

# **Work and Authority in Marcuse and Habermas**

in: Human Studies 2:3 (July 1979), pp. 191-208.

**BEN AGGER**

*Department of Sociology*

*University of Waterloo*

## **I. OVERCOMING THE WORK-PLAY DISTINCTION**

The work of Herbert Marcuse in the 1960s opened up the intriguing problem of a Marxist theory of work and authority. Marcuse's 1969 book, *An Essay on Liberation*, is an explicit attempt to go beyond Marx's traditional bifurcation of work and play, necessity and freedom, toward a unified nondualistic theory of productive human activity. This attempt has provoked recent critical theorists like Jürgen Habermas to confront the issue of a Marxist theory of work and authority. My thesis, to be developed in the course of this essay, is that Marcuse has frequently been misunderstood by both tory and Marxist critics, who read his work as a naive romantic glorification of a "totally unrepressed" social order, without normal interpersonal decency or a collectivizing concept of authority and organization.

In other work (Agger, 1976a, 158-181; 1976b, 12-31) I have attempted to read Marcuse as a responsible Freudian Marxist who does not abandon repression and sublimation necessary for the successful individuation of every human being, but only surplus repression in the interests of capitalist alienation. In this paper, I want to explore Marcuse's views on work and authority, in counterpoint to Habermas', toward the end of grasping certain fundamental issues of modern Marxism, notably, the problem of rational authority and workers democracy. It is my premise that a humane Marxism is beholden to optimally nonauthoritarian forms of work-organization and to the transformation of work itself. In this regard, my reading of Marcuse is rooted in the reappropriation of early Marx's theory of self-humanizing praxis; my argument is that it is imperative to preserve and broaden Marx's notion, embodied in the 1844 manuscripts, that work can conceivably become a form of social freedom.

Marcuse has built upon Marx's early theory of praxis and attempted to go beyond it by suggesting that Marx was insufficiently radical in his conception of the emancipation of labor. In *An Essay on Liberation*, Marcuse argues that

Marx (especially the “later” one) was not radical enough in his projections of the creative, even erotic character of humanized work under socialism:

The early Marxian example of the free individuals alternating between hunting, fishing, criticizing, and so on had a joking-ironical sound from the beginning, indicative of the impossibility of anticipating the ways in which liberated human beings would use their freedom. However, the embarrassingly ridiculous sound may also indicate the degree to which this vision has become obsolete and pertains to a stage of the development of the productive forces which has been surpassed. The later Marxian concept implies the continued separation between the realm of necessity and the realm of freedom, between labor and leisure—not only in time but also in such a manner that the same subject lives a different life in the two realms. According to this Marxian conception, the realm of necessity would continue under socialism to such an extent that real human freedom would prevail only outside the entire sphere of socially necessary labor. Marx rejects the idea that work can ever become play. (Marcuse, 1969, p.29)

Marcuse searches for a convergence of work and play, but one which does not abandon the necessary productivity of the working process. Marcuse is not unaware of the impinging reality of natural necessity—the necessity of human survival before nature. Work must still take place, until that magic moment of complete automation and servo-mechanistic control of the production process (a pipe dream at best, suggests Marcuse (1969), and a reactionary ideology at worst, used to justify alienation “now” in return for freedom from work “later,” as in the work of Daniel Bell and Herman Kahn). Marcuse’s effort is to salvage early Marx’s vision of self-creative, socially useful praxis without appearing needlessly utopian.

Marcuse wants to argue that there can be simultaneously creative and productive work without severe elements of domination and alienation—that human beings, in a nonsurplus repressive social order, need not sacrifice themselves in their work, enjoying themselves (and even then “falsely”) only in their time away from the job. At the root of Marcuse’s reinterpretation of the Marxian concept of praxis is his vision that work and play might converge in such a way that human beings could be seen to engage in constructive useful work without abandoning their creative individuality.

Much of *An Essay on Liberation* is given over to a discussion of a “new sensibility,” a person who has “developed an instinctual barrier against cruelty, brutality, ugliness” (p. 30). This new sensibility “is conceivable as a factor of social change only if it enters the social division of labor, the production relations themselves” (p. 3). His point here is that socialists must remake the working process itself, along with the social organization of work, in a way which unifies work and play, fulfilling and also going beyond Marx’s 1844 vision of self-creative praxis.

In earlier work, notably in his 1955 book *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse argues that the production relations can be transformed under the rule of a

“rationality of gratification,” i.e., through what Marcuse calls the “erotization of labor”.

The problem of work, of socially useful activity, without (repressive) sublimation can now be restated. It emerged as the problem of a change in the character of work by virtue of which the latter would be assimilated to play—the free play of human faculties. (Marcuse, 1955, p. 195)

Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization* sought a psychoanalytic ground upon which he could argue for the transformation of work and authority. He suggested that the erotization of work would depend upon a reactivation of polymorphous eroticism which would infuse work with new creative purposes.

...if work were accompanied by a reactivation of pregenital polymorphous eroticism, it would tend to become gratifying in itself without losing its *work* content. Now it is precisely such a reactivation of polymorphous eroticism which appeared as the consequence of the conquest of scarcity and alienation. The altered societal conditions would therefore create an instinctual basis for the transformation of work into play. (Marcuse, 1955, pp. 196–197)

The most provocative aspect of Marcuse's argument here is his notion that the erotization of labor would require new relations of production and organizational forms within which work could be carried out. He argues that this does not mean that human beings would act with total abandon, heedless of each other and of the collective imperatives of survival. Rather, he argues that a new division of labor and organizational rationality can emerge which fosters erotized nonalienated work. This would be the very basis of a new social structure, to replace capitalism and state-socialism.

To the degree to which the struggle for existence becomes co-operation for the free development and fulfillment of individual needs, repressive reason gives way to a new *rationality of gratification* in which reason and happiness converge. It creates its own division of labor, its own priorities, its own hierarchy. The historical heritage of the performance principle is administration, not of men, but of things: Mature civilization depends for its functioning on a multitude of co-ordinated arrangements. These arrangements in turn must carry recognized and recognizable authority. Hierarchical relationships are not unfree *per se*; civilization relies to a great extent on rational authority, based on knowledge and necessity, and aiming at the protection and preservation of life. Such is the authority of the engineer, of the traffic policeman, of the airplane pilot in flight. (Marcuse, 1955, p. 205)

Marcuse does not advocate the abolition of the division of labor or of rational authority; he does not advocate unbridled liberalism, for he is a Marxist and not a Lockean. A Marxist suggests (as Marx did in 1844) that

human beings can enjoy *social freedom* (praxis) without abandoning personal freedoms and liberties and that this social freedom can be at once productive and recreative. Marcuse believes, *against* liberalism, that the individual is not an atomistic entity. Marcuse, following early Marx in this regard, argues that the individual can only fulfill himself/herself in community and notably in a dialectic between his/her particular individuality (which must remain ultimately inviolable) and the general collectivity of the community. Thus his solution to the problem of social freedom is to point out that we all inhabit a dialectic of particularity and generality, and of self and community, which we cannot abrogate or wish away.

Marcuse is also saying in the passages quoted above that work and play can converge without abandoning the "work" character of work itself. He retains the rational organization of work without abandoning the Marxian goal of creative praxis. As he notes in the passage quoted, "hierarchical relationships are not unfree *per se*." That is, it depends upon the *kind* of hierarchy which informs the relationships. Marcuse's most vociferous critics have argued that he equates authority and hierarchy with alienation and thus advocates the abolition of all authority and hierarchy. But as we have just seen, Marcuse makes no such equation; he says rather that hierarchy is a necessary feature of all social relationships, both capitalist and socialist.

Marcuse in this way suggests two things: in the first place, he hints at a theory of work which rests upon the merger of work and play components. His views in this regard are captured in his vision of the "erotization of labor." In the second place, Marcuse hints at a form of organizational rationality which is nondominating. He suggests in *Eros and Civilization* and then, fourteen years later, in *An Essay on Liberation*, that social institutions can be organized in such a way that they do not dominate creative individuality. Taken together, these two components comprise what I will call his "theory of work and authority."

Marcuse's theory of work and authority is directly opposed to the Weberian theory of work and authority. Weber argued, against Marx, that it was impossible to create nondominated work relationships and furthermore that it was impossible to do without bureaucracies which would organize and coordinate alienated work. Weber in essence differed with Marx on the question of alienation. He said that a degree of alienation/estrangement from our work, ourselves, and our communities was inevitable in advanced industrial social orders and that we should accommodate ourselves to this alienation in pursuit of what he called "rationality."

Throughout the western philosophical tradition the concept of rationality has been taken to mean that human beings, through mental activity, would comprehend the necessity of the external universe and then adjust themselves to the laws and imperatives of that universe. Marxism emerged as a fundamental rupture in the traditional theory of rationality. Marx said that it

was not enough merely to contemplate passively the order of the universe; he argued that people must also *change* the laws which are seen to govern society at given points in history. Marx suggested that there are no eternal, time-invariant "laws" of social life. Instead there are particular structures of social and economic organization which extend through historical time. These structures can be transformed by people who understand the possibility of historical change.

Marcuse agrees with Marx that people can change the world and its necessities. In effect, Marcuse challenges the notion, which runs throughout mainstream western philosophy, that freedom and necessity are fundamentally separate. Marcuse argues instead that freedom and necessity are dialectically intertwined; he opposes the view, applied by Weber to his sociological study of industrial capitalism, that because the realms of freedom and necessity are ontologically separate, human beings can only hope to taste freedom beyond or outside the realm of necessity. Specifically, Marcuse argues for a "rationality of gratification" which merges the realms of freedom and necessity in such a way that they become virtually indistinguishable.

The leverage for Marcuse's reinterpretation and deepening of the Marxian critique of traditional western rationality is his theory of work and authority. The traditional view has it (most masterfully articulated by Weber in the late 19th century) that work resides within the realm of necessity, being a function of natural scarcity and the human will to survive in the struggle with external nature. Freedom, on this view, is merely the time left over from working. The most that human beings can hope for is an enlargement of the realm of leisure-time, based on the further technologization and automation of the industrial production process. Marcuse responds to the Weberian theory of rationality in this sense by saying that there can be a type of rationality, grounded both in the human mind and body, that refuses to fracture freedom and necessity. Marcuse says, sociologically, that the work-freedom distinction is peculiar to class-divided social orders (such as capitalism and state-capitalism). He argues that the creation of an authentically classless society will allow human beings to seek creativity and recreation in socially useful work.

---

<sup>1</sup>A most articulate modern exposition of Weberian assumptions in this regard is to be found in Berger, Berger, and Kellner, 1973.

<sup>2</sup>An important reinterpretation of Marx's views on labor and leisure are to be found in Leiss, 1976. Leiss, following Marx and Marcuse, argues that people must be able to seek their satisfaction in creative work as well as in consumption, especially as natural resources gradually run out, forcing a slowing of industrial growth. Not coincidentally, Leiss was a student of Marcuse at Brandeis University. "... the possibilities of human satisfaction must be rooted in the creation of a well-functioning sphere of shared activity and decision-making within which individuals would forge the means for satisfying their needs" (p. 105). This sounds remarkably similar to the concepts of creative praxis and nonauthoritarian authority, taken from Marcuse's theory of work and authority, which I develop in the course of this paper.

Furthermore, he argues that this work need not be organized via severely authoritarian bureaucratic forms. Work can be organized in such a way that the hierarchy of administration and authoritative decision making need not become a hierarchy of domination and alienation. For example, in a genuinely socialist society, workers together would determine the forms and quantities of their collective labor through the mechanism of workers' self-management, or workers' control. The nonauthoritarian organization of labor, to Marcuse, is possible precisely because he believes that freedom and necessity (or leisure and work, in sociological terms) are not categorically divided but potentially dialectically intertwined. This allows him to challenge the western tradition of rationality rooted in the dualism of mind and body, freedom and necessity, leisure and work, which, he argues, is the hallmark of a class-structured social order. Weber's sociology of work and authority is seen to be merely an ideological reflex of a capitalist order which wants to convince workers (and itself) that there will always be a degree of alienation in the working process and a degree of bureaucratic domination in the organization of that work. Marcuse's thought is fundamentally a critique of the Weberian articulation of western dualist rationality.

Marx himself is noted by Marcuse for having failed to foresee the possibility of a future socialist order in which work and play would become indistinguishable and in which authority could be cooperatively self-imposed without domination. In *An Essay on Liberation*, Marcuse begins by arguing:

Marx and Engels refrained from developing concrete concepts of the possible forms of freedom in a socialist society; today, such restraint no longer seems justified. The growth of the productive forces suggests possibilities of human liberty very different from, and beyond those envisaged at the earlier stage. Moreover, these real possibilities suggest that the gap which separates a free society from the existing societies would be wider and deeper precisely to the degree to which the repressive power and productivity of the latter shape man and his environment in their image and interest. (Marcuse, 1969, p. 15)

Marx was not utopian enough; he did not see that freedom and necessity could merge under an order in which people could express their creativity in their work (social freedom) without being dominated by the organization of that work. Marx did not go as far as Marcuse because he was a creature of the tradition of western rationality which disregarded the possibility of the erotization of labor and of nonauthoritarian socialist authority. While Marx transcended many of the assumptions of this traditional western rationality (such as the implicit assumption that society must always be divided between property owning rulers and propertyless ruled), he remained ensconced within its dualistic assumptions about necessity/freedom, work/play, labor/leisure, which Marcuse tries to transcend. With the help of psychoanalysis, Marcuse shows that we need not choose between body and

mind, between instincts and reason, but can instead create a rationality which joins reason and the instincts in a coherent and productive form of human sensibility.

## II. HABERMAS' DUALISM

What I characterized above as the Weberian position on problems of rationality, work and authority has curiously reemerged in the recent work of Jürgen Habermas (1971), a second generation member of the Frankfurt School. What is curious about this is the fact that Habermas is read by many as a neo-Marxist and because he is a humane critic of technocratic-capitalist society. However, Habermas' critique of the grounds of social science knowledge is sharply at odds with Marcuse's theory of work and authority. The contrast between their respective positions may shed further light on the nature of Marcuse's problem and on the disparity between full-fledged Marxian and Weberian positions on work and authority.

Habermas attempts to correct the apparent "mysticism," as he has characterized it, of Marcuse's theory of work and authority. Habermas believes that Marx fundamentally blurs the necessary distinction between work and interaction (including speech) which Habermas believes is at the core of all human action. Habermas submits that it is possible to distinguish between technique and praxis, between the logic of the instrument and the logic of human communication and interaction. The core of Habermas' position is his assumption that there is a categorical (or transcendental) difference between the way people work and the way they think and talk. In this sense, he says that there are three kinds of rationality: purposively rational or instrumental, self-reflective, and communicative. He draws a heavy line between the first and second types, arguing that instrumental rationality is a logic which is incommensurable with the logics of self-reflection and speech.

---

<sup>3</sup>Habermas' critique of Marcuse's mysticism is taken from his *Knowledge and Human Interests*, 1971. "Marx, on the contrary, does not view nature under the category of another subject, but conversely the subject under the category of another nature. Hence, although their unity can only be brought about by a subject, he does not comprehend it as an absolute unity. The subject is originally a natural being instead of nature being originally an aspect of the subject, as in idealism. Therefore unity, which can only come about through the activity of a subject, remains in some measure imposed on nature by the subject. The resurrection of nature cannot be logically conceived within materialism, no matter how much the early Marx and the speculative minds in the Marxist tradition (Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Herbert Marcuse, Theodore W. Adorno) find themselves attracted by this heritage of mysticism. Nature does not conform to the categories under which the subject apprehends it in the unresisting way in which a subject can conform to the understanding of another subject on the basis of reciprocal recognition under categories that are binding on both of them" (pp. 32-33).

In a mundane sense, of course, Habermas is not wrong. After all, our tools and machines do not think or speak (except, sometimes, in the artificial language of computers). But his is a direct challenge to Marcuse's creative reinterpretation of Marx's theory of praxis. Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization* (1955) aimed at a merger of reason and the instinctual substratum; in contrast to Habermas' essentially Weberian dualism of instrumentality and thought-speech, Marcuse would argue that the work we do upon the world is never distinct from the ways we think about and speak about that work: our work is a reflection of our embodied rationality.

Habermas disputes this equation of work and rationality because he argues that work is categorically reducible to the logic of the instrument. His position refurbishes Weberian sociology, for Weber *also* argued that it is possible to separate purposive rationality from substantive rationality. The former is a rationality of instrumentality, while the latter is a rationality of decision making about the purposes of the instrument. Weber did not personally favor a thorough-going preoccupation with instruments; indeed, he criticized industrial capitalists for paying insufficient attention to the substantive values which guide the choices we make about the uses of instruments. Habermas swims within the Weberian stream for he argues that purposive and substantive rationality are different in kind. He sees the difference here as a dualism and not as a continuum or as a dialectical intertwining of separate-but-similar entities.

Marcuse, in contrast to Habermas and Weber, and beyond Marx, argues that work and play *can* converge, but he never abolishes the dialectical distinction between these two entities. Marcuse does not say that there is utterly no distinction to be made between the way an artist paints a canvas and the way a child finger paints (or between building a house and building a doll house). The distinction is dialectical and not absolute. Habermas by contrast argues that it is possible to distinguish categorically between the ways we work and the ways we think and speak about the work we do. Habermas' position is enlightened and progressive for he calls for greater communicative rationality—greater discussion in a democratic context of our collective goals and aims. Habermas' more recent work on a communication theory of social organization urges the development of the "ideal speech situation" in which human beings democratically arrive at consensuses about the purposes of social life. The ideal speech situation is free of interpersonal domination as well as of ideological distortions of the speech itself.

Thus Habermas sees social change as the result of rational discussion about the purposes of social life, whereas Marcuse sees social change emerging *both* from rational discussion and self-reflection and from the transformation of the ways we work upon the world. It will be recalled from an earlier citation that Marcuse suggested that the "new sensibility" must enter the "production



relations themselves" in qualitatively transforming the very character of work. Marcuse, unlike Habermas, believes that we can remake work in such a way that it becomes social freedom, performed in the context of a non-authoritarian organization of co-operative and self-managing workers. Habermas would respond by saying that work *cannot* be transformed in its very essence, that the only realistic progressive desideratum is to create rational consensuses about the uses of social labor. In this sense Habermas would probably endorse the traditional argument for automation of the production process, believing that authentic freedom lies beyond the realm of "mere" necessity.

Habermas' dualism challenges Marcuse's attempt to synthesize work and play. Habermas dismisses Marcuse as a romantic optimist. In some sense, of course, Marcuse is a romantic: His vision of free work performed in a nonauthoritarian social setting suggests that people *can* have their cake and eat it. But Marcuse does not believe that human beings must limit their freedom to the domain beyond labor for, as a Marxist, he believes that the human purpose is to work upon nature and to realize our humanity in the projects we undertake. In short, Habermas appears to abandon Marx's 1844 theory of praxis.

Habermas rejects Marx's early theory of praxis on the grounds that Marx unjustifiably combined "interaction and work under the label of social practice (*Praxis*)" (1971, p. 62). Marx, according to Habermas, confused the way we work (*Arbeit*) and the way we think and talk about the way we work. Marx thus gave rise to the illegitimate conflation of the logics of instrumentality and of self-reflection and speech, which had the ultimate consequence of creating an overly positivistic, mechanical Marxism such as developed in the Second International under the auspices of Engels and Kautsky. Had Marx been clearer about the difference between work and interaction, Habermas says, he would not have given the misleading impression that the socialist revolution would proceed automatically, instrumentally, without the assistance of class-consciousness (arrived at, one presumes, through aggregated self-reflection).

Habermas is justified, I would contend, in attacking the Marxism of the mainstream theorists of the Second International as mechanical and deterministic. But this is a far cry from saying that the source of determinism is in Marx himself. I would argue, against Habermas, that Marx never abrogated the dialectic of consciousness and social being; Marx understood that socialist transformation would never be a matter purely of predetermined social-structural motion, without the active intervention of an ideologically awakened working class. I read Marx's concept of praxis as unifying manual and mental activities, unifying the logics of the instrument and of self-reflection (in Habermas' terms). Where Habermas sees Marx's concept of praxis as a sloppy confusion of two fundamentally distinctive

kinds of rationality, I see (and I believe that Marcuse sees) the concept of praxis as the vital link between doing and being. Thus, social praxis is a unity of intellectual knowledge and conversation about reality and *at the same time* the movement toward a different reality via social change.

Habermas does not understand what Marx meant by praxis because he belongs to the western tradition of dualism which Weber accelerated and in a sense summarized. Habermas, however, is closer to Marx than was Weber because he shares many of the radical democratic aspirations of the socialist movement. Habermas opposes the monopoly of power and of information under capitalism, and he believes, intelligently, that one of the best ways to shake that power is to give human beings the capacity to think and talk about their own alienation as a way of provoking critical action. Habermas and Marcuse differ most on the issue of the extent of social change.

### III. THE SPLITTING OF CRITICAL THEORY IN THE 1970S

The Habermas–Marcuse split can be understood as the difference between narrow and extensive radicalism.<sup>4</sup> Habermas believes that people can be freed by encouraging them to regain what Weber called substantive rationality, that is, the capacity to think critically about their lives and then to act upon those insights via the creation of rational consensuses. Marcuse believes that human beings must use intellectual and communicative rationality, to be sure, but he goes further than Habermas in arguing for the transformation of work. Habermas' "ideal speech situation" is the end point of social change, whereas Marcuse believes that the ideal speech situation is merely one agency of more fundamental kinds of transformation.

Habermas' radicalism is less extensive than that of Marcuse; it is narrower in its scope and its aims. Habermas wants to restore to people the capacity to reason that has been negated by capitalist ideology and which transforms them into passive consumers of dominant political and economic wisdom and, of course, of commodities. Habermas' critique of the effects of an instrumentalist ideology coalesces with those offered by Paulo Freire and Ivan Illich in their respective critiques of capitalist education and the capitalist professions. Freire and Illich join Habermas in arguing that western consumers have been fatally weakened by a social system which denies them the opportunity to determine their own fate, making them mere receptacles of ideology and commodities.

---

<sup>4</sup>A recent review of an edited collection (O'Neill, 1976) points up the split within modern critical theory around the debate between Marcuse and Habermas. See Schroyer, 1978, pp. 1033–1035.

Habermas argues that radical change can optimally return to people the psychic capacity to direct their own lives and to create rational consensus. He joins Marcuse in arguing for a form of self-managing socialist authority rooted in the power of the strongest argument as he has characterized it. Habermas in this sense has faith that human beings are rational creatures who can live peaceably in community as long as they allow the light of communicative rationality to show through, deferring to those who demonstrate superior competence.

Marcuse and Habermas agree that there can be nonauthoritarian rationality and authority, but they disagree about the scope and character of that rationality. Although Marcuse and Habermas share a model of communicative democracy, they differ in their views of work. Marcuse's position is more radical because he argues that the ideal speech situation is merely a tool for transforming the nature of work and for creating a society of praxis. Marcuse would see the ideal speech situation as a way of fostering new types of class consciousness, while Habermas, who rejects the possibility of qualitatively transforming the nature of work, sees it as an end in itself.

Habermas' growing appeal in North America can be attributed, I contend, to the way in which he salvages radical democracy without endorsing the full-blown Marxian programme (which, according to Marcuse, Marx himself never quite attained, unable to break finally with western mind-body dualism).<sup>5</sup> Habermas urges the democratization of technology and of politics without advocating the abolition of capitalism.<sup>6</sup> Habermas is a radical liberal who partakes of the western tradition of dualism, refusing to believe, with Marcuse, that people can engage in creative work-play in the context of a cooperative community of co-equal producers. Habermas'

---

<sup>5</sup>This point is amplified in my aforementioned "Marcuse and Habermas on New Science". I characterize Habermas as a "right-wing Marxist." What I meant is that Habermas reads liberalism into Marxism in such a way as to eliminate the class-struggle in favor of a democratic incrementalism rooted in his notion of the ideal speech situation. I now believe that Habermas is not a Marxist at all, having utterly severed his ties with the Marxian paradigm which is rooted in the assumption that there can be creative praxis, a view which Habermas (1971) systematically attacks.

<sup>6</sup>Habermas' recent *Legitimation Crisis*, (1975) appears to be a Marxist account of the crisis forms of advanced capitalism, but I read it differently—as an account of how advanced capitalism, although beset with deep crises, can continue to function as long as it finds an ideology to replace the ideology of just exchange and individual initiative which has evidently crumbled under the weight of state-intervention in the capitalist mixed economy. Habermas conveniently says nothing about how new forms of class-struggle (or for that matter personal struggle, in Marcuse's sense) can be generated in response to legitimation crisis. Habermas, simply put, is not a Marxist, although he shares with most Marxists, like Marcuse and myself, a democratic orientation and a belief in non-authoritarian authority and rational consensus. In this sense, Habermas might be seen not as a right-wing Marxist but as a left-wing Millian.

person is an initially isolated individual who temporarily enters the ideal speech situation not in order to humanize himself/herself but merely in order to seek a consensually validated truth which can then guide the uses of categorically immutable social labor.

Marx saw praxis as a socially useful activity which would also humanize the individual by externalizing his or her values and aspirations. Marx's essential challenge to the western dualist tradition was his claim, in the 1844 manuscripts, that we need not distinguish between the social utility of labor and its intrinsic creativity (or between necessity and freedom).<sup>7</sup> This was a revolutionary sentiment for it freed social labor from the strictly circumscribed realm of necessity and paved the way for a theory of rationality rooted in the *convergence* of necessity and freedom. Marx in this sense postulated the possible identity of personal self-interest and collective interest.

In this sense, Marx was a Rousseauian, positing the possible identity of individual self-interest and "general will." Rousseau was not a Marxist, however, because he did not recognize that the root of the individual's self-humanization lay in the socially necessary work that we must all perform in order to survive. Rousseau's theory of the identity of personal and general will was abstract and ungrounded because he ignored the centrality of labor.

Habermas too is a Rousseauian. Yet his Rousseauian concept of the ideal speech situation lacks a Marxian twist: Habermas ignores the humanizing potential of socially necessary work. For Habermas, as for the Greeks, the highest good for people is the life of politics, given over to rational consensus formation through ideal speech situations. For Marcuse, the highest good is self-humanization through work and not simply rational consensus formation which, in Marxist terms, is merely a way station en route to the mobilization of class consciousness.

Habermas abandons the dynamism of class struggle as the motive force of historical transformation. His ideal speech situation involves two or more individuals but not two or more groups or classes. Marcuse stresses that his new sensibility, propelled by the rationality of gratification, is but a mediation on the way toward full-blown class consciousness and class activism. At least in the 1960s, and notably in the *Essay on Liberation* (1969), Marcuse preserved Marxism's traditional focus on class struggle while *adding* a radical subjectivism which could help individuals move beyond their personal

---

<sup>7</sup>The Marxian concept of praxis has been examined in all sorts of ways, by many authors. For example, see the recent book *Praxis* (Sher, 1978) on the Yugoslavian intellectual currents which have resulted in the concretization of the praxis-philosophy in their experiments with workers' control. See also Fromm's edited collection *Socialist Humanism* (1965) and Schaff's *Marxism and the Human Individual* (1970) for more theoretical and philosophical discussions of the issue of creative praxis. At the root of all of these works is the assumption that socially useful work and creative work are not categorically antithetical.

alienation towards a more structural and collective appreciation of advanced capitalism. Marcuse's radical subjectivism was always in aid of the mobilization of new, appropriately contemporary types of class radicalism through which to transform the nature of social labor.<sup>8</sup>

Habermas appeals to those who abandon class struggle and instead endorses a radical incrementalism based on communicative rationality. The Marxist would ask: How can communicative rationality dent the corporate capitalist power system with "mere words"? A Habermasian might respond by saying that communicative rationality, toward the *telos* of consensus formation, is only a way of raising consciousness about evident structural domination. But Habermas explicitly rejects the Marxian-inspired aim of emancipating social labor in Marcuse's sense of fusing work and play, or in Habermas' own terms of fusing instrumental rationality and self-reflection. It would appear that his radical incrementalism might aim at certain piecemeal goals, such as the democratization and economic levelling of the capitalist welfare state, without aiming at the full emancipation and transformation of social labor in the sense of dialectically unifying productivity and creativity.

Habermas' argument against the alleged mysticism of Marx's theory of creative praxis appears to follow from his sober appraisal of the possibility of class radicalism in the 1970s. Habermas is often read as a "sensible" radical, and not a romantic. Indeed Marcuse in recent years has retreated from the possibility, announced by him during the late 1960s, of creating mediations between new sensibility and new types of class-radicalism. Marcuse in 1978 published *The Aesthetic Dimension*, followed upon his 1973 *Counter-revolution and Revolt*,<sup>9</sup> in which he denounced the American New Left for ignoring Marxian rationality. The theme of both books, highlighted in the more recent one, is the lack of existing mediations between the personal and collective levels of struggle and the subsequent retreat of radical opposition into aesthetic symbolism with its "promesse de bonheur" (1978).

It is interesting to compare Marcuse's and Habermas' varieties of radical pessimism. Habermas' ideal speech situation is designed to be a directly practical alternative to class struggle, a way of achieving rational consensus. Marcuse's retreat to artistic symbolism possesses no clear-cut practical directives but is self-consciously meant to be a retreat from collective praxis (without losing sight of its importance). Marcuse is saying that there are no existing mediations between new sensibility, on the individual level, and a

---

<sup>8</sup>I systematize this dialectic between personal and collective radicalism, in a discussion of Marcuse's recent thought, in Agger (1979).

<sup>9</sup>The common denominator for the misplaced radicalism in the cultural revolution is the anti-intellectualism which it shares with the most reactionary representatives of the Establishment: revolt against Reason—not only against the Reason of capitalism, bourgeois society, and so on, but against Reason *per se*" (p. 129). But Marcuse goes on to add that "with all its misplaced radicalism, the (student-radical) movement is still the most advanced counterforce" (p. 129).

more collective type of opposition—no way of translating the individual consciousness of unbearable alienation into a class-based political programme. Art is not a substitute for class struggle but a reminder that class struggle is absent and a way of keeping alive socialist ideals in the midst of what Marcuse has termed one-dimensionality.

Habermas responds to the absence of class consciousness with a revisionist theory of communicative rationality. Marcuse responds to this absence of class consciousness with a theory of radical art designed to keep alive the promise of effectively mediated personal resistance, able to achieve its final form as socialist praxis. Marcuse's position is starkly realistic, refusing to substitute incrementalism for full radicalism. He does not endorse Habermas' communicative rationality because it is insufficient to the task of abolishing alienation. Marcuse might say: Better to keep alive the "promesse de bonheur" through artistic symbolism than to succumb to the clichés of liberal democracy which foster the illusion that calm discussion among co-equal speakers will shake the foundations of the capitalist order.

#### IV. CONCRETIZING MARCUSE'S THEORY OF WORK AND AUTHORITY

My discussion of Habermas' Weberian-inspired critique of the Marxian theory of praxis, and its creative exposition by Marcuse, has been a necessary digression, designed to situate Marcuse against the backdrop of traditional western rationality. I now want to return to Marcuse's theory of work and authority and to relate it to historical and contemporary themes in a way which shows its practical significance.

Marcuse has been interpreted above as suggesting that socially necessary work can also be seen as a form of social freedom, creative and self-expressive. Is this to be taken to mean that Marcuse thinks that factory workers can enjoy, somehow, the monotony of the machine, being seduced by its rhythms and sounds? Traditional (orthodox) Marxists might take exactly that position, glorifying physical labor whatever its character or content. But Marcuse, as a theorist of praxis, certainly could not accept the stoned reverie of the day-dreaming assembly line attendant as a form of liberation (or, indeed, of class consciousness). Praxis must take other kinds of forms.

A Marcusean example of emancipated work-play, which does not lose its "work" component, is of a group of workers engaged in building a house. This exemplifies both the nature of unified work-play (social freedom) and the nature of nonauthoritarian authority. In the first case, the house builders engage in socially necessary activity which can also fulfill certain creative and artistic needs. Workers who are not compelled to construct prefabricated homes which resemble other such homes to be located in a monolithic suburban space, but who can inject their personality into their house can

approach that unity of work and creativity which is the essence of praxis. In the second case, the workers work together without having to institutionalize bureaucratic or imperatively coordinated forms of decision making. But the workers do not for that reason abandon all forms of hierarchy or authority. More experienced workers instruct inexperienced workers without taking on an authoritarian role. Similarly, the workers can develop a division of labor without becoming identical with any one role which is then immutably imprinted on the individual's sensibility. Indeed there can be rotation of functions, thus ensuring that the more odious and physically demanding chores can be shouldered by all.

The house builders are Marcusean workers because they do not view their work as a chore, performed only in return for a wage; nor do they develop a cast-iron authority structure which legitimizes the domination of the many by the few (e.g., of the workers by a foreman). It would seem that the relationship between the creative character of the work and the nonauthoritarian character of the workers' self-imposed supervision and division of labor suggests interesting models of socialist freedom. It would seem that house-building is not intrinsically "creative" work; in fact, it is work which many of us would not find existentially and aesthetically fulfilling, either because we simply do not see carpentry as artwork or because we are so unskilled in the intricacies of carpentry that we would view the work as mere toil (not possessing the skills, for lack of experience, necessary for enjoying the work). The work is self-expressive (social freedom) not so much because it is intrinsically artistic but rather because it is democratically self-managed and nondominating.

Marcuse's theory of work and authority hints at a model of radical workers' control.<sup>10</sup> *I would contend that work tends to be experienced as creative praxis (work-play) because it can be socially organized without domination.* Thus, the possibility of nonauthoritarian authority is more crucial than the intrinsic character of the work itself. Marx in 1844 argued for the "free flowering of human individuality," implying that people would choose to do *different* kinds of things in a free socialist community. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels proposed the famous archetype of the fisherman-hunter-critic, the "all-round individual" who moves easily across roles. I would contend that Marx felt that human beings, in their incredible diversity, would each choose different sorts of praxis in a socialist society. What was most important for Marx was the way in which workers relate to each other in the working process, developing nonauthoritarian relations of trust and interdependence. People can enjoy all sorts of praxis as long as that

---

<sup>10</sup>This model has been partially elaborated in many works by Yugoslav philosophers and industrial sociologists. An especially interesting treatment is by Markovic (1974), in which he argues against the bureaucratization of the Yugoslavian system of workers' control.

praxis is organized in an optimally democratic fashion—as long as it is subject to the ultimate rationality of workers' control.

The concept of workers' control is old, but its partial realization is relatively new. In contemporary Yugoslavia, since the early 1950s, workers' self-management, through the mechanism of the workers' council, has been the dominant ordering principle of their industrial production process. Workers' control is the living expression of the kind of authority which Marcuse desires. It is a form of democracy in which workers are able to develop relationships of authority and dependence, and a division of labor (although not a rigid one), *without* introducing the domination of the unskilled by the skilled. This is a kind of organizational rationality which retains leadership and social differentiation without reifying the fluid relationships between leaders and led (for the led can be taught to become leaders).

But workers' control, as factory democracy, is insufficient to transform alienated work into creative and socially useful praxis of the kind that Marcuse desires. Along with workers' control of investment decisions and day-to-day logistics of production there must be the transformation of the working process into a process in which machines do not dominate people but people dominate machines. It is conceivable that workers' control could obtain in a highly differentiated assembly line system (such as a modern automobile factory); but this would not mean that the factory workers are necessarily engaged in creative praxis—alienation can exist even under a system of workers' control.

What is needed here is an additional notion of the workers' control of the technological apparatus. This sort of control does not refer primarily to democratic decision making regarding investments, salaries, and day-to-day logistics of production. It refers rather to the notion that workers are able to understand and manipulate machinery so that the machinery does not bend them to its intrinsic imperatives. The assembly line system is alienating primarily because the worker becomes a veritable cog in the machine, performing a narrow, piecemeal productive function, having no control over his or her machine and, most important, remaining estranged from the fabrication of the total product. Thus there must also be direct workers' control of the technological apparatus to ensure that workers are able to understand and master the tools with which they work.

Workers' control has two integral components: workers' control of the decision making regarding investment strategies and day-to-day operations of the plant; and workers' control of the technological apparatus, such that workers understand the division of labor and their tools and machines and subsequently do not become estranged from them and dominated by those who have mastered them. In the west, the move toward workers' control, especially in West Germany and Scandinavia, has often lacked the crucial second component. Instead, workers' control in those nations has come to



mean more effective participation of workers and unions in high-level negotiations with government and corporations. The so-called tri-partite system in Germany is a reflection of this tendency to truncate workers' control into a watered-down coping mechanism of the capitalist welfare state.

"Real" workers control, in the Marcusean sense, would be more than workers' democracy regarding economic decision making. It would also be workers' control of the very labor process itself. Marcuse's theory of creative praxis and of self-managing authority seems to suggest that if workers' control in both senses obtains, then workers will tend to experience their work as creative praxis (unified work-play). Unless workers control the very production process, and the technological apparatus which supports it, they will remain alienated from the possibilities of creative praxis.

## V. CONCLUSION

I have argued that Marcuse's notions of the merger of work and play and of the possibility of nondominating organizational rationality and authority fly in the face of the mainstream Weberian tradition which venerates the labor-leisure dualism and the bureaucratic coordination of labor. I have further argued that this Weberian current is reappropriated by Jürgen Habermas in his own recent work on the epistemological foundations of social science. The counterpoint between Marcuse and Habermas reveals a split within modern critical theory. This split could be characterized as the split between radicalism and incrementalism. Marcuse takes the more radical viewpoint, arguing that if work and leisure are dialectically merged and if that work is organized democratically through workers' control, then social labor will be experienced, in Marx's early sense, as creative praxis—a type of self-externalizing activity which is both productive and recreative. Habermas, in his reformulation of Weberian sociology, endorses an incrementalist position (contra Marcuse's radicalization and deepening of early Marx's theory of praxis) which rejects the possibility of transforming labor into praxis, arguing instead for greater communicative democracy as a way of redirecting (what Habermas contends is categorically immutable) social labor toward more constructive ends such as the economic levelling of the capitalist welfare state.

## REFERENCES

- Agger, B. *Western Marxism*, Chapter 6, "Individualized Marxism: class-radicalism in the 1960s." Santa Monica, Calif.: Goodyear, 1979.
- Agger, B. Marcuse and Habermas on new science. *Polity*, Winter 1976, IX, 2, 158-181. (a)
- Agger, B. On happiness and the damaged life. In J. O'Neill, (Ed.), *On critical theory*. New York: Seabury, 1976. (b)
- Berger, P., Berger, B., & Kellner, H. *The homeless mind*. New York: Randon House, 1973.
- Fromm, E. (Ed.) *Socialist humanism*. New York: Doubleday, 1965.

- Habermas, J. *Legitimation crisis*, Boston: Beacon, 1975.
- Habermas, J. *Knowledge and human interests*. Boston: Beacon, 1971.
- Leiss, W. *The limits to satisfaction*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1976.
- Marcuse, H. *The aesthetic dimension*. Boston: Beacon, 1978.
- Marcuse, H. *Counterrevolution and revolt*. Boston: Beacon, 1973.
- Marcuse, H. *An essay on liberation*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1969.
- Marcuse, H. *Eros and civilization*. New York: Vintage, 1955.
- Markovic, M. *From affluence to praxis*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1974.
- O'Neill, J.(Ed.) *On critical theory*. New York: Seabury, 1976.
- Schaff, A. *Marxism and the human individual*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1970.
- Schroyer, T. *American Journal of Sociology*, January 1978, 83, 4, 1033-1035.
- Sher, G. S. *Praxis*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978.