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Book Review Essay

# A New Marcusean Moment? A Review of *Eros and Revolution: The Critical Philosophy of Herbert Marcuse*

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## BOOK REVIEW ESSAY

**A New Marcusean Moment? A Review of *Eros and Revolution: The Critical Philosophy of Herbert Marcuse***, by Javier Sethness Castro, Leiden, Brill, 2016, vi + 410 pp., \$194 (hardback and E-book), ISBN 9789004308695, E-book ISBN 9789004308701, Chicago, IL, Haymarket Books, 2017, \$28 (paperback), ISBN 9781608468065

Javier Sethness Castro's *Eros and Revolution* is a broadly comprehensive and highly detailed study of Marcuse's thought that will be invaluable not only to students of that philosopher, but to anyone who is interested in critical and dialectical thought and its contemporary relevance. The book is a broad survey of the life and work of the most widely known and most politically engaged of the Frankfurt School critical theorists. The author presents an exposition and analysis not only of Marcuse's major works, but also of his significant articles and many of his speeches and conference presentations, along with an illuminating discussion of the biographical and historical context of these works.

There is a great need (I'm tempted say a theoretical and practical urgency) for reconsideration of Marcuse today, in view the direction of history and the evolution of the global Left over the nearly four decades since his death. There may have been a Marcusean moment for the Left of the late 1960s, but there is, at least implicitly, a much more deeply Marcusean dimension of politics today than at any time during the philosopher's lifetime. This is true because of a variety of developments, including, notably, the presence of much stronger anarchist, libertarian socialist, and anti-authoritarian tendencies, the challenge of indigenous movements to dominant conceptions of society and subjectivity, the vastly greater importance of feminism and radical critiques of gender and sexuality, and the inescapable centrality of ecological struggles and the crisis of the Earth.

We are now in a world in which the classically masculinist, *ouvrierist*, and vanguardist revolutionary movements can no longer constitute privileged points of reference for radicals and revolutionaries. These guiding paradigms have been joined, and, to a significant degree, displaced by what we are learning about social transformation from indigenous and community-based movements in places like Chiapas in Mexico, Rojava in Syria, and El Alto in Bolivia, and from social-ecological struggles across the planet against dam-building, deforestation, extractive industry, and pipeline construction; movements that are often led largely by women and indigenous people.

As in previous epochs, theory (or at least what is most widely recognized as important theory) has lagged to a significant degree behind the course of history. As the gap between the two has widened, the ways in which Marcuse was in certain ways ahead of this course itself becomes more striking. Though he certainly retained certain limitations of the traditional Left, what makes his thought revolutionary for his time and still highly relevant today is the extraordinary degree to which he transgressed the limits of the dominant worldview, and

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The author's extensive and detailed focus on the pivotal role played by in Marcuse's thought by his concept of Eros is a great strength in this work. The concept is crucial for a contemporary world in which the patriarchal biases of the Left are often challenged, in which rigid gender identities are questioned, in which the productivist version of the myth of progress is breaking down, and in which the society of consumption itself is increasingly revealed as a depersonalized culture or malculture of separation, alienation, and addictive escapism. Our age is Marcusean to the degree that there is a dawning awareness that the existing order is a form of death-dealing *thanatotic capitalism* that can only be cured by a transition to a form of life-affirming *erosocialism*.

For Marcuse, "the ascendancy of Eros" would mean the creation of a qualitatively different kind of world in which human beings would, according to his formulation, find gratification in "cooperation, love, friendship; in the pursuit of knowledge, in the creation of a pleasurable environment, in the *kalokaynos*: the beautiful and the good" (230). Eros signifies for Marcuse that there is a natural and biological basis for the human impulse toward social cooperation. Nature and psyche, along with the vital forces they contain, are thus given their rightful place in the material base of society. There is, Marcuse says, a "repressed biological orientation of the organism toward cooperation and socialism" that can "surface and express itself by means of the development of a new human sensibility reflective of Eros" (207-208).

Marcuse's politics of Eros encompasses a radically utopian vision of socialism based on the emergence of a deeply transformed sensibility and the primacy of the esthetic

dimension. Sethness Castro notes that Marcuse “announces the superiority of Fourier’s sensuous utopian socialism” over the “industrial-productivist” version presented by Marx (12). The result of the emergence of an “erotic sensibility” will be “a world infused by calm, playfulness, sensuality, and beauty” (208).

A precondition for such a world is that that *techne* will ultimately be placed in the service of Eros. Automation, mechanization, and other technological advances will then be used to reduce labor-time and thereby abolish alienated labor, scarcity, and competition and allow people to devote themselves to a life of joyful communal self-realization (79). This is another area in which Sethness Castro reveals the need for Marcuse’s inspiration today. The contemporary Left certainly focuses on the problem of technique in relation to increasingly pressing issues such as climate change and the avoidance of ecological catastrophe, in addition to more traditional concerns such as alienated labor and the loss of jobs. However, the more inspiring Marcusean utopic vision of a liberatory technology in the service of radical social transformation and the emergence of an erotic sensibility remains at best quite marginal.

To a certain degree, as Sethness Castro points out, the erotic sensibility and esthetic ethos advocated by Marcuse was manifested in the late 1960s by increasing demands for greater beauty, preservation of the natural world, cultural liberation, and other trends. Marcuse, at that time in one of his more optimistic moods, took such developments as indications that we were in a period of “enlightenment prior to material change” (209). The seemingly emancipatory tendencies that he pointed out had, indeed, an authentically liberatory moment, but this moment was soon overwhelmed by larger systemic developments. The direction of subsequent “material change,” including the global division of labor, diverse forms of megatechnics, revolutionizing of the means of communication, the marketing of psychotropic drugs, etc. resulted in all these tendencies being largely coopted.

This might be taken as evidence of Marcuse’s lack of realism concerning historic possibilities, but it is just as much evidence that his critique takes on even greater

significance in a mutating late capitalism. For the coopted social forces were transformed into something that Marcuse himself diagnosed brilliantly and prophetically: forms of repressive desublimation within an increasingly mystified quasi-totalitarian system. The demand for “all power to the imagination” was fulfilled by the channeling of power into the technological, cybernetic, digital, and above all consumptionist imagination. Thus, it is time not to contemplate discarding Marcuse’s analysis as obsolete, but rather to ponder further the implications of Marcusean radical critique in the post-modern desert of digital nihilism.

In this later stage of capitalist development, the prophetic dimension of Marcuse’s erosocialism also becomes increasingly relevant. In his view, an essential part of the historic struggle between Eros and Thanatos is a pervasive revolutionizing of sexual politics. Sethness Castro shows that Marcuse proposed a radically feminist socialism that would abolish patriarchy, tame male aggressiveness, and end the masculinist, productionist obsession with the maximization of material production. This would result in “opening the possibility of the emancipation of the senses and a generalized enjoyment of human life” (270).

Marcuse agreed with those radical feminists who point out that through the very fact of oppression and exclusion from positions of power in a corrupt and degrading capitalist system, women have been able to avoid dehumanization more than men, and to find other, non-dominating modes of exercising power. Women, therefore, become better agents for the transformation of the dominant system and better resisters of adaptation to it. Marcuse distinguishes such an emancipatory feminist outlook from that of bourgeois feminism, which, he predicts, quite presciently, would merge with the forces of repressive desublimation, offering a superficial and elitist freedom that undermines true joy and fulfillment (154).

Marcuse was also far in advance of most of the Left of his time in questioning imposed sex roles and gender identities. As Sethness Castro shows, this radicalism was

manifested through his recognition of the reality of androgyny, his critique of compulsive heterosexuality, and his defense of an Orphic Marxism in which the

Freudian concept of polymorphous perversity is given a liberatory reinterpretation. Sethness Castro concludes that even “amidst the repressive conformity of the 1950s U.S. society,” Marcuse already “shows himself to be an important trailblazer in favor of LGBTQ liberation” (120).

One of Sethness Castro’s major projects in *Eros and Revolution* is to show the relationship of Marcuse’s thought not only to the so-called utopian socialist tradition, but more specifically to its anarchist branch. He hopes, indeed, to show that the philosopher can in a meaningful sense be described as an “anarchist thinker,” and that “it is justified to regard his views of authority and the means of transitioning away from capitalism and domination as anarchistic.” An immediate obstacle to this project is the fact that, while Marcuse clearly had strong affinities with anarchism, there were specific instances in which he resisted attempts to label his position as anarchist. Indeed, he sometimes presented a negative view, or even a parody, of anarchism. As a very careful student of both Marcuse and anarchism, Sethness Castro is, of course, aware of this, and he makes a valiant attempt to surmount these obstacles in the way of his thesis.

In support of his view, he cites Marcuse’s statement that he sees “the anarchic element” as an “essential element” in the struggle for liberation (210). Furthermore, Sethness Castro observes that among forms of liberatory social organization, Marcuse had “greater affinity” for the typically anarchist idea of “a free federation of associated communes” (346). He also quotes a passage in which the philosopher responds to being described as an anarchist by saying that if anarchism means being against “a society geared and governed by a vast bureaucracy which is in reality no longer responsible to the people” (346), then he accepts the label.

Such an interpretation can only go so far in making a case for Marcuse’s anarchism. In the reply just mentioned, Marcuse’s response indicated only that he opposed such an authoritarian society, not that he ordinarily called himself an “anarchist” based on such opposition, or that thought that the term should be redefined in this rather restrictive sense. In the end, it remains impossible to show that he either “is” or “is not” an

anarchist in some unambiguous, essentialist sense (unfortunately English does not, like French, have the slightly non-committal solution of *anarchisant*).

What is clear, and more important, is that Sethness Castro presents a convincing case for recognizing Marcuse as a major figure in the history of libertarian socialist (and more specifically, in libertarian communist) thought, and who had very strong affinities with anarchism. Even more significantly, he also shows Marcuse to be a libertarian ecosocialist. This makes the philosopher a truly prophetic figure at this point in history, after the global collapse of authoritarian and centralist socialism and in the era of a manipulative, technocratic, and ecocidal capitalism with intensifying contradictions that produce increasingly authoritarian and even fascistic tendencies.

One of the most significant achievements of Sethness Castro's book is his demonstration of the importance of Marcuse for radical ecology and for the ecosocialist movement. He notes that for a short time Marcuse accepted instrumentalist ideas of nature but that he developed a strong critique of Marxist Prometheanism, and came to see the project of liberation as including the liberation of nature from human domination. And, as Sethness Castro also notes, even in his early writings Marcuse had already acquired from Hegel the implicitly ecological idea that humanity is "the whole of nature come to consciousness" (286). This aspect of his thought then moved increasingly to the center.

Marcuse came to reject explicitly all utilitarian and objectifying conceptions of the natural world. He recognized the existence of intrinsic value in nature in his idea that it must be looked upon as "a subject with which to live" (290). Elsewhere, he calls for "a new (sensuous) relationship between [humanity] and nature" in which nature "would become a Subject in its own right and *Telos*: as the environment and soil of freedom," thus overcoming "the enslavement and violation of nature, its treatment as a mere object" (296). In taking this position, Marcuse went beyond the vast majority of the Left of his time, which, at best, demanded that exchange value merely be replaced by use value, a standpoint that still retains an instrumentalist view of the natural world, not to mention a dualistic view of humanity and nature.



Such views show Marcuse to have been far in advance not only of the contemporary Left, but of environmental philosophy, which did not even exist as an academic field or even a topic of widespread research during his lifetime. For example, the works just cited were from 1970 to 1972, and Marcuse had already been expressing similar ideas for many years. Arne Naess's famous article founding Deep Ecology was only published in 1973 and the first academic environmental philosophy journal was not founded until 1979, after which the field finally began to grow quickly.

Sethness Castro shows that Marcuse was also a visionary thinker in seeing the deep significance and revolutionary implications of ecology as a social movement. The philosopher posited an "intimate relationship between Eros and militant environmentalism" and saw radical ecology organizations as expressions of a "political and psychological movement of liberation" (297). He held, in fact, that the movement for the liberation of nature goes beyond other liberation movements because it represents a "revolt in which the *whole organism, the very soul of the human being, becomes political*" and "a revolt of the life instincts *against organized and socialized destruction*" (297, emphasis in the original). As environmental philosophy and "progressive" politics finally begin to come to grips, albeit quite timidly, with growing ecocide and the specter of biospheric collapse, Marcuse's critique of Thanatotic Capitalism comes to appear deeply prophetic.

Despite the author's great admiration for Marcuse's enormous achievements in this and other areas, it must be recognized that he does not hesitate in this work to challenge the philosopher's position in a number of areas. For example, he shows Marcuse's record as a strategist of revolutionary change to be rather inconsistent. On the one hand, he cites Marcuse's many brilliant insights into the preconditions for and barriers to emancipatory social transformation. In investigating the nature of an authentic agent of revolution, Marcuse concludes judiciously that

the radical subject must have a "vital need" for abolishing the existing system; it must be capable of both "risking" what [it] has and what [it] can

get within the system in favor of effecting radical change; and it must practically have the ability to either initiate or altogether complete the overthrow of the prevailing system. (213)

Furthermore, even at his most culturally utopian Marcuse still recognized, realistically, that the working class must ultimately join the movement for social transformation. He also had a realistic view of the need for strategies that challenge and assume actual social power, for example, through forms of direct action, factory occupations, general strikes, and strategic alliances between movements in the global North and South.

However, Sethness Castro also shows that the philosopher sometimes lapsed to a less than critical view of social phenomena and historical developments. Thus, he presents repeated examples of Marcuse's inconsistency in applying his critique of racism and his anti-colonialism to the case of Israel. Furthermore, despite the philosopher's extensive knowledge and understanding of revolutionary history, he was sometimes injudicious in accepting leftist regimes as authentically revolutionary. It is difficult to see a strongly "anarchic dimension" as a major social determinant in such regimes in Cuba, or Vietnam, or China during the Cultural Revolution, all of which Marcuse thought to have "advanced a non-authoritarian implementation of socialism that avoids bureaucratization" (232). Moreover, at the same time that he was minimizing the centralist and authoritarian dimensions of these systems, he was overestimating the radical potential for "rebellious middle class" tendencies in capitalist consumer society (232).

In general, Marcuse seemed to vacillate rather radically in his views of political strategy based on existing trends, at times overestimating revolutionary possibilities and at other times too hastily abandoning them. Thus, while he may have overestimated the depth of the radicalism of the late 1960s, he seemed to veer excessively in the direction of mild reformism in his late period. At that point, he advocated participation in a united front with reformists and undertaking "the long march through the institutions" as a viable means of preparing for an increasingly distant social revolution (242).

A crucial example of Sethness Castro's critical approach is his questioning of the grounding for Marcuse's theoretically foundational conception of Eros. He contends that though "considerable evidence could be marshalled" in favor of this fundamental Marcusean concept, its ontological status always remained somewhat ambiguous. He notes that as a "metaphysical hypothesis" it "suffers from at least one major problem," as far as it "presumes Eros to guide if not determine evolution," since "empirically, the theory of natural selection—or *descent with modification*—shows the history of life on Earth to have developed highly randomly, far from reflecting any purpose or outside influence, whether the work of 'intelligent design' or Eros" (302, emphasis in the original).

Sethness Castro raises important issues here, and suggests the kind of challenges that exist not only for Marcuse but for anyone who undertakes a similar left Hegelian ontological project. It is quite true that such a project fails to the extent that it invokes any external designing force to govern evolution or dialectical development. Yet there is still the question of the degree to which Eros (which, to give away a secret, acts at times as a kind of code word for Spirit) is an immanent dimension of nature, and thus has a certain degree of objective though virtual reality that comes into play or is liberated through the vicissitudes of what otherwise appears as mere random activity. According to such an interpretation of Eros, there is no predetermined teleological necessity of development, but rather a dialectic between what in abstraction might appear as pure chance and what in abstraction might appear as pure necessity.

Sethness Castro also poses a crucial theoretical question when he suggests that while there is evidence in support of Marcuse's view of Eros, his position "runs the risk precisely of naturalizing social revolution and thus obfuscating the ethical, actively conscious, and autonomous dimensions of struggling for radical social change" (304). Issues such as this deserve attention from anyone who wishes to avoid idealism by giving a naturalistic basis to the unfolding of Eros or Spirit. The degree to which

Marcuse's project might have such reductive implications is not entirely clear, but Sethness Castro is right to point out that Marcuse seems not to have adequately

delineated the ways in which they are to be avoided.

Such weaknesses in Marcuse's thought in no way detract from his enormous achievements as a profound thinker and engaged intellectual. Sethness Castro's highly illuminating work shows conclusively that Marcuse's thought can be a vital source of inspiration and guidance today. The very title of the book epitomizes its important message. Marcuse's concept of Eros expresses a utopian vision of hope, reconciliation, and communal fulfillment that is desperately needed in an age of growing resignation and nihilism. And his radical conception of "Revolution" expresses both the opposition to all forces of domination and oppression, and the faith in our ability to undertake decisive collective action that will be needed to liberate ourselves from these forces.

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