

# The Relevance of Reality\*

HERBERT MARCUSE

Ever since Thales designated the substance, origin, and principle of things as water; ever since Parmenides declared all motion and time as illusion, ever since Plato rejected the objects of sense perception and Common sense as mere appearance, ever since Aristotle proposed the "bios theoreticos" as the highest mode of life—the relationship between philosophy and reality was, to say the least, ambivalent. From the analysis of reality, philosophy derived its devaluation: whatever the *given* reality may be, it is not the real thing; whatever knowledge may be attained *in* it, is not knowledge *of* it, is not "science," "the truth." Philosophy, as science, demanded abstraction from the colorful, and painful, world of everyday experience, better still, closing one's eyes on many of its features in order to remain "pure" in thought. Truth and purity became interrelated: life was dirty—thought must be pure: pure science. Socrates' terrible statement that, for the philosopher, death is the beginning of life, was, at least in a figurative sense, to become a signpost in the history of philosophy (though by no means of all philosophy). And Socrates' own death was the voluntary, methodical, philosophically argued surrender to the order of the state whose blatant irrationality he had so effectively demonstrated throughout his life.—Was this great model of the philosopher perhaps also the model of the liberal whose radical criticism terminates in civil obedience when the confrontation with the Establishment finally occurs? We are told (and it makes good sense) that Socrates was searching for the *concept*: which would define what things really *are* in contrast to what they are held to be by the common man, the citizen, and his representatives in the state, the government. No "elitism" was necessarily involved in this philosophy, for the common man himself was thought capable of arriving at the truth—provided only he would start thinking by himself instead of

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just accepting what was being said and done. But the teacher himself, did he pursue his search for the "concept" to the very end, or did he break it off at the point where the *polis* itself would be subject to question?

For Socrates, the search indeed stops where the concept of "law and order" itself, and not only some positive and posited "case" becomes the object (and terminus) of thought: then, the particular, and not the universal—the given things and conditions, and not their Form, their Idea have the last word. The judges question Socrates whether he did not intend to destroy the city state. Here is his answer (in *Crito*):

"Yes, I do intend to destroy the laws, because the State wronged me by passing a faulty judgment at my trial."

And "the laws" reply:

"Was there provision for this in the agreement between you and us, Socrates? Or did you undertake to abide by whatever judgments the State pronounced?"

And the Laws remind Socrates that

"any Athenian, on attaining manhood and seeing for himself the political organization of the State and us, its laws, is permitted, if he is not satisfied with us, to take his property and go wherever he likes."

(CRITO 50-51)

This argumentation, which Socrates puts in the mouths of his judges, is not less flimsy than today's popular and familiar "if you don't like it here, why don't you go somewhere else?"

A geographical definition of reason and freedom not worthy of a philosopher! By virtue of this definition, the particular triumphs over the universal, established *fact* over the *concept* which is supposed to define and "judge" the fact (the philosophical proposition as judgment, sentence). The search for the universal, as the *arche*, principle, (true) Form of the particular things, is frustrated: it comes to a halt before the power of the *polis*. It is the political power which establishes, and enforces (if necessary, by imposing the death penalty) the meaning of words and the corresponding moral behavior.

Or was Socrates right? Did his surrender, his free decision, testify to the inherent limits of philosophy, its impotence before a reality which offers stubborn resistance to any transcending conceptual analysis, that is to say, an analysis which is directed toward a universality (validity) *higher* than that of the established facts, and of the modi-

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fications, extensions, prolongations of them? In the Socratic example, this defining and confining reality was the City State; its political authority turned into philosophical authority forbidding the philosopher to draw certain conclusions from his analysis, to apply the philosophical Logos, Reason to the logic and rationality of the state. For the demand for civil obedience, which Socrates so eloquently defends and so courageously justifies by the sacrifice of his life, goes far beyond the jurisdiction of the court, the tribunal which judges Socrates' crime. Not the judgment of the Court, but Socrates' own unconditional acceptance of it extends the State's authority over the realm of critical thought.

Thus, thinking (in the emphatic sense) becomes a political offense: the crime of civil disobedience begins with the radical questioning, with the destruction of the prevailing *concepts* of piety, courage, justice, etc. *They* are the concepts which guide the citizen's behavior, their common values; therefore, they are the cement that joins them together: the "concrete." And Socrates cannot argue that his *own* (contradicting) concepts are true in theory but inapplicable in practice; he cannot invoke the freedom of thought and the servitude of action. For his concepts are *normative*, the truth is *normative* and calls for a corresponding mode of behavior in opposition to that required by the city state. To argue for the separation of theory from practice would establish the essential harmlessness of philosophical thought, its essential non-commitment—non-commitment made into a Principle of Non-Intervention, according to which the philosopher is to continue to *think* about the Beautiful, the Good, and the True while refraining from *doing* something about them in reality, outside his academy. Socrates was thus horribly consistent when he said that philosophy is really not of this life, that it comes into its own only with death. Reality becomes irrelevant.

We know that the picture changes with *Plato*: at least since the *Republic*, philosophy and politics are internally linked: the concepts elaborated by philosophy *imply* subversion of the existing political reality. What does it mean: "imply?" Philosophical thought is critical thought: its concepts are *normative*; its definitions are veiled *imperatives*. Already for Heraclitus, the *Logos is Law*; and Plato develops the theory of Ideas as the Forms, not of a given reality but of one *to be attained*. To be attained first in thought: what men and things really are, their "concept" must be determined by a complex interplay of "abstract" analysis and synthesis: abstract in as much as the way of thought leads *away* from the immediately given, to that which is

"announced," "in-formed" *in* the given, as the blocked, distorted *potential* of the given, as the *essence*. In this sense, philosophy *is* theory of information, communication: it takes the given, ordinary words, propositions, gestures as signs, symbols of a meaning, a message not exhausted, not adequately expressed by the established vocabulary of words, meanings, "values." To the degree to which philosophy elaborates the universal concepts as against the particular appearance of things, it communicates not only knowledge but also the *imperatif* of *acting* accordingly. The universality of the concept contains the message of concretization: the "ought" is implied in the "is."

Now the normative concept stipulates a twofold universality: the (subjective) universality of Reason, of the rational faculties of man, and the (objective) universality of the human condition. The *Subject* who defines the concept (let's say, the philosopher) must be more and other than a contingent individual; Socrates must be able to show credentials for his claim that the prevailing concepts are false, and that his abstraction from the values of the particular State and its citizens is capable of arriving at an *overriding*, universal validity. And the human condition, without losing its particular concreteness, must be supra-individual, common to such an extent that the validity of the concept can become a practical one—translatable into a reality which is throughout *social* reality. Unless this dual condition prevails, philosophy lacks the denominator, the field of convergence of thought and action, concept and reality: philosophy's relevance to reality would be as slight, as uncommitted as the relevance of reality to philosophy.

The universal validity of the concept, and its twofold, subjective and objective foundation are never given facts, they are projections and evaluations. For the philosophical concepts never govern propositions describing established conditions. The concepts of Reason, Freedom, Knowledge, Good and Evil, etc. circumscribe a range of *possibilities* derived from the analysis of the *actual manifestations* of Reason, Freedom, etc., of given "cases," particular realizations of the universal. And these possibilities terminate in the concept of "that which (the universal) really is"—according to the mind and intelligence of the respective philosopher. And his intelligence is a *historical* condition, and as such a *particular* condition. All philosophy, no matter how abstract and speculative, constructs its conceptual universe with the material provided by a particular *historical* universe, which remains operative even in the purest abstractions and speculations—not as sociological conditioning "from outside," but as the very stuff of

which concepts are made. By virtue of this situation, the philosophical concepts remain inextricably *ideological*: their universality remains a particular one, confined by the historical situation. Here are the limits, internal limits of the validity of the "concept." And I believe that this tension between philosophy and history lies behind the contradiction between Socrates' critical enterprise and his abdication to the powers that be.

Philosophical thought confronts the material force of existential conditions which thought can neither master nor change. And the numerous intermediary links which may lead to the translation of thought into action also lead *away* from the established conditions—into the past and into the future. (For example, in the case of Socrates, to the roots of the "false" reality which remain hidden to the philosopher, namely, the separation of intellectual from manual work, the origin of slavery, the disintegrating imperialist base of the city state.) Philosophy is obstructed by a reality which it can transcend only in thought: reality is left to its own devices, and autonomous philosophical thought terminates in civil obedience.

Let us make the jump from the beginning to the end of philosophy. Precisely at the point where the claim of Hegel's absolute idealism seems to become mere phantasy, philosophy comes to grips with reality. "The Rational is real": man has finally set out to organize his world "in accordance with Reason," "to recognize nothing in a constitution as valid that is not right according to Reason." This is Hegel's judgment of the French Revolution: the existential conditions have attained the level of Reason; Reason comes into its own as historical practice, and history is the development of the Logos. Consciousness, in its inherent "logical" development, becoming ever more fully aware of what its object really *is*, in the historical context in which it has emerged and in which it changes—consciousness turns into Reason: *true* consciousness, capable of constructing a rational and free universe. The *Phenomenology of the Spirit* is the grandiose attempt to read the logic of liberation into the history of servitude. Chronologically, the revolution is at the *origins* of Hegel's philosophy; structurally, at its *end*. The Real is rational: in the *process* of *being made* rational, and for Hegel, this is the realization of freedom. Philosophy comes to a close when man makes himself free to act in conformity with Reason: translation of the concept into reality. The "*Aufhebung*" of philosophy is proclaimed in Hegel's system.

We know that Hegel's announcement of the advent of Reason and Freedom in history was wildly premature (or simply wrong). How-

ever, the very notion that philosophy is cancelled by its fulfillment anticipates the decisive trend of the period which begins at the time of his death. The *Phenomenology of the Spirit*, according to Hegel the road to the "absolute idea"—to true philosophy, is in fact the road to its destruction: it spells the demise of idealism. To the degree to which philosophy comprehends history and the philosophical concepts "incorporate" history, philosophy becomes materialistic, and to the degree to which philosophical materialism comes to grips with the basic facts of history, it undermines the abstract sovereignty of philosophy. Hegel's idealistic reconciliation of philosophy with reality was of short duration. In the development of thought from Hegel to Feuerbach and Marx, reconciliation turns into radical activism: the philosophical concepts, "translated" into materialistic ones, are to become the theoretical guide for social and political practice.

We must now ask: what miraculous event has bridged the gap between philosophy and reality? And why does this juncture lead (apparently) to the "negation of philosophy"? There is a familiar answer: reality has "overtaken" philosophy in a very empirical sense: scientific, technical, material progress has preempted the domain of philosophy, or rather of all "*pure*" philosophy which tried to remove from its concepts their historical denominator. Such philosophy seems to be *reduced* to the order of an intellectual exercise; rather removed from the human condition, and only modestly interested *in* the human condition.

What is the point in subtle epistemological investigations when science and technology, not unduly worried about the foundations of their knowledge, increase daily their mastery of nature and man? What is the point of a linguistic analysis which steers clear of the transformation of language (ordinary language!) into an instrument of political control? What is the point in philosophical reflections on the meaning of good and evil when Auschwitz, the Indonesian massacres, and the war in Vietnam provide a definition which suffocates all discussion on ethics? And what is the point in further philosophical occupation with Reason and Freedom when the resources and the features of a rational society, and the need for liberation are all too clear, and the problem is, not their concept but the political practice of their realization?

The weight of reality has become too heavy, its ingression into abstract thought too large for philosophy as a separate discipline—even in terms of the academic division of labor. Today, it seems impossible to think, to analyze, to define anything without thinking, analyz-

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ing, defining the language, the behavior, the conditions of the existing society. This is perhaps the hidden rationale of a philosophy which, renouncing all transcendence, faithfully sticks to the analysis of ordinary language; the rationale of Wittgenstein's elegant program for the self-reduction of philosophy, the first phase of which ends in the familiar exhortation to silence *in rebus philosophicis*, since what can be *said*, i.e. the propositions of natural science, is "something that has nothing to do with philosophy." This early radicalism partakes—much more than the later linguistic philosophy—of the total suspicion of all ideology which now seems to extend to all modes of thought which transcend the given reality.

This verdict hits thought itself, thought in the emphatic sense, which is essentially abstract. The abstract universals of philosophy are replaced in reality by the emergence of a *concrete* universal: a common goal—a common fight—solidarity. Marx already sketched it in its two manifestations: establishment of a "world market," and realization of man as *Gattungswesen*, "species-being." The global development of the productive forces tends to dissolve the petrified distinctions and conflicts of class, race, nationality—the entire social division of labor which set man against man, the particular against the universal interest, politically required suppression against possible liberation.

On the material, historical basis provided by the possible conquest of scarcity and blind nature, the translation of Reason and Freedom into existential conditions on a universal scale is within the reaches of man. The abstract, universal *Telos* of the philosophical quest is now translatable into the real Subject of history: it is emerging in the global struggle against the powerful international and national policies of domination and exploitation which tend to converge beyond all boundaries and particularities; and the rebellion against these policies assumes an equally universal character. And behind the particular, immediate grievances and struggles of the peoples in rebellion, lies the one universal demand for human freedom pure and simple—a demand on *all* existing forms of society, capitalist and socialist, democratic and authoritarian, East and West.

The reality which has overtaken and overwhelmed philosophy also affects the relevance of its most concrete and actual discipline: social and political philosophy. The efforts to elaborate the critical theoretical concepts which could develop political consciousness and guide political practice out of the established society are losing contact with the very reality they want to join. The political philosopher faces, rather embarrassed, the deep-seated suspicion, the contempt for theoretical

preoccupation on the part of even some of the most "rational" among the rebellious young intelligentsia—a derogation of thought in favor of immediate and direct action on the part of the militants. They are aware of the fact that this position flatly contradicts Marxian theory, that it is grossly undialectical, "vulgar," etc. They are willing to put up with this accusation; they insist on the absorption of thought in reality; what they are being taught and what they learn must be "relevant to their life here and now" . . . Are they right on their own terms, and with respect to their own goals?

The answer to that question depends on that to a larger question: does the contemporary situation which I tried to describe indeed call for the sacrifice (or absorption) of thought, of theory by action? Does it indeed call for the *Aufhebung* of philosophy since reality, by virtue of its own development, its *progress*, has invalidated the historical relevance of philosophy? so that, as Marxian theory predicted, only logic and epistemology remain as its genuine domain?

My answer is negative. Paradoxically, the new relevance of reality, its capability of changing the world, far from making the theoretical philosophical effort superfluous and a luxury, demands a renewed and restructured theoretical effort. Obviously and inevitably, this statement appears as, and is, a declaration *pro domo*, but one's own theoretical house is not necessarily a sanctuary from reality, it may also be a workshop for intellectual weapons offered to reality.

The need for a sustained theoretical effort, for a new abstraction from the immediate experience is suggested by this experience itself, which if raised to the level of critical consciousness, calls for a reexamination of the relation between theory and practice—philosophy and reality. The historical conditions in which Marx confidently proclaimed the "definite negation" of philosophy have changed. He envisaged the convergence of consciousness and existence: the exploited classes would become aware of their inhuman situation and of the necessity and the way to replace it by a free and rational society. He knew that this convergence did not prevail, that it had to be achieved in a long political struggle. Prevailing instead was the *discrepancy* between consciousness and existence.

In 1844, Marx wrote that what matters is not what the proletariat *thinks* it is, but what it *is*. For a long time, in fact in some of the less advanced industrial societies until this very day, this antagonism and contrast between consciousness and existence seemed to be definitely reduced and their unity seemed to be established: the worker *thinks* how and what he *is*, namely, exploited and abused—in spite of, or



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precisely because of the rising standard of living. However, in the most advanced industrial countries, the political consciousness is suffocated, overpowered by a social reality which, by virtue of its technical and material achievements and capabilities, seems to call for protection, perpetuation, improvement of the status quo rather than for radical change. And yet, critical theory demonstrates the *objective* need for such change, and the practice of the protectors and defenders of the status quo verifies this demonstration ever more emphatically.

Under these circumstances, the analysis and development of a transcending consciousness—the germane task of philosophy—assumes renewed urgency. The more uncompromising, the less “private” the commitment to change, the greater the need for learning the conditions, resources, and prospects for change in the society *as a whole*. And since the laws, the forces which move this society as a whole are still experienced as “blind” forces, operating behind the backs of the individuals, since the appearance still conceals the essence, abstraction from the appearance still is the first step toward gaining concreteness, namely, the new concreteness which is that of liberation. It matters little whether you ascribe this theoretical effort to the philosopher, sociologist, psychologist, or historian: reality has long since superseded even the academic division of labor—they are all in the same boat, or ought to be. More than a hundred years ago, Marx called philosophy “the head of the emancipation of man”—we should be worthy of this compliment!

But if reality itself, the concrete social and political reality now calls for the critical philosophical effort—as a guide for action—this does not mean a mere continuation of the manifold philosophical tradition. To be sure, there is much in this tradition which must be preserved (and restored as against the debunking ideological tendencies which, in the academic establishment, want to discard some of the most advanced concepts of traditional rationalism and empiricism): this tradition must be adequately taught and learned, precisely because these concepts are still antagonistic to the given reality, and project conditions of man and nature which now have become subject to materialization, translation into reality.

However, the preservation of this philosophical tradition, and its defense against the twofold attack by the militant, radical activists on the one side, and the pure and neutral technicians of academic thought on the other, does not mean simple repetition. The brute ingression of reality into conceptual thought demands rethinking, sometimes recantation in cases where philosophy has accepted, with

too good a conscience, established conditions and values as the terms and termini of thought. Such rethinking is imposed upon philosophy by a reality *in need of philosophy*, that is to say, in need of modes of thought which can *counteract* the massive ideological indoctrination practiced by the advanced repressive societies of today. This counteracting philosophy would have to sacrifice its puritan neutralism in exchange for a critical analysis which transcends the false consciousness and its universe of discourse and behavior toward its historical "concept." Such a philosophy would be materialistic to the extent to which it preserves in its concepts the full concreteness, the dead and living matter of the social reality; it would be idealistic in as much as it analyzes this reality in the light of its "idea," that is, its real possibilities.

Let me, by way of illustration, suggest some areas in which certain changes in reality become relevant for philosophy and call for philosophical rethinking.

(1) *Linguistic analysis*. In reality, language has been made, to a considerable extent, into an instrument of control and manipulation. This transformation affects the syntactical as well as conceptual structure of language, the definition and the vocabulary. The distortion and falsification of the "rationality" of language, and the way in which it impedes independent thinking (and feeling, even perceiving!) appear as an appropriate field of critical analysis and evaluation: political linguistics as the full concretization—and conceptualization of linguistic analysis.

(2) *Aesthetics*. The familiar and periodical "crisis of art" has today assumed a form which jeopardizes the very existence of art as art. The notion of the "end of art" becomes the more realistic the more art, in its most radical and destructive expressions, is smoothly absorbed and incorporated into the very reality it wants to indict and subvert. This situation calls for a renewal of philosophical aesthetics: analysis, not so much of the artist and his creativity, not of the "aesthetic experience," as an analysis of the work of art itself, its ontological and historical place and function in the interaction between art and society.

(3) *Epistemology*. The modes and the extent to which society (i.e., objects and "data" as specific historical facts) enters into the process of knowing at all levels (sense perception, memory, reasoning) and blends with physiological and psychological processes requires an investigation which hitherto has been left to the "sociology of knowledge." However, the problem calls for a "transcendental"

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rather than sociological analysis. Such analysis would differ from Kant in as much as it would treat the "forms of intuition" and the "categories of understanding" not as "pure" but as historical forms and concepts. These would be *a priori* because they would belong to the "conditions of possible experience," but they would be a *historical a priori* in the sense that their universality and necessity are defined (limited) by a specific, experienced historical universe.

(4) The *history of philosophy* offers many areas in need of reinterpretation. To mention only one: Plato's demonstration of the best form of government is still easily ridiculed and judged under the dual aspect of its obviously repulsive features and its irreconcilable conflict with liberal and democratic values. But there is another aspect to the *Republic*; namely, the internal relation between the theory of knowledge and the theory of government, political theory. Government is here made conditional upon the attainment of the highest mode of knowledge, and on the actually available possibilities to attain them. If the first part of the premise is accepted, the conclusion seems inevitable: as long as this knowledge is not attainable by all citizens, democracy implies a dangerous reduction (if not abolition) of the qualification for government; authentic democracy presupposes equality in the ways, means, and time necessary for acquiring the highest level of knowledge.

"Relevance to reality" has become one of the slogans by which our militant students oppose the academic establishment. They insist that what is taught and learned should be relevant to their life, here and now. The time-honored hostility against history, but also against abstract thought, theory itself is present again. We should not belittle the justification of this claim: relevant today is the action, the practice that can get us *out of* a society in which well-being, even being is at the price of destruction, waste, and oppression on a global scale. But relevant to this goal is not any private and particular practice; relevant is only a practice in which the universal suffering and the universal protest appear in the particular action—a practice which demonstrates the need and the aim of liberation. And such a practice, if it is to obtain a mass base (that is, to become universal, social rather than particular action), presupposes knowledge of the conditions, limitations, and capabilities of change. They derive from the structure, dynamic, and history of the existing society: to know them as conditions and prospects of action means to understand them in terms of a *theory* of society, of the whole which they form, closed toward the past, open toward the future—open within a given range of alterna-

tives. In this sense, action itself—in order to be able to attain its goal—calls for thought, for theory. The relation between theory and practice is truly a dialectical one: “it is not enough that thought should strive toward its realization; reality itself must also strive toward thought.” Today, this is perhaps more necessary than before. False consciousness and truth are inextricably intertwined: the benefits of the affluent society are *real*, technical progress is *real*, the rise in the GNP is *real*—and so are the frustration, waste, oppression, and misery inflicted by the same reality. To be sure, this dialectic of progress is nothing new; new are the deadly efficient (and comforting) controls which bar its awareness; new is the scope of the false consciousness, its all but immediate, direct coincidence, harmony with reality. Change, the changing practice presupposes the break of this harmony, the emancipation of thought—*abstract* thought. For the concepts, images, and goals which are to guide this practice are not yet concrete, cannot be “read off” the existing facts and conditions; they are still transcendent.—Their elaboration involves a reexamination of the past, where the failures as well as the discoveries, the false as well as the true consciousness originated. This means learning, and it requires intellectual discipline and energy—the theoretical discipline and energy which will find concreteness in the discipline and energy of action.

Philosophy was at the origin of the radical historical effort to “change the world” in the image of Freedom and Reason; the effort has not yet attained its end. The famous Feuerbach-thesis never meant that now it is no longer necessary to interpret the world—we can just go about changing it. This undertaking today is even more difficult than before: the world must be interpreted again in order to be changed; and a good part of this interpretation requires critical thought, philosophical thought. *Pro domo* or not—I think we still have a job to be done—an *increasingly serious*, and, I hope, an increasingly RISKY job!

*University of California, San Diego*