

Radical Politics, Critical Aesthetics, Queer Pleasure: A Workshop on Herbert Marcuse

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Davis & Fleming

In a one-day workshop co-organized by **Paul Fleming** (Cornell University) and **Ulrich Plass** (Wesleyan University) and sponsored by the Institute for German Cultural Studies at Cornell and The Center for the Humanities and The Certificate Program in Social, Cultural, and Critical Theory at Wesleyan University, presenters and participants considered the influence of the philosopher, social critic, and New Left activist Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979). Despite the highly controversial public profile of the scholar during his lifetime, thirty-five years after his death his work is not as often taken into consideration in discourses on radical political thought and action. In opening remarks from the co-organizers, Paul Fleming observed that Marcuse's legacy has become "disconcertingly uncontroversial" and is considered, on the one hand, to lack the philosophical rigor of 'high' critical theory and, on the other, to be too complex to inform political practice. Similarly, Ulrich Plass emphasized the disciplinary stakes for Marcuse's work along the theory-praxis divide. The co-organizers thus articulated the aim of the workshop: to situate Marcuse in current discourses both in critical theory and in radical practice, and to provide a forum for workshop participants to define personal and professional stakes of Marcuse's work on their own terms. Additionally, one of Marcuse's most renowned former students, the scholar and social activist **Angela Davis** was engaged as a respondent for the morning session.

Paul Fleming opened the morning session of the workshop, "Radical Politics," with a presentation titled "Democratic Intolerance," in which he explicated Marcuse's 1965 essay, "Repressive Tolerance," and extracted several primary theses: Tolerance towards all opinions has lost its historically oppositional force and now serves not democratic progress but the repressive status quo; therefore, progressive democracy must begin to incorporate intolerance in certain spheres of discourse, such as the political, where life and happiness are at stake; determining grounds for intolerance, however, is an ongoing project integral to deliberative reason. In making these claims, Marcuse posits that true tolerance is not the relation between freedom and opinion, but rather between freedom and rationality—intolerance must be exercised in the name of reason, liberation, and democracy. Therefore, one reaches an impasse when democratic structures come to serve the purpose of repression. Fleming proposed that the question as to who decides the "minimum rational demand" of that which is to be tolerated remains to be resolved, as education and knowledge are only part of the answer. In the discussion that followed, historically predominant conceptions of progress, historical contingency, and the possibility of an absolute truth were taken into consideration with regards to both Marcuse's thought and the work of other scholars affiliated with Frankfurt School social

theory. **Angela Davis** contributed observations from a social activist's point of view, particularly drawing from her experiences with legal practices and legislation. Although elements of Marcuse's thought contributed to arguments in support of laws intended to eliminate racism and its dissemination, some of these same laws today work against people of color (e.g., 'hate speech' laws are more often invoked against people of color), thus accomplishing the opposite of what they were intended to do. Consequently, Marcuse's claim that "the telos of tolerance is truth" relies upon a belief in either absolute or contingent truth that must be continuously reevaluated, cognizant of the tension between philosophical discourse and the execution of political action.

Next, in a presentation titled "Errors of Form: Adorno and Marcuse on the Dialectics of Praxis," **Matthew Garrett** (Wesleyan University) discussed the famous letter exchange between Marcuse and Theodor W. Adorno in the year 1969 regarding the German student protest movement. Garrett's account of the "embarrassingly" personal nature of the correspondence considered their respective positions regarding the theory-praxis divide as expressed in their stance towards student demonstrations. The debate was prompted by the occupation of a room in the Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt, led by SDS (*Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund*) members and the activist Hans-Jürgen Krahl, in response to which Adorno called in the police, much to Marcuse's disappointment. The letters between the two friends express their disagreement concerning academics' roles in support or opposition of such radical manifestations of protest. However, their dialogue ranges broadly with respect to subjective or objective limitations and the possibility of personal engagement in radical political action. In the discussion, attention was drawn to the historical context of the correspondence in light of populist movements in Germany, including on the one hand resistance to activism that is not informed by theory and, on the other, the high degree of intellectual training of student activists. Based on personal acquaintance, Davis confirmed the degree to which prominent leaders such as Krahl were influenced by theorists such as Adorno and, in light of the scholar's resistance to praxis, in fact used Adorno's thought against him.

The morning session was concluded by **John Abromeit** (SUNY Buffalo State), whose presentation, "Herbert Marcuse and the Social Psychology of Right-Wing Populism" elucidated the historical context and contemporary relevance of Marcuse's posthumously published essay, "The Historical Fate of Bourgeois Democracy" (1972). Witnessing the re-election of Richard Nixon, the persistent war campaign in Vietnam, and the abandonment of socialist democracy in the consolidation of conservative movements in Europe, Marcuse observes social and psychological factors involved in the political shifts of the time. Marcuse asserts that bourgeois democracy relies upon the identification of the working class with leaders in power, which resulted in irrational and dangerous domestic and foreign policy as well as in class divisions being replaced by racial discrimination. Abromeit cited contemporary social historical research on racism in the working class in the US, the construction of a white identity, and systematic racism both in the historical context of Marcuse's essay and today. Aligned with the work of social philosopher André Gorz, Abromeit emphasized that a new rationality and sensibility becomes necessary as wealth accumulates among an ever-decreasing portion of the population and a new caste society emerges. The discussion focused on the privileging of productivity that is visible in today's political landscape, particularly in the US in minimum wage debates and Tea Party agendas, and on a global level, in the history of colonialism, in which racial

discourse overwhelms class differentiation and furthermore becomes aligned with productivity. (Miyako Hayakawa)

Workshop co-organizer **Ulrich Plass** opened the afternoon session on “Critical Aesthetics and Queer Pleasure” with his presentation, “Reason and Gratification,” which focused on the “Philosophical Interlude” in Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization* (1955). Retracing Marcuse’s elaboration of Sigmund Freud’s *Civilization and Its Discontents* and Freud’s notion of *Lust* (pleasure, joy), Plass interrogated the peculiar role of the concept of reason in Marcuse’s text. On the one hand, Marcuse portrays the history of philosophy as an unfolding of “the Logos of domination,” which he seeks to undo via recourse to Nietzsche’s circular temporality of the eternal recurrence interpreted as a joyful eroticization of being. On the other hand, and in contrast to Wilhelm Reich, Marcuse retains reason (which he seeks to re-appropriate as “logos of gratification”) as a constitutive means towards attaining a just society in which pleasure becomes practical freedom and is no longer at odds with the demands of rational self-interest. The ensuing discussion brought up similarities between Marcuse and Friedrich Schiller’s *Aesthetic Education of Mankind*, with its ideal of a harmonious unfolding of joyful play and rational freedom in an aesthetic state. However, workshop participants also criticized the lack of historicity in Freud’s and Marcuse’s respective theories: The antinomy between sensuous bodily instincts and reason is itself historical and could be overcome if the totality of social relations were organized differently.

In her presentation titled “Liberation of Nature as Human Liberation,” **Mari Jarris** (Wesleyan University) discussed Marcuse’s chapter on “Nature and Revolution” in *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (1972), fleshing out the role Marcuse attributes to internal and external nature in the development of a “new radical sensibility” capable of effectively resisting capitalism’s instrumental rationality. Jarris criticized Marcuse’s essentializing account of a supposedly peaceful female nature in this context, and part of the ensuing discussion revolved around the question of how to treat such compromised passages in contemporary scholarship on Marcuse. Workshop participants also posed questions as to how to rescue Marcuse from the critique often posited against Negri and Hardt, which asks how a refuge to nature can be read as something beyond an undialectical exit from historically complex antagonisms inherent in reified social relations.

Katherine Brewer-Ball (Mellon Fellow, Wesleyan University) delivered a presentation titled “Remembrances of Freedom: What Can Art Do?” in which she brought Marcuse’s text on “Art and Revolution” from *Counterrevolution and Revolt* into dialogue with the work of artists and ACT UP activists Zoe Leonard and David Wojnarowicz. Starting with Leonard’s propensity to photograph clouds during the height of the AIDS crisis and her activism, Brewer-Ball used Leonard’s work and Wojnarowicz’s comments on it to reflect on the role of beauty in politics. Both Wojnarowicz and Marcuse locate a utopian function in the aesthetic form, or think of beauty “as the sensuous appearance of the idea of freedom” (Marcuse). Brewer-Ball pointed out that while Marcuse initially locates resistance in street art, after the fall of the New Left he returns to high art, identifying it as that which is separate from reality and allows us to imagine freedom. However, unlike Adorno, Marcuse also claims that such resistant art should subvert traditional material preserved in folk art and traditions. Discussants challenged Marcuse’s later dismissal of pop culture, and considered how to situate his work in this regard within the Frankfurt School tradition.

In the workshop's final presentation, titled "Queer Pleasure in Marcuse and Foucault," **Peter Rehberg** (DAAD Professor, UT Austin) staged a missed encounter between Marcuse and Queer Theory, relating Marcuse's *Eros* to Michel Foucault's concept of pleasure. Rehberg explained Queer Theory's dismissal of Marcuse as a consequence of the strong influence that Foucault's anti-repressive hypothesis has had upon the field since its inception: In comparison to Foucault's account of power as a productive rather than repressive force, Marcuse's writings on sexual liberation in *Eros and Civilization* were bound to look hopelessly naïve. Nevertheless, as Rehberg demonstrated, Foucault's account of productive power owes much to the idea of commodified pleasure, or "repressive desublimation," which Marcuse developed in his later work *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). Rehberg also made a case for acknowledging the similarity of the utopian moment of pleasure in Foucault, which can be juxtaposed to the sex-knowledge regime of power, and the emancipatory dimensions of *Eros* in Marcuse's work. As a way of reading the material aspects of Foucault, Rehberg's concluding suggestion was to make space for Marcuse in a new, anti-capitalist project of Queer Theory. (Jette Gindner)