

# Marcuse: A Critic in Counterrevolutionary Times

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## ABSTRACT

As a critique of neoliberalism, this article considers Marcuse's formulations on "paralysis of criticism" presented in his seminal text *One-Dimensional Man*. This is not a pessimistic perspective. Rather, the author promotes a social diagnosis on political struggles, considering the new challenges of advanced industrial societies to radical subjective experiences of emancipation. The article centers upon, it is important to note, a frequent question in Marcuse's inquiries: *How do we think critically in counterrevolutionary times?* This is a question that mobilizes dialectics to revolutionary trends as it expresses an effort to re-think traditional categories of Critical Theory in their "obsolescence." In a world of "no alternatives," obsolescent categories are symptom of its diseases. Such obsolescence contrasts immediate relations of status quo with "radical" mediations of social forces. It mobilizes criticism in "catalytic" processes to emancipate "centrifugal social forces" from below, a qualitative leap to social changes able to face counterrevolutionary times.

## Introduction

Marcuse opens *One-Dimensional Man* with the diagnosis of the "paralysis of criticism."<sup>1</sup> This perspective sounds like a certain feeling of powerlessness of critique to face the contemporary challenges. In this sense, Boltanski and Chiapello make the following diagnosis:

Ideological disarray has thus been one of the most evident features of recent decades (...). In part, (...) this is because the only critical resources available were built up to denounce the kind of society that reached its zenith at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s – that is to say, just before the great transformation, whose effects are today making themselves felt with all their force, set in. For now, the critical apparatuses to hand offer no wide-ranging alternative. All that remains is raw indignation, humanitarian work, suffering turned into a spectacle, and (...) action focused on specific issues (...). These still lack the refurbished analytical models and social utopia to assume the scope of appropriate representations.<sup>2</sup>

Such feeling of incompleteness presupposes the obsolescence of Critical Thought from 1968 as well as the claims for a new model of criticism before those years. Is Marcuse's diagnosis

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<sup>1</sup>See the introductory chapter of *One-Dimensional Man*, "The Paralysis of Criticism: Society without Opposites."

<sup>2</sup>Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (New York, NY: Verso, 2005), p. xLIII.

part of such “ideological disarray?” Is “paralysis of criticism” the effect of a gap between Marcuse’s model of critique and the development of Capitalism, or perhaps the “new spirit” of Capitalism, as it is called by Boltanski and Chiapello?

The question here is understanding Capitalism not only as an economic structure, but also as the development and reproduction of its social apparatus and subjectivities. That is, capitalist mode of production is a mode of rationality, in which not only the economic system is structured, but also their corresponding subjective experiences. Consequently, the “ideological disarray” of criticism expresses this particular mode of rationality in which Capitalism absorbs its opposites. A typical “action-reaction” game, in which criticism plays the role of motor of “spirit of capitalism” in progress.

Boltanski and Chiapello point to an important impasse in *Critical Thought*: the absorption of critique by the system. Similarly, Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man* notes such experience of integration as “paralysis of criticism.” How does social critique avoid its absorption into new forms of ideology? According to Marcuse, one-dimensional society expresses a context of apparent freedom, where:

authorities are hardly forced to justify their dominion. They deliver the goods; they satisfy the sexual and the aggressive energy of their subjects. (...) The people, efficiently manipulated and organized, are free; ignorance and impotence, introjected heteronomy is the price of their freedom.<sup>3</sup>

Liberties are recognized within manipulated and organized order of social relations, in which autonomy is obliterated by introjected heteronomy.

This situation makes criticism difficult because this new form of ideology resists any criticism based on the strategy of Enlightenment to shed lights on consciousness against the serfdom in heteronomy. As Marcuse knows, this “free people” emerged in heteronomous rules are just apparently free people. According to him, it makes no sense to talk about liberation to free people, nor to talk about repression when people enjoy more sexual liberty than ever before. To this, we can add: Does it makes sense to talk about freedom of speech when this legal right can express the conservative defense of crimes against humanity? Or, according to *One-Dimensional Man*:

how can the administered individuals – who have made their mutilation into their own liberties and satisfactions, and thus reproduce it on an enlarged scale – liberate themselves from themselves as well as from their masters? How is it even thinkable that the vicious circle be broken?<sup>4</sup>

In this sense, Marcuse’s questions are close to the diagnosis of powerlessness in critique described by Boltanski and Chiapello. All of them note the scenario of the gap between critique and capitalism.

However, Marcuse gives another perspective in comparison with Boltanski and Chiapello’s diagnosis. Despite their important considerations on experiences of thought in Capitalism, Boltanski and Chiapello left behind some aspects of criticism which cannot be absorbed by the system. There is a special moment of critique that goes beyond such perplexity and makes possible new critical horizons. This moment appears when the critical theorist acknowledges the crisis of his own experience. The consciousness of the experience in crisis

<sup>3</sup>Herbert Marcuse, “Political preface,” in Herbert Marcuse (ed.), *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1966), pp. XI–XIII.

<sup>4</sup>Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Advanced Industrial Society* (New York, NY: Routledge Classics, 2002), p. 255.

breaks with its systemic relations between critique and Capitalism as well as reinforces the necessity for categories that escapes from the absorption of criticism by the system.

Thus, beyond the skeptical incompleteness described by Boltanski and Chiapello, Marcuse's perspective of crisis does not consider critique as the motor of Capitalism. Criticism (and its correspondent practices) can overcome this system. However, it is not a simple task. Actually, Marcuse notes the crisis of critique in front of the new forms of ideology. If the ideological disarray is the most evident feature of recent decades, could Marcuse's considerations on crisis of critique offer a new model of social utopia?

## Paralysis as Symptom of Crisis

The first step to answer such a question is understanding how Marcuse describes the crisis of critique. Paralysis is not an appropriate response to an insufficient model of criticism, as Boltanski and Chiapello could consider in their readings on *One-Dimensional Man*.

According to them, Marcuse's questions on freedom in contemporary society reveal a necessity for a discourse on authenticity, in which an authentic existence would otherwise be repressed by social relations in Capitalism.<sup>5</sup> Consequently, the meaning of freedom reverses itself in developments of the new spirit of Capitalism: the system responds to its critics by the "commodification of difference." That is, developments "in the direction of an increased commodification of certain qualities of human beings (...) with the wish to 'humanize' services and, in particular, personal services, as well as work relations"<sup>6</sup> – a framework of personal services in respect to authenticity of the consumer as a way to combat market saturation and its consequent crisis of overproduction. At the end, Boltanski and Chiapello relate critique and capitalism in an action–reaction game. Despite some interesting ideas from this perspective, the authors run the risk of perpetuating a vicious circle which would block social transformation.

However, they neglect the important step of criticisms like Marcuse's, in which he questions the capacity of their own critical categories to mobilize themselves through historical development of the status quo as well as to change such order in a more emancipatory society. It is not a rhetorical digression when Marcuse asks for the possible way to break the reproduced circle of domination. In fact, it is a decisive question on limits of criticism as well as the possible reconstruction of reality. That is an important element to understand why Marcuse diagnoses criticism as paralyzed in order to describe social relations in *One-Dimensional Man*.

Paralysis expresses a social situation proper to the predominant capitalism of advanced industrial societies, where social oppositions are integrated in one-dimensional relations. Thus, paralysis is not just a symptom of insufficient critique, but a description of a historical context in which Critical Theory faces a "society without opposition." It does not mean to live under the rules of Terror, in which antagonists would be exterminated by dictatorships. According to Marcuse, societies without opposition can support democratic systems, as he notes in the most liberal social relations. In this sense, he affirms that, "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."<sup>7</sup> Then,

<sup>5</sup>Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, p. 441.

<sup>6</sup>*Ibid.*, 442.

<sup>7</sup>Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. xl.

technological society uses other ways of cohesion: productivity and efficiency offer the social condition to the new form of ideology in advanced industrial society. Technology is the basis for a society without opposition ruled by one-dimensional relations, which conquer any social attempt to eruption by “centrifugal social forces.”

One relevant example to understand how such forces has been contained by technological society is the social role played by workers in developed Capitalism. Earlier, they were explicitly the social class that “had nothing to lose, but its chains.” Although Capitalism conserves its continuous necessity to create plus-value by exploitation of working force, technological innovations change the mode of production into accelerated productivity as well as intervene with the social relations of the working classes. Since the 1960s, as Marcuse notes: “the machine becomes itself a system of mechanical tools and relations and thus extends far beyond the individual work process,” asserting “its larger domination by reducing the ‘professional autonomy’ of the laborer and integrating him with other professions which suffer and direct the technical ensemble.”<sup>8</sup> It is a new social environment, where working classes weaken their negative power against Capitalism through integration. If all people are connected, as proponents of new information technologies say, there would be no places of resistance left.

The example of the conquering of “social centrifugal forces” by Technology elucidates Marcuse’s consideration on “society without opposition.” Indeed, workers and capitalists do not defend the same vested interests. However, they would share common horizons in one-dimensional society, although they take different places at the negotiation table. In a deeper sense, workers struggle for their rights as presented by their immediate guarantees in one-dimensional heteronomy. Consequently, workers accept deals as soon as their social positions as consumers could be preserved as a part of the Establishment. Living as producers in order to be acknowledged as consumers, workers are reduced to the one-dimensional reality. Conforming to new theories of management, workers appear as part of a system of flexible machines inside this advanced industrial society. At the end, workers and their boss can enjoy the same virtual spaces on the internet, own the same desired goods, as well as visit the same resort places. How much does it cost? Such needs and satisfactions are achieved at the high price of preserving the Establishment. It is an important social phenomenon to understand why workers make deals to preserve their actual social position despite the consequences: for example, metallurgist neglects claims for a non-ecological mode of production in the automotive industry in defense of their employment, or they adapt themselves for some precarious employment against unemployment. At the end, automatization makes a shambles of the critical power of the working-class and contains their “social centrifugal force.” Far from a scenario proper to class struggle, workers run the risk of orbiting the same gravitational force of Capitalism in advanced industrial society. From this perspective, working classes lose their critical feature as a negative force of Capitalism. Critical Theory thus loses one of its most important social referents.

The example presents challenges to Critical Theory to escape from a situation of paralysis. Douglas Kellner notes such diagnosis as a key to Marcuse’s thought as reflections on the “crisis of Marxism.”<sup>9</sup> How do we consider the critical power of working classes in advanced industrial society, if they are connected by a technological system as defenders of the Establishment? Where would the power of negative thinking and its correspondent action

<sup>8</sup>Ibid., 30.

<sup>9</sup>Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1984), p. 367.

be, if the working-class tends to lose its character of opposition against Capitalism? How do we rearrange Critical Theory to face the new spirit of Capitalism?

Indeed, this new perspective on social relations “without opposites” changes all critical rationality we know until now. Moreover, it demands new inquiries on the traditional categories of Marxism. In a society where opposition appears more and more integrated, it is important to ask: How do we criticize the social contradictions in a society without opposites? Or, in a more strategic way: What kind of criticism would be able to create a more emancipatory condition for humanity?

### **Crisis of Marxism, Crisis of Dialectics**

Questions like these are not easy to answer. According to Marcuse, we live in times of “paralysis of criticism,” the moment when experience of thought apparently obliterates itself in front of contemporary antinomies. The society without opposites is not an historical context of society without social division of classes. Rather, the contemporary order offers a social experience from which opposites would be integrated to the preservation of the Establishment, so that this relation preserves a social division in a deeper grade than earlier stages on a global scale. So, if it is connected to a new social context of Capitalism, why does the paralysis of criticism express a “crisis of Marxism?”

It is important to note that each development of Capitalism demands a new development of critical thought. In this sense, Marcuse’s intellectual experiences links paralysis of criticism to crisis of Marxism in three different historical contexts:

- (a) The communist movement in 1920’s Germany;
- (b) Criticism in fascist times;
- (c) The post-World War II and one-dimensional societies.

From these three moments, Marcuse’s question on the dialectics of historical materialism reveals a decisive point to the political possibility of social changes. From such perspectives, it is possible to suggest not only a “crisis of Marxism,” but also a “crises of dialectics.” Do these crises differ from each other?

Since the 1920s, Marcuse highlighted the “problem of dialectics” by the vulgarization of categories by Marxian tradition converting the rigor of its experience of thought into some kind of “panacea” where “everything can be incorporated into such a ‘dialectical system,’ and everything remains in an unresolved state.”<sup>10</sup> Marcuse criticizes such perspective, relating the crisis of dialectics to the crisis of Marxism:

what for Marx was the meaning and essence of historical movement has become a fetter in the present. Through a faulty dialectic each mistake, each step backward, can be justified and can be claimed as a necessary link in the dialectical movement, so that in the end the same thing results as with bourgeois philosophy – decisions are avoided. In view of this, one should either abandon all talk about the dialectic or make an effort to reappropriate its originary meaning.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>10</sup>Herbert Marcuse, “On the Problem of the Dialectic,” in Richard Wolin and John Abromeit (eds), *Heideggerian Marxism* (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press), p. 55.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid.

In the face of such a choice, Marcuse chose the latter: the effort by a particular re-appropriation of dialectics.

Marcuse's search for new sources on the foundation of Marxism in the 1920s is the consequence of this re-appropriation. It reveals a "crisis of Marxism" in political-epistemological terms, following the question proposed then by the German Social Democratic Party: Would Marxism be scientific? If then, what sustains its critical scientific basis? Such questions arise at times when official Marxism would be too close to political institutions of power. The official answers to these questions express Marxism as an established discourse of power. Then, Marcuse's inquiries into new sources of historical materialism means the effort to re-think the revolutionary basis of Marxism as a radical action beyond the Establishment.

In this sense, he re-appropriates dialectics through phenomenology. Although Marcuse will abandon this project when he perceives the irremediable impasse of this relationship, the lesson here would be that he recognizes dialectics as fundamental to re-evaluating Marxism in terms of the historical development of society and its contradictions. According to Marcuse,

The truths of Marxism are not truths of knowing [*Erkennens*], but rather truths of happening [*Geschehen*]. The critical question can thus only be posed in the following way: does the framework of theoretical concepts from which Marxism derives truth – that is, the necessity of the historical action it addresses and comprehends – emerge from a full grasp of the phenomena of historicity?<sup>12</sup>

Dialectics (and Marxism) receives the challenge to diagnose the "happening," that is, the revolution at the present time. It makes Marxism (and dialectics) a critical theory based on historicity. At this time, Marcuse devotes all his energy to think about revolution inside the logics of happening: the eruption of working classes to an effective social emancipation as a consequence of "radical action."

However, official Marxism tends to constitute its politics in scientific terms. As a consequence, dialectics becomes the called "panacea": an empty discourse to justify political decisions of power. Marcuse notes then a certain "crisis of dialectics" as follows: the basis of Marx's critical theory becomes part of the Establishment, as a Hegelian "bad infinite" that hounds the apparent victory of socialism or communism in the 1920s.

In order to break this vicious circle, Marcuse creates a phenomenology of historical materialism to re-think dialectical categories connected with historical change, in which History is a blank page of new possibilities contrary to a closed book of the immediate present. Thus, Marcuse's approach with phenomenology is not an intellectual exercise to add new philosophical elements "beyond" Marxism. Rather, phenomenology just highlights the historicity proper to Critical Thought and his correspondent revolutionary subject. In other words, phenomenology contrasts to dialectics in order to open this one to an experience of historicity, avoiding the reified rationality of a strict epistemology based on positivity and synthesis proper to legitimate the barbarism of the Establishment, the "panacea" of the bad infinite.

The price of neglecting the dialectical features of historical possibility will be high: the ascension of Nazism. This historical fact marks Marcuse's critical experience: it is necessary to examine the basis of Marxism again – a second moment presented by *Reason and Revolution*. Now, the problem ceases to be identified as an impasse of official Marxism only. Another question is raised: How is it possible to engage a Critical Theory against Terror? The

<sup>12</sup>Marcuse, "Contributions to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism," in Marcuse (ed.), *Heideggerian Marxism*, p. 1.

best answer is by recovering the libertarian features of dialectics. So, *Reason and Revolution* introduces Hegel as a thinker of Revolution contrary to conservative readings that reduce Hegel as an ideologue of Totalitarianism.

However, there are new impasses approached by *Reason and Revolution*. Different from the epistemological-political question in the 1920s, Marcuse points up the dilemmas of dialectics by the contrast between materialism and idealism. From a general perspective, dialectics provides an adequate orientation for revolutionary practice. His method,

is a totality wherein “the negation and construction of existing” appears in every concept, thus furnishing the full conceptual framework for understanding the entirety of the existing order in accordance with the interest of freedom.<sup>13</sup>

In this sense, Marx meets Hegel. The controversy between them however occurs by their considerations on historical movement. For Marcuse, Hegel’s abstract reason effectuates the historical movement as the so-called “end of history.” According to Marx, such Hegelian historical processes hypostatize a particular phase of human history only: Capitalism as the effectuated history of mankind. In contrast, Marx expresses historical processes as concrete movement: that is, the history of mankind did not happen yet and we live at the pre-history of human beings.<sup>14</sup> Marx’s dialectics review the Hegelian perspective in order to give historical movement to the revolutionary categories. Thus, the given state of affairs cannot express the idealistic “end of history.” Rather, the truth of historical materialism “transcends the given historical reality, but only in so far as it crosses from one historical stage to another. The negative state as well as its negation is a concrete event within the same totality.”<sup>15</sup> In other words, relations within social totality sustain a series of contradictions. By the alienation of work, Marx reveals how Capitalism reproduces its contradictory relation between labor and capital. The force of working classes that produces surplus value, as well as reproduces the established system, is the same force to be negated by the same system. The working classes arise as the negation of the entire system by the negative features of labor against capital.

In this way, the contrast between Marx and Hegel’s perspectives on dialectics highlights crisis on two levels. On the one hand, a possible crisis of Marxism is presented by the gap between the concrete power of the negative and the historical development of Capitalism. That is, the centrifugal social forces proper to change society are conquered by the Establishment in advanced industrial societies as well as in the first experiences of socialist societies based on revolutionary or reformist processes. On the other hand, through the contrast between Marx and Hegel founded in *Reason and Revolution*, it is possible to diagnose a “crisis of dialectics,” in which critical discourse and action face an impasse of their own historical categories; that is, when Hegel makes immediate present as the truth whole and the *end of history*, he reduces dialectics as a conformist thinking of the given facts. Consequently, the pure affirmation of the immediate present put dialectical thought in crisis.

Moreover, “societies without opposition” highlight relevant aspects of the crisis of dialectics. Such societies reproduce themselves by the continuous confirmation of the Establishment by the positive facts. “There are no alternatives!,” as the neoliberal slogan has it. In dialectical terms, it is an expression proper to “counterrevolutionary times,” where positive thinking

<sup>13</sup>Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1960), p. 401.

<sup>14</sup>*Ibid.*, 315.

<sup>15</sup>*Ibid.*

obliterates the critical power of negative forces. Developed from Auguste Comte's principles, positive philosophy implies,

educating men to take a positive attitude towards the prevailing state of affairs. Positive philosophy was going to affirm the existing order against those who asserted the need for "negating" it.<sup>16</sup>

From this perspective, *One-Dimensional Man* expresses positive thinking on a global scale. Automation represents the law of immediate facts, with which all opposition is connected: the state of affairs absorbing all opposition to itself. Accordingly, to think about paralysis of criticism means: *How do we think critically in counterrevolutionary times?*

Indeed, the impasse produced by one-dimensional societies calls for a serious inquiry on the destiny of the revolutionary subject. Some Marcusean considerations reiterate this question as a way to overcome the paralysis of criticism. In this sense, Kellner exposes how Marcuse notes the necessity for a "reconstructive concept of subjectivity and agency in the face of theoretical critique and practical fragmentation and dissipation."<sup>17</sup> According to Kellner, such reconstruction allows Marcuse to criticize the traditional subject of Modernity as well as to propose another perspective on crisis of subjectivity "overwhelmed by big corporations, new technologies, seductive media culture, and the complex and contradictory forces of globalization."<sup>18</sup> It does not mean a reduced consideration of subjectivity condemned to live in a society without emancipatory changes. On the contrary, Kellner points up the possible radical subject by Marcuse's considerations of a new rationality which is able to overcome the crisis of Marxism as paralysis of criticism. In other words: Is it possible to think another kind of subject? This question claims for a new subjectivity contrary to Modern bases: a subject without essentialist, idealist or metaphysical features. As Kellner concludes: "Marcuse's conception of subjectivity is both materialist and socially mediated (...)."<sup>19</sup>

What does it really mean to understand subjectivity as a conception mediated by material and social bases? From the perspective of a crisis of Marxism, it expresses Marcuse's radical subject as a historical reconstruction. In this sense, the author bets on new political movements for emancipation as the claiming of students, feminists, racial and ethnic minorities, or environmentalists. Here, the question of radical subjectivity enters into dangerous waters. For example, Žižek criticizes Marcuse as being a "post-Marxist," in that "almost any of the antagonisms which, in the light of Marxism, appear to be secondary can take over this essential role of mediator for all the others."<sup>20</sup> That is, in the name of new criticism to overcome the crisis of Marxism, Marcuse would accept new forms of political fundamentalism, from which Critical Thought lost its perspective on the social whole. Then, criticism would be reduced in particular struggles, from which there would be no global liberation without recognizing the particular claims of this group's as fundamental ones. In the end, Marcuse's post-Marxism would lack revolutionary focus because, as Žižek concludes: "it is not possible to solve any particular question without solving them all – that is, without solving the fundamental question which embodies the antagonistic character of the social totality."<sup>21</sup>

Marcuse as a "fundamentalist" sounds strange in light of his critique of one-dimensional fundamentalism based on a "society without opposite." Moreover, it is not true that Marcuse

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 327.

<sup>17</sup>Douglas Kellner, "Marcuse and the Quest for Radical Subjectivity," in William Wilkerson and Jeffrey Paris (eds), *New Critical Theory: Essays on Liberation* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001), p. 97.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., 93.

<sup>20</sup>Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (New York, 1989), p. XVII.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., XXVI.



does not understand the “antagonistic character of the social totality” as fundamental to Critical Theory. Paralysis of criticism is an effect of the problem to think social totality in a new order. Indeed, Žižek’s objections on “Marcuse’s Post-Marxism” reveal the risk to understanding “paralysis of criticism” as a diagnosis of the “crisis of Marxism” only. To search for new radical subjects to activate new forms of negative thinking does not correspond to Marcuse’s question. Such a perspective could be an idealistic one without considerations on social and material mediations of this subject.

Paralysis of criticism faces this problem. The question on the rising of radical subject corresponds to the question on its objective conditions. Criticism is paralyzed as blocked experiences connected with the social appearance of the eternal immediate relations in technological societies. In the “society without opposition,” one-dimensional structures perpetuate the *immediate* state of affairs of the Establishment presented as the only alternative. As a consequence, the power of negative forces would weaken on its own bases: the objective conditions of material and social *mediations*. Living in the realm of the immediate status quo, the traditional Critical Theory becomes paralyzed in their own dialectical logic of protest. Any mediation can be absorbed by the one-dimensional system of opposites and social mediations become meaningfulness. Dialectics without mediations reveals its own crisis: a deeper one, by which radical forms of subjective experiences are blocked in their material and social bases.

Thus, paralyzed criticism expresses the blocked experience to denounce contradictions of the contemporary society. A dangerous situation, Marcuse advises, because “the contradiction does *not* explode *by itself*” – and that “left alone, the conflicting tendencies may lead to fascism rather than socialism.”<sup>22</sup> This is a risk that Critical Theory cannot run. The question would be then: Is it possible to re-think mediations able to face the immediate relations of one-dimensional societies? Such a question makes Marcuse re-examine not only Marxism, but dialectics. In other words, besides the “radical subjectivity,” it is important to think about “radical mediations” able to overcome “relations without opposites” as well as to make clear social contradictions in one-dimensional experiences and its corresponding radical subjects.

Frederic Jameson states what is at stake:

Mediation is not only the “black box” through which one state passes, on its mysterious metamorphosis into a radically different one. It also names relationship itself, the very inner link of the binary opposition, the equal sign which can signify either identity or difference, or indeed both at the same time. It is also a logical relationship which can itself be transformed into a temporal one.<sup>23</sup>

Marcuse’s efforts to re-examine dialectics in crisis mean to re-think its categories as historical ones. Mediations are not only passages to metamorphose social relations into new historical stages. As Jameson affirms, it is necessary to understanding the material and social content of mediations. Then, it is important to note the regimes of identifications and differences among the mediated elements, by which logical categories of dialectical thinking expresses historical struggles. In the face of the immediate relations of one-dimensional society, how

<sup>22</sup>Herbert Marcuse, “Obsolescence of Socialism: Marcuse – Brandeis Farewell Lecture 27 April 1965,” in Douglas Kellner and Clayton Pierce (eds), *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse: Marxism, Revolution, and Utopia*, vol. 6 (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), p. 242.

<sup>23</sup>Frederic Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2009), p. 35.

do we intervene in such a crisis of dialectics in order to recover mediations as social relations of emancipation?

## The Obsolescence of Revolutionary Categories

Absolutely, such an intervention is not a simple task. In one-dimensional societies, the power of negative thinking is dissolved among a series of integrated opposites. Marcuse recognizes that the potential revolutionary subjects are not immune to the social rationality in which everyone can find their determined social place. In technological societies, working classes are not so far from the American Dream. Even Cultural Revolution proposals would be suspects in their more transgressive actions, as the example of systematic use of “obscene language” by some student movements, presented in Marcuse’s *Counterrevolution and Revolt*: this strategy is not so far from “standardized language” that satisfies more the aggressiveness than the protest itself.<sup>24</sup>

Marcuse’s critique on both examples does not express a pessimistic view. On the contrary, both of them are particular cases of how dialectical experience works. As a historical rationality, dialectics understands its own categories as possibilities for social transformation as well as elements absorbed by the status quo. Critical Theory must observe the two sides of the same coin. In dialectical perspective, nothing is true by itself. Depending on the mode of relations, dialectical categories can justify or change the Establishment. From here, mediations are determined as historical categories.

In this sense, it is important to note how Marcuse marks rebel elements under the sign of “obsolescence.” The author uses this term often in his texts, qualifying themes which he esteems as potential critique.<sup>25</sup> Of course, obsolescence is not a Marcusean sign of a militant pessimism. All through one-dimensional reality and its corresponding state of paralysis, Marcuse’s Critical Theory is singular in his search for alternatives to overcome the state of affairs. Obsolescence then means another perspective than pessimistic one. According to Feenberg, “Marcuse’s concept of ‘obsolescence’ situates his critique historically,”<sup>26</sup> in order to understand dialectical categories in their full critical potential. It is a dialectical turn by which decisive mediations appear as obsolescent inside the one-dimensional ideology. However, it is such obsolescence that makes some categories a powerful instrument of critique.

There are two Marcusean obsolescences upon which exemplify the considerations above: the individual in psychoanalysis and the Marxian concept of labor. As we will see, these two cases can shed new light on the problem of paralysis of criticism in terms of radical mediation.

<sup>24</sup>Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1972), p. 80.

<sup>25</sup>For example: “The Obsolescence of Psychoanalysis” (1963), “The Obsolescence of Socialism” (1965) and “The Obsolescence of Marxism” (1967). Even in his defense of black movements, the notion of obsolescence presents itself when Marcuse remarks on how the deviations of spectacle operates upon the products of that manifestation (Herbert Marcuse, “Art and Revolt,” in Douglas Kellner (ed.), *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse – Art and liberation*, vol. 4 (New York, NY: Routledge, 2007), pp. 168–169. The same is true for his last defense, of ecological movements – even there the scenario of obsolescence will be present, when Marcuse recognizes the potential weakness of such movements without a critique on Capitalism (Herbert Marcuse, “Ecology and the Critique of Modern Societies,” in Douglas Kellner and Clayton Pierce (eds), *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse – Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and Emancipation*, vol. 5 (New York, NY: Routledge, 2011), p. 213.

<sup>26</sup>Andrew Feenberg, “Commentaries – I,” in Marcuse (ed.), *Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and Emancipation...*, p. 215.

## The Obsolescence of Psychoanalysis

In the first case, Marcuse considers the individual as obsolescent in the advanced industrial society.<sup>27</sup> This conclusion is not a partial criticism. According to Freud, the individual is the fundamental “mediation” of the subjective expression: it “is the living process of *mediation* in which all repression and all liberty are ‘internalized,’ made the individual’s own doing and undoing.”<sup>28</sup> Consequently, the constituted individual is the structure where the psychic conflict arises: the field of battle of particular and repressed desires against social and repressive demands. In Freudian terms, the individual results from the divisions of our psychic apparatus as constituted by three parts: (a) the instances of pleasure (the *id*); (b) the instances of moral judgment on values of the external world which we interiorize in the form of a psychic instance (the *superego*); and (c) the borderline elements (the *ego*) which operates as a “frontier creature” between the demands of the *id* and those of the *superego*.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, the Freudian subject expresses the mediations – as weak as humans could be – between particular desires and social reality.

Considering this proposition, Marcuse concludes that the individual as mediation becomes obsolete in one-dimensional society.

In the social structure, the individual becomes the conscious and unconscious object of administration and obtains his freedom and satisfaction in his role *as* such object (...). The multidimensional dynamic by which the individual attained and maintained his own balance between autonomy and heteronomy, freedom and repression, pleasure and pain, has *given way* to a one-dimensional static identification of the individual with others and with the administered Reality Principle.<sup>30</sup>

The individual is involved in the one-dimensional reality, where relations are just the affirmation of the immediate experience. The conflicts diagnosed by Freudian theory as constitutive for individual experience were absorbed by an administered Reality Principle organized by technological apparatus. Ego is no more the mediation between particular desires and social morality. Rather, ego becomes an *immediate* part of technological society where the Reality Principle speaks en masse. Different from an element of mediation, Ego loses its “power of negation.” At the same time, it is assimilated by the social rule of the Other – in order to reproduce the role of competitors or superiors by instinctual hostility. Ego then becomes unable to use its faculty of judgment, but rather “directs aggression toward the external enemies of the Ego ideal.”<sup>31</sup> As a result, just an *immediate* Ego is preserved: a narcissistic one, or in Freudian terms: an image of itself projected by the social order.<sup>32</sup> Consequently, it rests on a competitive society, where individuals “manage to keep away from their ego [ideal] anything that would diminish it.”<sup>33</sup> To protect its fragile Ego ideal, individual aggressiveness becomes a recurrent weapon of self-defense. At the end, the

<sup>27</sup>Marcuse, “Obsolescence in Psychoanalysis,” p. 109.

<sup>28</sup>*Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>29</sup>Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*..., p. 30; Sigmund Freud, “The Ego and the Id,” in Sigmund Freud (ed.), *Complete Works* (London, UK: Vintage Books, 2001), p. 3990.

<sup>30</sup>Marcuse, “Obsolescence in Psychoanalysis,” p. 112.

<sup>31</sup>*Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>32</sup>For example: Sigmund Freud, “On Narcissism: An Introduction,” in Freud (ed.), *Complete Works*, pp. 2931–2954. It is important to note that Narcissism here differs from the myth of Narcissus referred in *Eros and Civilization*. In this last case, Narcissus refuses to be part of society where he lives and constitutes its own identity forged by erotic ties with Nature and himself (Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*..., pp. 159–172). Differently, the narcissistic individual of the one-dimensional reality lives and suffers as the “image and likeness” of society.

<sup>33</sup>Freud, “On Narcissism...,” p. 2943, our brackets.

evolution of the contemporary society has replaced the Freudian model by a social atom whose mental structure no longer exhibits the qualities attributed by Freud to the psychoanalytic object.<sup>34</sup>

That is the “obsolescence of psychoanalysis”: reduced to a social image of itself, Ego loses its negative power as a psychoanalytical mediation of subjective experiences in one-dimensional society.

However, Marcuse does not interpret this change as a reason to abandon psychoanalysis. On the contrary, the same obsolescence of psychoanalysis is the true content of such knowledge: “The truth of psychoanalysis is thereby not invalidated; on the contrary, the obsolescence of its object reveals the extent to which progress in the reality has been regression.”<sup>35</sup> In other words, obsolescence of psychoanalysis marks not its critical limits, but its potential criticism against one-dimensional relations. The therapeutic strategy to reinforce Ego becomes insufficient to understanding subjectivity in one-dimensional times, not because there is a new kind of subjectivities, which psychoanalysis did not adapt to them.<sup>36</sup> Rather, the earlier mediations proper to individual experiences diagnosed by Freud have been fragmented more and more by the new social order in regressive terms of heteronomy of desire. More than a theoretical limit, then, obsolescence of psychoanalysis sustains itself as a denunciation against contemporary civilization and its discontents.

### **The Obsolescence of Marxism**

Marcuse's *Obsolescence of Marxism* (1966–1967) maintains a similar perspective to psychoanalysis. Once again, obsolescence is a sign for historical criticism on dialectical mediations. However, the object in question now is quite different from psychoanalysis. Marcuse's interests are directed to social structures of revolutionary transformation. When Marcuse reflects on Marxism in terms of obsolescence, he does not abandon the critical potentiality of this theory. As Marcuse affirms: “a re-examination and even reformulation of Marxian theory cannot simply mean adjusting this theory to new facts but must proceed as any internal development and critique of Marxian concepts.”<sup>37</sup> In this sense, Marcuse develops an immanent critique on the dialectical movement of obsolescent categories, preserving the critical potential of this theory without external re-examination of these terms. Similar to psychoanalysis, Marcuse highlights the historical extension of Marxian categories by their own obsolescence.

The obsolescence of Marxism complements the object of the obsolescence of psychoanalysis. In light of Marx's thought, the question is not only psychical structures of individuals. Rather, Marxian obsolescence operates on the social mediations of theory of revolutionary transition from Capitalism to Socialism. It corresponds to the view wherein, at the historical moment of one-dimensional societies, any attempt to changings would be integrated by a system of opposites. As *One-Dimensional Man* advises us:

<sup>34</sup>Marcuse, “Obsolescence of psychoanalysis,” pp. 109–110.

<sup>35</sup>*Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>36</sup>See *Eros and Civilization's* critique of “Freudian neo-revisionism,” which justifies a review of Freud's theory of instinct in order to adapt or reject its categories in front of new social demands.

<sup>37</sup>Marcuse, “The Obsolescence of Marxism,” in Herbert Marcuse (ed.), *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse: Marxism, Revolution, and Utopia*, vol. 6 (New York, NY: Routledge, 2014), p. 188. A similar position against revisionism can be founded in Marcuse's considerations on psychoanalysis, as we saw above.

When capitalism meets the challenge of communism, it meets its own capabilities: spectacular development of all productive forces after the subordination of the private interests in profitability which arrest such development. When communism meets the challenge of capitalism, it too meets its own capabilities: spectacular comforts, liberties, and alleviation of the burden of life. Both systems have these capabilities distorted beyond recognition and, in both cases, the reason is in the last analysis the same – the struggle against a form of life which would dissolve the basis for domination.<sup>38</sup>

In front of this one-dimensional scenario, there is only paralysis of Marxian mediations proper to revolutionary transformation of society. From this point, there are no possibilities of a real transition from Capitalism to Socialism, but only a correspondence of two extremes of the same domination by strategies of “Cold War.” At the end, there are only immediate relations of the status quo in both extremes. Worst of all, these integrated opposites fight together against their real enemy: “the common denominator of all doing and undoing (...), the real specter of liberation.”<sup>39</sup> Both extremes are representative of containing centrifugal forces of qualitative changing of society. There are no places for social mediations, but only immediate identification with one of two cases of the Establishment.

The perspective on the obsolescence of Marxism offers possibilities to Marcuse to interrupt the apparent obliteration of liberation. Dialectical perspective turns its own paralysis into movement when the obsolescent mediations become the object of radical and critical judgment through immanent critique. In this way, the crisis of dialectics can be reviewed by the other side of obsolete categories: the power of the negative that has been obliterated by one-dimensional paralysis. It means taking seriously the destiny of labor as social mediation in technological rationality of advanced industrial societies in order to recover the negative potentiality of Marxian categories. From this perspective, Marcuse does not ask about the role of workers in such societies only, but also about how such societies reproduce themselves. A question that requires a review of all Marxian categories within technological revolutions in the post-World War II period. This points up new relations of labor versus capital. In terms of immanent critique, Marcuse underlines the brief passage of Marx’s *Grundrisse* when the author previews future forms of labor, named “intellectual labor.” According to Marcuse,

Marx apparently attempts to “abstract” from the revolutionary proletariat and to focus entirely on the internal technological-economic tendencies in capitalism that would provide the disintegrating tendencies of the capitalistic system.<sup>40</sup>

From tendencies of automation in later capitalism, Marcuse finds a Marxian perspective that criticizes social domination without legitimating the limited thesis of arising impoverishment in capitalism (that is, the capital crisis obliterated by Welfare State configurations) or even the traditional form of revolutionary struggle of classes as “dictatorship of proletariat” (and its historical results in totalitarian societies).

From the *Grundrisse*’s arguments, “the collapse of capitalism is focused entirely on the internal ‘technical’ dynamic of the system towards automatism,” and the

[t]echnical achievements of capitalism would make possible a socialist development which would surpass the Marxian distinction between socially necessary labor and creative work, between alienated labor and nonalienated work, between the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>38</sup>Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man...*, p. 58.

<sup>39</sup>*Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>40</sup>Marcuse, “Obsolescence of Marxism,” p. 190.

<sup>41</sup>*Ibid.*, 191–192.

Such distinctions represent the centrifugal social forces of emancipation. But they are obsolete as opening possibilities obliterated by advanced industrial societies. That is, the social mediations necessary to create new forms of labor are not obsolete by themselves. Rather, they are obsolete in spite of their own possibilities, a blocked experience of liberation in technological societies. Thus, Marcuse does not abandon Marxism at all. He attempts to remove obstacles that paralyze criticism reorganizing all Marxian mediations blocked in the new organization of work.

Again, obsolescence points to the historical tendencies of mediations in its ambivalences. Technology represents domination as well as liberation. New ways to transition from capitalism to socialism via new forms of labor are made obsolete by the restrictions of the Establishment. Considering obsolescence, criticism recovers its own mobilization, reorganizing its categories in a wide structure for the struggle between labor and capital. Productivity in affluent society is not a signal of social success but rather a denouncement of its own limits, when domination and repressiveness perpetuates, in opposition to the real specter of liberation.

Obsolete theories and movements are thus not the end of history. Rather, these are the beginning which implicates a potential change for an emancipated society. By obsolescence, mediations are not more obliterated by a system of integrated opposites. Beyond a crisis of dialectics, these mediations can recover their own mobilization in order to change critically the society by their new tendencies where historical dialectic affects dialectical materialism itself.<sup>42</sup> Marcuse's considerations on the obsolescence of psychoanalytical Ego as well as of Marxian labor are meant to denounce the social syndromes of immediate relations as well as to promote immanent critical tendencies to social transformations. From this perspective, radical mediations appear as a real possibility, that is, the Marcusean concept of "catalysis."

### Catalysis as Radical Mediation

According to Marcuse, movements of resistance cannot be immediately considered as the final destiny of revolutionary subjects, but rather as a catalyst. In doing so, he refers to a chemical metaphor, which Marcuse uses many times in his essays, one that avoids a reification of the heroic subject of revolution and the ideological adhesion without criticism. Marcuse redefines the revolutionary subject in the following terms:

a class or group which, by virtue of its function and position in society, is in vital need and is capable of risking what they have and what they can get within the established system in order to replace this system – a radical change which would indeed involve destruction, abolition of the existing system.<sup>43</sup>

In dialectical terms, the revolutionary subject does not exist *in itself* only, but also "for itself." In other words, Marcuse insists on the necessity of thinking about the "social function and position" of such subjectivity, that means, its "revolutionary mediation." Catalysis denotes to such dynamics: it is composed by elements that change the entire social relation and underlines the internal contradictions by its own impulse for the vital needs, for the political *eros*. Only then is it insufficient just to identify the revolutionary subject without the catalysis proper to its negative existence.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 195.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 196.

Marcuse concludes that the revolutionary subject has to move himself in this new geopolitical map: the new movement of national liberation in the so-called “Third World” receives a new strategic *status*. In fact, the people that live in those countries are not external to Capitalism. On the contrary, they are an “essential part” of the “global space of exploitation.”<sup>44</sup> Marcuse does not, however, determine the revolutionary subject in those places while recognizing their important role. Marcuse does not adopt a Maoist strategy by the “rise of the world village against the world city,” as is evident in his interview with Peter Merseburguer.<sup>45</sup> On the contrary, Marcuse believes that the struggle for liberation in the “Third World” should be placed in the global level of the contradictions. When Marcuse bets on the catalyst function of the national liberation movements, he notes the possible instability inherent in the one-dimensional society. This is the turning point against the integrated opposition as the vital needs of these movements for liberation represent the inner contradiction of the status quo.

Moreover, the perspective of catalysis conceives the connected changing of the social components. Every protest is linked from the “Third World” to the affluent society. A new situation from where Marcuse understands changings on the “logics of protests” in those social catalysis, recovering new ways of life that can explode the internal contradictions of the status quo. As revolutionary mediation, catalysis operates new identifications and new strategies among the Great Refusal movements. It is significant to note “decolonization” as an important sign in protests of students, racial and ethnic minorities, feminists, and environmentalists as well.

However, Marcuse considers catalysis as another way to think changing movements on a global scale. Catalysis does not mean necessarily the Guevara’s strategy to create “two, three, many Vietnams”<sup>46</sup>. Although the relevance of this strategy, catalysis does not consider its revolutionary success by any *quantitative* illusion. This is something that Marcuse notes from the insufficient Lenin formulation: “three steps forward, two steps back” (or, paraphrasing Guevara: “many” steps forward without retreat). Considering the counterrevolutionary moment, Marcuse affirms to Rudi Dutschke that the strategy would be “no longer quantitative steps forward, but a *qualitative* leap.”<sup>47</sup> In order to re-examine the traditional concept of revolution, the importance of the catalysis would reflect the qualitative aspect as a “radical mediation.” In spite of the quantity of Vietnams that should be created, Marcuse’s strategy makes evident the *quality* in the struggle for liberation. It reinforces the necessity for re-thinking dialectics in terms of its negative potential and mediations to contribute to our understanding of how the Vietnam War results from the internal contradictions and, from the very beginning, how the catalysis for the “leap” from the “below” would be able to reorganize our struggles:

the struggle for a different way of socialist construction, a construction “from below,” but from a “new below” not integrated into the value system of the old societies – a socialism of co-operation and solidarity, where men and women determine collectively their needs and goals, their priorities, and the method and pace of “modernization.”<sup>48</sup>

<sup>44</sup>Herbert Marcuse, “Re-examination of the Concept of Revolution,” in Marcuse (ed.), *Collected Papers...*, vol. 6, p. 203.

<sup>45</sup>Herbert Marcuse, “Discussion between Herbert Marcuse and Peter Merseburguer on the Panorama Program of the NDR (23 October 1967),” in Marcuse, *Collected Papers...*, vol. 6, p. 269.

<sup>46</sup>Ernesto “Che” Guevara, “Message to the Tricontinental,” available online at: <https://www.marxists.org/archive/guevara/1967/04/16.htm> (accessed November 8, 2016).

<sup>47</sup>Herbert Marcuse, “Correspondence with Rudi Dutschke (1970–1972),” in Marcuse (ed.), *Collected Papers...*, vol. 6, p. 338.

<sup>48</sup>Marcuse, “Re-examination of the concept of revolution,” p. 202.

And now? What comes from below in neoliberal times when “No alternatives” becomes a slogan to perpetuate domination? According to Kellner and Pierce,

how Marcuse envisioned revolutionary social change in counterrevolutionary contexts is highly relevant in the neoliberal stage of capitalist development that now confronts the challenge of creating alternatives to capitalist and imperialist societies.<sup>49</sup>

Does Marcuse’s catalysis offer strong critical mediations on obliterated experience of neoliberalism? Think about new mediations in recent “Occupy” movements. What happens at the meetings in the central squares? Could someone hear the sound of catalysis provoked by critical noises coming from below?

### Notes on contributor

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<sup>49</sup>Douglas Kellner and Clayton Pierce, “Introduction: Marcuse’s Adventures in Marxism,” in Marcuse (ed.), *Collected Papers...*, vol. 6, p. 3.