx calls that contradiction "alienation."

The immediate and irrefutable evidences of these two irrationalities or contradictions are, first of all, the ever more violent business cycles, in which the productive capacity expands while the distributive mechanism breaks down; and second, the manifest misery of the working class in the midst of ample material productive capacity. Marx concludes that both forms of irrationality can be overcome only by a thoroughgoing transformation of the system of production and distribution, that is, by the institution of socialism. He claims that this transformation will take place because the progressive immiseration of the working class will drive them to attack a capitalist ruling class weakened by its inability to control the ever more irrational system of production and distribution.

Marcuse begins with two facts and a deep-rooted conviction. The first fact is that the contradictions in the system of production and distribution have been overcome, at least to the point of stabilizing the business cycle. He alludes here to the role of the state in managing the capitalist economy so that the swings of the cycle are dampened. The second fact is that the contradictions in the process of production have been overcome at least to the point of alleviating the misery of the working class, ensuring a rising standard of living, and so forth. The absence in America of a significant revolutionary working-class movement is evidence of this change.

But, despite these two facts, Marcuse remains convinced that advanced industrial society is deeply substantively irrational. In the Introduction to *One-Dimensional Man* he writes:

And yet this society is irrational as a whole. Its productivity is destructive of the free development of human needs and faculties, its peace maintained by the constant threat of war, its growth dependent on the repression of the real possibilities for pacifying the struggle for

existence—individual, national, and international. This repression, so different from that which characterized the preceding, less developed stages of our society, operates today not from a position of natural and technical immaturity but rather from a position of strength. The capabilities (intellectual and material) of contemporary society are immeasurably greater than ever before—which means that the scope of society's domination over the individual is immeasurably greater than ever before. Our society distinguishes itself by conquering the centrifugal social forces with Technology rather than Terror, on the dual basis of an overwhelming efficiency and an increasing standard of living. (pp. ix–x)

There are three possible points of view we can take toward Marcuse's position, and all three are vigorously defended in contemporary literature of social criticism. First, we can say that Marcuse is just plain wrong about his facts. Capitalism has not solved the contradiction between production and distribution. It has been forced to fight thirty-five years of war to prop up its faltering economy. The quarter-century of postwar American prosperity is merely a transient phenomenon, bought at the expense of the temporarily weakened capitalist economies of Europe and Japan. What is more, the American working class is not affluent at all. Marcuse has been taken in by the very propaganda he is attacking. The real facts of wealth and poverty show the persistence of widespread poverty and misery. As competition from foreign capitalist firms forces domestic firms into speed-ups, wage freezes, and other cost-cutting maneuvers, worker discontent will spread and generate a true militant worker movement. The rising indices of social pathology serve as indicators of the sick condition of American capitalism.

The second view we might adopt is that Marcuse's facts are right and his conviction is wrong. Things *are* getting better and better, and Marcuse's complaint about the pleasantness of advanced capitalist society is merely the frustrated whining of an armchair revolutionary who doesn't want his working-class troops to desert the battle. The remaining problems will yield to a further application of the same techniques of liberal capitalist social management that have taken us this far.

The third view, which Marcuse himself of course holds, is that his facts are right, that his deep conviction about the destructiveness and substantive irrationality of American society is right, and that we are thereby faced with a problem whose analysis requires us to go beyond the theory elaborated by Marx. To repeat, Marcuse sees the situation in this way: the manifest evidences of instrumental and substantive irrationality in industrial capitalist society have significantly diminished, while the society is more

irrational than ever before. The aim of *One-Dimensional Man* is to answer two questions: First, what is the structure of false consciousness which permits contemporary men and women to ignore or deny the evident irrationality and unfulfillment of their lives? How have the natural forces of rebellion in the psyche been dampened or repressed, and in what ways are the new forms of psychic repression integrated into the new institutions of social control? How has the language of negation and rebellion been deprived of its power to challenge and undermine the established social order, so that the literature of revolution can be offered up to the young as part of their training for integration into the society?

And second, what are the possibilities for change? for, in Marcuse's term, the transcendence of the present one-dimensional society?

Notice that Marcuse offers us neither an historical account of the genesis of the present-day one-dimensional capitalist society, nor anything more than the most general and sketchy characterization of the social institutions that maintain that one-dimensionality. His discussion is almost entirely devoted to his theory of contemporary false consciousness, which I believe to be profound and important, and to his analysis of contemporary Anglo-American philosophy, which is considerably weaker. In the remainder of my remarks, therefore, I shall be concentrating on his psychological theory of repression, negativity, and what he calls repressive de-sublimation.

Let us begin our analysis of the problem with a puzzle. Why is it that the most dramatic, outrageous, powerful words and ideas so rapidly become domesticated and acceptable in America today, *without changing anything along the way*? Radicals call America imperialist, and decent people everywhere are horrified. Several years later, J. William Fulbright refers in passing to America's imperialist foreign policy on a television interview program and none of the newsmen thinks it worth commenting on. Black militants shout "power to the people!" and nice folks cringe in their beds. Next season, "Power to the people!" is a John Lindsay campaign slogan, and soon thereafter a Richard Nixon campaign promise. Avant-garde artists violate every canon of artistic sensibility in a last-ditch effort to repudiate the plastic culture of Madison Avenue capitalism, and Madison Avenue reproduces their most outrageous productions as decorations for its advertisements. Woodstock begins as a cry of protest against middle America, and ends as the name of a bird in *Peanuts*. How can this be? Is nothing sacrilegious? Can modern American society absorb anything into itself without changing? Must every protest turn into this year's fad and next year's ancient history?

To answer these questions, Marcuse draws on the psychological theory of the origins of the ego and of civilization which Freud set forth in *Civili-*

zation and its Discontents, and which he revised and developed in *Eros and Civilization*. Freud, it will be recalled, argued that the objective, ungetoverable constraints of the real world forced each infant to, as he put it, substitute the reality principle for the pleasure principle. Both the intractability of the material environment, and the inevitability of interpersonal conflicts, particularly those fueled by sexual desire, force us to regulate or deny entirely certain of our strongest desires. The psychic means for this regulation, Freud suggested, are repression, sublimation, and fantasy, of which repression is the first and most important. Thus is generated the realm of the unconscious, populated by wishes, impulses, desires, loves, and hatreds which cannot be expressed and acted out in the real world. "Where Id was, let ego be!" Freud said, making it clear that repression was the price of that necessary substitution. Civilization itself, the organized collective life of man rests upon a foundation of repression, for not even the most miraculous technical wonders or the most flexible social arrangements can gratify the infantile wishes that lie beneath the conscious surface in every adult man and woman.

Two features of the content and structure of the unconscious are crucial to Marcuse's analysis. First, the unconscious is timeless. The thwarted desires and fears which reside there retain their power across decades of real-world time, returning again and again irrespective of changes in the world which originally thwarted them. A mother who loses her child grieves, mourns, and eventually becomes reconciled to the loss. Time heals her wounds, and the objective passage of events places the loss farther and farther behind her. The child whose mother dies before he or she can cope with the loss may repress the grief and anger, so that half a century later, the anger at the mother's desertion will recur as strongly, albeit in transmuted forms. In particular all of us carry with us unrelinquished infantile desires for the sorts of total, immediate, ecstatic satisfaction which as tiny babies we imagined we could, in our omnipotence, command.

Secondly, the content of the unconscious has a thoroughly ambivalent character. On the one hand, it is whatever reality (either natural or social) has decreed to be bad, inefficient, worthless, dirty, ugly, hostile, shameful. On the other hand, it consists of wishes and desires that have been denied fulfillment, but which retain their power. Part of the self—the part that identifies with society, reality, adulthood, the world—hates, loathes, feels shame for, the repressed. That is the part of the self that cannot acknowledge a fascination with its own feces, or sexual desire for objects deemed socially inappropriate, or laziness, or messiness, or the urge to inflict pain and suffering. But another part of the self secretly delights in the content of the repressed. And what is more, it delights in the repressed *because* it is repressed. So we have the men and women who can only enjoy illicit

sex; or, rather less dramatically, we find the familiar folk-character of the perpetual child who refuses to "grow up"—Pan, Til Eulenspiegel, Peter Pan.

Marcuse accepts Freud's fundamental claim that repression is essential to civilization. To me, much that is most attractive and powerful in Marcuse's writings stems from this willingness to face and accept the deeply pessimistic conclusions of Freud's theory. It is just this acceptance that sets Marcuse off from a host of utopian social dreamers whose sketches of ideal society consist in the elaboration of the infantile fantasy that all repression can be miraculously overcome. (Incidentally, since the primary frustrations suffered by the infant are oral, by and large, rather than genital, it is not surprising that so much utopian literature and so many utopian communities devote an inordinate amount of attention to eating, rather than to genital sexuality.)

But Marcuse, in a brilliant deployment of one of Marx's key notions, revises Freud's theory of repression by introducing a distinction between necessary repression and surplus repression. Necessary repression is simply that kind and amount of repression that is required at a given state of socioeconomic development in order to carry on the struggle for existence. It involves, for example, denying oneself part of the harvest even when one is hungry in order to have seed for the next planting; it involves forcing oneself to continue laboring at painful tasks because of the rational recognition that hunger, disease, danger, and death may result if one lets up too soon. But some repression, Marcuse argues, is required not by the objective constraints of an intractable reality, but rather by the specific system of domination and submission that exists in society at that moment in history. In short, some repression serves only to protect the favored position of the rulers, by restraining the subjects from rising up and overthrowing their masters. That repression is "surplus repression," and human progress consists in eliminating surplus repression while simultaneously decreasing the amount of necessary repression through technological advance. Indeed, Marcuse argues, at a time when our technology should permit us considerably to relax the bonds of necessary repression, through the shortening and lightening of the workday, through the relaxation of work discipline, and so forth, surplus repression grows greater and greater so that the total burden of repression suffered by modern industrial man is not appreciably lighter than that suffered by his technically less advanced predecessors. The purpose of that ever-increasing sector of surplus repression is, Marcuse claims, to maintain the ever more manifestly unjustifiable dominance of the ruling sectors of our society.

The concept of surplus repression is one of those brilliant insights

which are too often rejected by hard-headed social scientists because they prove difficult to quantify or operationalize. How would we measure the relative proportions of necessary and surplus repression in an individual psyche? Indeed, how could we ever show of a single instance of repression that it was unnecessary, and hence surplus? I don't know the answer to these questions, but I remain convinced that Marcuse has his finger on a fundamental fact here, and that to the extent that it is fuzzy or imprecise, we should struggle to clarify it rather than use the lack of clarity as an excuse for rejecting it.

Now, with the notion of surplus repression, and the theory of the unconscious, we can sketch Marcuse's theory of the function of negative thinking and thereby approach his analysis of tolerance. Briefly, his position is this. The repressed content of the unconscious in all of us exists as a permanent psychic pool or source of opposition to the established order of society. We all construct powerful defenses against this repressed content within ourselves, using such familiar mechanisms as denial, projection, and transference. When a rebellious member of society violates some taboo, by uncovering a part of his body that is supposed to be concealed; or by using openly language that is supposed only to be used covertly; or by defying canons of dress, decorum, or deference, he provokes a response that is exaggerated all out of proportion. The rest of us recoil from the temporary and perhaps insignificant breach of the rules of repression because it provokes the ever-present desire within us to liberate ourselves from the same rules, and we can control that desire only by clamping down on the transgressor. A struggle over bare nipples or long hair or even an insolent slouching way of standing becomes a struggle between the repressed content and the forces of civilization.

Now, if all the actual repression were necessary repression, then it would be clear that the rebel should be contained, however sympathetically we might acknowledge that he speaks for a part of each of us. But Marcuse's claim is precisely that not all of the repression is necessary, that some of it is surplus, unnecessary, and that in the interest of human happiness it ought to be eliminated. But—and this is the key to his entire theory, so far as I can see—in order to generate sufficient emotional energy in enough people to conquer the surplus repression inflicted by our society, it is necessary to tap the ubiquitous, irrational, infantile desire for a release from all repression. To put it bluntly, you must promise men an impossible liberation from necessary repression in order to get them to struggle for the elimination of the merely surplus repression. To get men to the barricades, it is not enough to say, "Workers of the world, unite! After the revolution you shall suffer only necessary repression." Instead, you

must say, "Workers of the world, unite! After the revolution you shall be free." And each projects his own fantasy of absolute freedom, a daydream both inevitable and unfulfillable.

The revolutionary role of negative, oppositional concepts or artistic styles is precisely to tap the reservoir of repressed desires, to draw on the permanent opposition within us to necessary repression, and thereby to fuel the fight against surplus repression. The call for liberation is necessary, and doomed to failure. The particular content of the rebellion against the established order is not crucial. In one social setting, the expletive "damn" will have as much effect as total nudity in another. The point is that no matter what is permitted, there remains both a repressed content that is denied and a longing to express it that can be tapped. The fight always appears to be about the particular rule that has been broken, but it is always really about the existence of repression itself. If the rebellion is successful, surplus repression is reduced, but that success is always perceived as a failure by the participants themselves, because they must sooner or later relinquish their fantasy of total liberation from all repression.

How can the dominant class in a society defend itself against a rebellion rooted in repressed desires and wishes? Not by clamping down compulsively on the breaches of decorum or public order through which the rebellion expresses itself. Such a reaction only heightens the force of the repressed desires and, Anteus-like, redoubles their energy. Rather, the appropriate move is to permit the specific, overt act, but to rob it of its unconscious significance by immediately accepting it into the repertory of permissible acts. It thereby ceases to serve as a surrogate for the entire unconscious, and so cannot mobilize the energies of that unconscious against a repressive social order. This process, which Marcuse calls "repressive desublimation," destroys the power of negativity—that is, of the repressed content—to undermine and thereby transcend the existing social order. Our society, he argues, is "one-dimensional" just in the sense that it lacks the capacity to transcend itself, to reach out to social forms less dependent upon surplus repression, to tap the negativity of the unconscious as a source of psychic energy for social progress.

Tolerance, for Marcuse, is liberating when it is the established order's grudging acceptance of negative or oppositional expressions which seek to tap the unconscious as a way of attacking surplus repression. Tolerance is repressive when it is, as in our present society, an easy acceptance of the surface manifestations of that negativity in such a manner as to rob it of its transcending capability and leave surplus repression untouched. Since mere rational argumentation and calculation is never enough to



elicit revolutionary activity from an oppressed class, this repressive tolerance robs the psychic forces of liberation of the means by which they can be translated into politically effective energies. Here is the passage in which Marcuse summarizes his argument:

Freud well knew the difference between progressive and regressive, liberating and destructive repression. The publicity of self-actualization promotes the removal of the one and other, it promotes existence in that immediacy which, in a repressive society, is (to use another Hegelian term) bad immediacy (*schlechte Unmittelbarkeit*). It isolates the individual from the one dimension where he could "find himself": from his political existence, which is at the core of his entire existence. Instead, it encourages non-conformity and letting-go in ways which leave the real engines of repression in the society entirely intact, which even strengthen these engines by substituting the satisfactions of private and personal rebellion for a more than private and personal, and therefore more authentic, opposition. The desublimation involved in this sort of self-actualization is itself repressive inasmuch as it weakens the necessity and the power of the intellect, the catalytic force of that unhappy consciousness which does not revel in the archetypal personal release of frustration—hopeless resurgence of the Id which will sooner or later succumb to the omnipresent rationality of the administered world—but which recognizes the horror of the whole in the most private frustration and actualizes itself in this recognition. (*Critique of Pure Tolerance*, pp. 114–115)

Marcuse concludes that the advancement of human happiness and genuine liberation from surplus repression may require us to refuse to tolerate the forces and institutions that oppose that advancement. As he says, "certain things cannot be said, certain ideas cannot be expressed, certain policies cannot be proposed, certain behavior cannot be permitted, without making tolerance an instrument for the continuation of servitude." But contrary to what one might imagine from these quotations, Marcuse is quite well aware that he offers us a counsel of despair. He knows that it will do the rebels little good to withdraw their tolerance from the established majority. In the Introduction to *One-Dimensional Man*, he describes the present time as a bad time for political philosophy precisely because there are no discernible movements for liberating transcendence within present-day society. He apologizes for the abstract nature of his analysis by observing that political philosophy retreats to higher levels of abstraction when it has no real social movement on which to base itself. Indeed, were it not for his irrepressible optimism, he would hardly have gone on

from the black conclusion of *One-Dimensional Man* to the rather shaky hopefulness of the *Essay on Liberation*.

For myself, I believe that much of Marcuse's analysis is correct, but I cannot in practice bring myself to adopt such political tactics as the disruption of public meetings, the silencing of government spokesmen, or the refusal to teach or discuss blatantly evil and repressive doctrines (nor, I might add, can Marcuse himself). I cannot offer a systematic defense of my behavior, but I can perhaps explain its roots and thereby say something further about the emotional roots of political behavior.

I am a philosopher and a teacher. That is the way in which I define myself—not as an intellectual (which is something different) nor as a member of either the working class (my correct location in the social relationships of production) or of the upper middle class (my correct location in a ranking of socioeconomic status). I feel pride in myself and my work when I conform my behavior to the norms of philosophy and teaching, and shame when I fall short of them. The university community is my world; its members are my colleagues, to whom I look for the confirmation of my identity. I have spent the first part of my life in it; and despite my endemic dissatisfaction with its shortcomings, I shall almost certainly spend the rest of my life in it. Now, as a philosopher and teacher, I am constantly engaged in a self-reflective criticism of both philosophy and pedagogy. But powerful as my criticisms may be, they have never been as strong as my self-identification as philosopher and teacher. In order for me to adopt modes of behavior which violated the norms of philosophy and pedagogy, it would be necessary for me not merely to give to myself rational arguments demonstrating the desirability of the probable results of such behavior, but also to undergo so thorough a transformation of my conception of myself that I could live with myself after that behavior. For as Marcuse's own argument shows, the roots of political behavior are only partially rational.

Now, it is—to use a clumsy but useful psychological phrase—thoroughly ego-dystonic for me to silence a student who expresses a morally evil doctrine; to deny the podium to any speaker who is willing to engage in debate and answer questions; or to eliminate from the readings and discussions in my courses the views of social philosophers with whom I violently disagree. But that subjective reluctance is perfectly compatible with the objective correctness of Marcuse's analyses and arguments and their implications for political action.

I think it is a mistake to elevate a subjective reluctance to the level of a political or philosophical principle. There are many morally right actions which I think I might find it subjectively impossible to perform, including

something as uncontroversial as an emergency tracheotomy with a pen-knife. So I can only conclude by remarking that should I find it necessary to engage in "liberating intolerance," I shall be forced to reject my self-identification as philosopher and teacher and form some new conception of who I am.