

Marcuse and Feminism*

by Margaret Cerullo

Not the least of the ironies and interesting paradoxes that constitute the significance of Marcuse for us is the fact that as an 81-year-old man and product of one of the most deeply patriarchal and authoritarian of modern cultures, he turned and returned consistently in his late writings to the subject of feminism. He explained his reasons in one of his last public lectures delivered at Stanford in 1974: "I believe the Women's Liberation Movement is perhaps the most important and potentially the most radical political movement that we have — even if the consciousness of this fact has not yet penetrated the Movement as a whole." Speaking as a woman and a feminist, I take Marcuse's serious engagement with the feminist project both as a testament to his enormous historical openness, his refusal of political resignation, and also as a moving gesture of respect and solidarity, which may turn out to be the most important part of his legacy to the male Left in the United States today.

I want first to explore why Marcuse thought that the Women's Liberation Movement is our "most radical" political movement and then, in a Marcusean spirit (evident always in his dialogue with Marxism), interrogate the tradition of Critical Theory itself, confronting it with the development of feminist theory and practice, in the hope of its emancipation from its own patriarchal bias and male-modelled assumptions.

What Russell Jacoby wrote in relation to the New Left may be even more apt here — with the emergence of the Women's Liberation Movement, the gap closed between Marcuse's texts and the writing on the wall. So many recurrent Marcusean dreams and themes found their embodiment in the movement for women's liberation that came to be called socialist feminism: his vision in *Eros and Civilization* of love as revolution; his insistence on the possibility of a new reality principle as the promise of a socialism which could no longer be understood as a change in social institutions, but had to be deepened to include a vision of a change in consciousness and the very instinctual structures of human beings deformed by exploitation and domination; his understanding of socialism as a qualitative leap to a new system of needs which are sensuous, ethical and rational in one. Our recent

* This is a draft of a brief talk given at a memorial service for Herbert Marcuse in Boston on August 30, 1979 at the annual convention of the American Sociological Association.

history has revealed the power of eros, of love, which Marcuse invoked against a repressive civilization to be the power of women at work and in the community,¹ a power which found its most concerted and political expression in the women's liberation movement.

Marcuse saw the women's movement at its most radical as announcing precisely a rupture with the performance principle, the reality principle of industrial capitalism and of a socialism which continued and even extended the performance principle and its values. Underlining the demand for the *liberation* of women thrown up by the Movement itself, Marcuse insisted that equality with men is not yet freedom. He understood women's liberation as a subversion of the performance principle, not an invitation to participate. Marcuse saw finally that what was at stake was a new morality, a feminist morality, a reversal of the values of profitable productivity, repression, efficiency, aggression, competitiveness, of an instrumental rationality severed from emotion — all this in the name of receptivity, tenderness, non-violence. It seems to me that remembering our own dream, our own vision, our own morality, whose terms Marcuse had so eloquently anticipated, is of critical importance to our Movement today — in a period in which instrumentality, competitiveness, self-assertion, aggressiveness, individualism are starkly revealed and even cynically embraced as the name of the game, particularly the academic game. To challenge any and all of these, to stand against the instrumentality which has come to infect the Movement that once stood on the basis of another morality; to propose, to think, let alone to envision and establish the alternative structures and modes of intellectual activity that would concretize a different vision of intellectual engagement — sounds as romantic, as naive and utopian as anything Marcuse ever proposed.

Marcuse himself stood outside — irritating, critical, romantic, utopian, outrageous: a model of a critical politically engaged intellectual, against the grain, the trend, the fashion. The political, intellectual, and cultural position he claimed for himself is one known to few men and fewer women. Even to put together the words, critical, politically engaged, intellectual — woman breaks the sequence and reminds us that we are dealing with a phenomenon virtually unknown in this country. I would like to begin to explore why. What kind of life are we talking about and for whom it is possible? What kinds of assumptions, decisions, struggles, sacrifices constitute, enable, paralyze, or deny the life of a political intellectual? Where do family, sexuality, parenting, love fit within it? (All issues which in other contexts Marcuse insisted had to be taken into political account.) When Marcuse proposed the fusion of eros and reason as the terms of such a life, what I must conclude is that he was implicitly — if importantly — talking about the feminization of male intellectuals. The identification of the feminine, of

1. For a magnificent historical development of this point, see Elizabeth Ewen, *Immigrant Women in the Land of Dollars 1890-1920* (forthcoming from Pantheon).

woman, with eros, with pleasure, with sensuality must seem more ambiguous to us, the eroticization of our intellects a possibility with which we are all too familiar. As women, our project must be to create the space of study and solitude, of intellectual intensity and assertion, of confidence and challenge — and still to think, to act, and to be like women. Here we might begin to salvage and renew a critical intellectual tradition too long deformed and distorted by our absence. In essence, this would be a radical and subversive project in the Marcusean spirit.

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