

Herbert Marcuse:

## Towards A Marxist Hermeneutic

BY FREDRIC JAMESON

L'ainée, celle qui ne parle pas! l'ainée, ayant le  
même âge! Mnémosyne qui ne parle jamais!  
Elle écoute, elle considère.  
Elle ressent (étant le sens intérieur de l'esprit),  
Pure, simple, inviolable! elle se souvient.  
Elle est le poids spirituel. Elle est le rapport  
exprimé par un chiffre très beau. Elle est  
posée d'une manière qui est ineffable  
Sur le pouls même de l'Etre.

—Paul Claudel, *Cinq grandes odes*

Herbert Marcuse's work takes the form of a commentary on Hegel and Marx, on Freud and Schiller and aims precisely at rethinking these earlier systems, and their consequences, in the light of the utterly new socio-economic environment of postindustrial capitalism which began to emerge at the end of World War II. The new environment is one in which the possibility of eliminating poverty and hunger definitively for the first time in history goes hand in hand with the technical possibility of unparalleled control and total organization in the realm of social life. It is neither a completely technological nor a completely political development: for the purely scientific Utopias of food from the sea and world government ring hollow, while at the same time the older class analyses no longer seem applicable to a situation in which there are no longer any visible "agents" of the historical process, in which the working classes become assimilated in their values and politics to the bourgeoisie, while the "power elite" often seems, in comparison to the older types of ruling classes, as much a pawn as a master of the enormous forces at its disposition.

Abundance and total control: such is the paradoxical context in which Marcuse prepares to rethink Freud and Marx, to reevaluate the classical opposition between individual happiness and social

organization with which they were both concerned. Indeed, his cultural reflections may be taken as a kind of ironic reversal of those of Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, which posited an irreversible and unavoidable interdependency between progress in the evolution of society and unhappiness in the repressed psyche of individual man, between individual self-denial and the diversion of psychic energy for collective purposes. For Marcuse, on the other side of the great watershed of postindustrial capitalism, things no longer look quite the same, and it turns out that it is precisely increased sexual freedom, greater material abundance and consumption, freer access to culture, better housing, more widely available educational benefits and increased social, not to speak of automotive mobility, which are the accompaniment to increasing manipulation and the most sophisticated forms of thought-control, increasing abasement of spiritual and intellectual life, a degradation and dehumanization of existence. Thus it is that the happier we are, the more surely we are given over, without even being aware of it, into the power of the socio-economic system itself.

It is this feature of Marcuse's thinking which has lent renewed actuality to the ancient Platonic debate about the nature of the good: for his analysis raises precisely the problem of happiness, and forces us to ask whether people can know what is good for them, whether the social good can be judged in terms of a subjective feeling of contentment, in a world in which brainwashing and manipulation exist as everyday mechanisms. At the same time, his books have been the target of the classic objection to the trustworthiness of the philosopher king or the philosophical elite who are expected to make the ultimate judgments on the good of society in the absence of a reliable voice from the people themselves.

It seems to me, however, that the problem is most usefully posed the other way round, and that the thrust and persuasiveness, the basic unity, of Marcuse's work can best be felt if we reverse these conceptual priorities and take as his basic theme not happiness, but rather the nature of the *negative* itself. Indeed, what his discussion of Freud's instinctual dynamics has in common with his sociological doctrine, as it emerges from Marx, as well as with his tactical positions expressed in *Repressive Tolerance* and *An Essay on Liberation*, is the notion that the consumer's society, the society of abundance, has lost the experience of the negative in all its forms, that it is the negative

alone which is ultimately fructifying from a cultural as well as an individual point of view, that a genuinely human existence can only be achieved through the process of negation.<sup>1</sup>

Thus seen, Marcuse's relationship to Adorno and the Frankfurt School becomes that of the practical to the theoretical. For where Adorno drafted the theory of negative or critical thinking (or of a "negative dialectic"), where in his essays on literature or philosophy or music he traced the effects of a weakening of the negative upon the superstructure, Marcuse's works may be thought of as explorations of the psychological and socio-economic infrastructure of the same massive historical transformation.

For we find essentially the same circumstances at work on all the levels of modern life, whether on the political or the psychological, that of action or that of contemplation. The basic development in the light of which all of Freud must be rethought is the collapse of the family, the disappearance of the authoritarian father, that is, of oppression at the level of the cellular family unit. With this liberalization, the Oedipus complex and the superego themselves are greatly weakened, so that the apparently liberated individual is at the same time denied that path toward genuine psychic individuality once offered him by the revolt against the father. The ego of modern man "has shrunk to such a degree that the multiform antagonistic processes between id, ego and superego cannot unfold themselves in their classic form. . . . Their original dynamic becomes static: the interactions between ego, superego, and id congeal into automatic reactions.

---

<sup>1</sup> It will be observed, perhaps, that the recent Freudian tradition has produced a position even more thoroughly critical and negative than Marcuse's, namely that of Philip Rieff, who rejects not only the dominant culture itself — rightly insisting that it is no genuine culture at all, but rather a privative element in which the older values and motives wither and disappear — but also those forces within it which oppose it and make for radical change. Rieff would thus seem to have enlarged the concept of "what is", the vision of that established order systematically to be refused and negated, to include not only the businessmen, but also their enemies the students, not only the imperialists, but also the third world revolutionaries who attempt to reduce and subvert their control: his alone would therefore seem to qualify as a genuinely global negation. Yet the "plague on both your houses" only serves in the long run to reinforce those already in power, as the John Stuart Mill of *On Liberty* saw no less clearly than the Marcuse of *Repressive Tolerance*. In Hegelian terms, such total negativity proves to be indistinguishable from an affirmation of the status quo; and indeed, Mr. Rieff is a philosophical descendent of the anti-dialectical tradition of Nietzschean rather than Hegelian negation. But his ritualistic invective against the New Left betrays the contradictions inherent in the claim to diagnostic "objectivity", and shows once again that the deep unconscious forces of ideological motivation possess all the more strongly he who declares himself above them or who dares pronounce them inoperative and non-existent.

Corporealization of the superego is accompanied by corporealization of the ego, manifest in the frozen traits and gestures, produced at the appropriate occasions and hours. Consciousness, increasingly less burdened by autonomy, tends to be reduced to the tasks of regulating the coordination of the individual with the whole."<sup>2</sup> In much the same way, on the social level, the overt burden of societal repression and enforced sublimation is withdrawn: the older restraints, characteristic of a period of "primitive accumulation of psychic capital," have given way to "repressive desublimation," in which the society of sexual abundance encourages overt but specialized sexual activity as a way of reducing conscious unhappiness within the system, of foreclosing conscious dissatisfaction with the system, while at the same time compensating for the necessarily increased impoverishment of the environment from an emotional or libidinal point of view, a phenomenon we have described above.

On the political level, the withdrawal of the right to revolt against the father is reproduced as a disappearance of any effective possibility of negating the system in general. The weakening of the class struggle, the assimilation of the working classes into the bourgeoisie, is the objective condition for this universal neutralization; and with the extension of the media, the very content and gestures of revolt are exhausted, in the sense in which television performers speak of the "exhaustion" of their raw material through overexposure. In this sense, tolerance in our society can be said to be genuinely repressive, in that it offers a means of defusing the most dangerous and subversive ideas: not censorship, but the transformation into a fad, is the most effective way of destroying a potentially threatening movement or revolutionary personality.

Attenuation of the Oedipus complex, disappearance of the class struggle, assimilation of revolt to an entertainment-type value — these are the forms which the disappearance of the negative takes in the abundant society of postindustrial capitalism. Under these conditions, the task of the philosopher is the revival of the very idea of negation which has all but been extinguished under the universal subservience to what is; which, along with the concepts of nature and of freedom, has been repressed and driven underground by the reality principle. This task Marcuse formulates as the revival of the Utopian impulse. For where in the older society (as in Marx's classic

---

<sup>2</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (New York, 1955), pp. 90, 93-94.

analysis) Utopian thought represented a diversion of revolutionary energy into idle wish-fulfillments and imaginary satisfactions, in our own time the very nature of the Utopian concept has undergone a dialectical reversal. Now it is practical thinking which everywhere represents a capitulation to the system itself, and stands as a testimony to the power of that system to transform even its adversaries into its own mirror image. The Utopian idea, on the contrary, keeps alive the possibility of a world qualitatively distinct from this one and takes the form of a stubborn negation of all that is.

We may therefore say that for Marcuse it is the Utopian concept — “the attempt to draft a theoretical construct of culture beyond the performance principle”<sup>3</sup> — which henceforth, absorbing and replacing the function of art for Schiller and for the Surrealists, embodies the newest version of a hermeneutics of freedom. For Utopian thinking may be said to unite both the philosophical and the artistic impulses, at the same time that it transcends both: it is philosophy become concrete, it is art which takes as its object not products and works but life itself. The impulse of fantasy, in which alone the pleasure principle remains pure and unrepressed, now negates the existing real world, the “realistic” world, and prepares for that world a future. For Adorno had also shown, after his fashion, that the production of works of art is in our time undermined by powerful internal contradictions, and that the resulting art objects are immediately absorbed back into the immensity of what is. Now Marcuse sees in the new sensibility and the new sexual politics an application of the artistic impulse to the creation of a new life-style itself, to a concrete acting out of the Utopian impulse.

But the political limits of the new sensibility are inherent in the very notion of a hermeneutic: its political implications can only be clear when it is itself understood as a dress rehearsal of Utopia, as a foreshadowing of ultimate concrete social liberation. The immediate contingent freedoms of the new life-style must therefore function as *figures* of Freedom in general; and without this characteristic movement in them from the particular to the general which we have described above, from individual experience to that universal liberation for which the experience stands, they remain a matter of individual narcosis, of individual salvation only in the midst of the collective shipwreck. Now indeed we are in a better position to resolve

<sup>3</sup> *Eros and Civilization*, p. 144.

the traditional problem of happiness evoked above; for it is only when individual happiness, subjective contentment, is not positive (in the sense of ultimate satiation by the consumer's society), but rather *negative*, as a symbolic refusal of everything which that society has to offer, that happiness can recover its right to be thought of as a measure and an enlargement of human possibilities.

Marcuse's work is not, however, exhausted by this description, for at the same time that it develops the vital urgency of Utopian thinking, it also lays the groundwork for the very possibility of such thinking in the first place. At the same time that it develops a new hermeneutic, it establishes the conditions of existence of hermeneutic activity in general. This theoretical foundation takes the form of a profound and almost Platonic valorization of memory, anamnesis, in human existence. Indeed, it is not too much to say that Mnemosyne occupies something of the same emblematic and mythopoetic position in Marcuse's thinking that the deities of Eros and Thanatos hold in Freud's late metapsychology.

The functional value of memory may be judged by the fact that it is for Freud the very source of conscious thought itself, the latter being "merely a detour from the memory of gratification . . . to the identical cathexis of the same memory, which is to be reached once more by the path of motor experiences."<sup>4</sup> On account of the diagnostic character of so much of Freud's writings, we are tempted to think of memory chiefly in terms of pain, in terms of trauma, whereas in reality memory's primary function is in the service of the pleasure principle. "The memory of gratification," Marcuse tells us, "is at the origin of all thinking, and the impulse to recapture past gratification is the hidden driving power behind the process of thought."<sup>5</sup>

Now the origin of Utopian thinking becomes clear, for it is memory which serves as a fundamental mediator between the inside and the outside, between the psychological and the political, whose separation we described at the beginning of this essay. It is because we have known, at the beginning of life, a plenitude of psychic gratification, because we have known a time before all repression, a time in which, as in Schiller's nature, the elaborate specialization of later, more sophisticated consciousness had not yet taken place, a time that precedes the very separation of the subject from its object, that

<sup>4</sup> Quoted, *Eros and Civilization*, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> *Eros and Civilization*, p. 29.

memory, even the obscured and unconscious memory of that prehistoric paradise in the individual psyche, can fulfill its profound therapeutic, epistemological, and even political role: its "truth value lies in the specific function of memory to preserve promises and potentialities which are betrayed and even outlawed by the mature, civilized individual, but which had once been fulfilled in his dim past and which are never entirely forgotten."<sup>6</sup> The primary energy of revolutionary activity derives from this memory of a prehistoric happiness which the individual can regain only through its externalization, through its reestablishment for society as a whole. The loss or repression of the very sense of such concepts as freedom and desire takes, therefore, the form of a kind of amnesia or forgetful numbness, which the hermeneutic activity, the stimulation of memory as the negation of the there and now, as the projection of Utopia, has as its function to dispel, restoring to us the original clarity and force of our own most vital drives and wishes.

The theory of memory, indeed, furnishes an unexpected theoretical justification for such a priori social models as those of Schiller, for we may say that such apparently indefensible reasoning is as it were the conceptual disguise which memory takes, and it is as though the eighteenth-century philosophers were able to reinvent the psychological truth of individual existence only by imagining themselves to be in the act of deducing, through reason, the characteristics of the historical state of nature and of original human society in general. Thus, what looked most abstract turns out to be concrete on a wholly different and unexpected level, and Schiller's famous words about the objects of nature win a new and profound resonance: "They *are* what we *were*; they are what we must once more *become*. We were Nature just as they are, and our culture must lead us back to Nature along the path of Reason and Freedom. They are therefore the representation of our lost childhood, that which will eternally remain dearest to us; for that reason, they fill us with a certain sadness. At the same time, they symbolize for us our highest possible completion in the realm of the Ideal, and for that reason they awaken in us the noblest exaltation."<sup>7</sup> But what Schiller took to be the hypothetical origins of humanity itself turns out to have been but reason's way of misinterpreting the prehistory of the individual psyche.

<sup>6</sup> *Eros and Civilization*, p. 18.

<sup>7</sup> *Philosophische Schriften*, p. 210.

Marcuse's position with respect to Freud is in many ways markedly similar to that of Schiller in the face of Kantian critical philosophy. The latter had set itself the task of exploring the conceptual preconditions of what already exists, of formulating the necessary conditions of possibility of the experiences of sense perception and of beauty, of free will. Schiller, as we have seen, continues to deduce conditions of possibility: but these are now the preconditions not of an existing but of a hypothetical state. Schiller wishes to determine, in other words, how man's psyche would have had to have been constructed for a genuinely free and harmonious personality to become one day a real possibility; but in the very terms of this argument, there remains the logical alternative that such a being does not and can never exist.

In much the same way, where Freud's instinctual theory is designed to explain the structure of real and existent mental phenomena, of hysteria and the neuroses and psychoses, Marcuse's use of that theory has a more speculative and hypothetical cast: for it aims at describing the conditions of possibility of a society from which aggression will have been eliminated and in which libidinally satisfying work will be conceivable. Thus, for example, the ingenious hypothesis of a "maternal super-id"<sup>8</sup> is designed to show how in a Utopian future the apparently contradictory claims of the pleasure principle and of some form of social morality might be harmonized and justified by the topology of the instincts themselves.

To be sure, there is always the possibility that such a society is precisely impossible: and this final alternative, which the a priori model leaves open for us, is itself the source of Marcuse's realism, of his insistent reminder that salvation is by no means historically inevitable, that we do not even find ourselves in a prerevolutionary, let alone a revolutionary, situation, and that the total system may yet ultimately succeed in effacing the very memory of the negative, and with it of freedom, from the face of the earth.

---

<sup>8</sup> *Eros and Civilization*, p. 209. This is perhaps the psychic equivalent, for Marcuse, of Marx's and Engels' valorization of the stage of matriarchal communism in social development.