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Interview with Arnold L. Farr by Margath Walker – On critical theory, liberation and Herbert Marcuse

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Margath Walker: I would like to begin with a conversation about Marcuse and the ways in which you have been instrumental in bringing him to the forefront of theoretical discussions both in your own work and through the International Marcuse Society. Why should critical theorists be interested in Herbert Marcuse?

Arnold Farr: So, who is he? Well, of course he is a member of the famous Frankfort School for Social Research that was formed in Germany in the 1920s, all of whom were exiled to the US when Hitler came to power. Their lives were in danger. Walter Benjamin lost his life en route. The others came to the US. After the war, most of them returned although I believe Erich Fromm stayed in Mexico. Marcuse and Leo Lowenthal stayed in the US. They are famous for fusing Marx and Freudian psychoanalysis. They were concerned with the following question: why does it seem to be the case that the people who benefit most from a Marxist revolution and social change are most likely to resist it? It was Freud that helped them understand the way in which capitalism and other forms of economic and social systems can shape one's psyche so one accepts oppression. In addition, Marcuse was a scholar of Hegel in terms of what we call dialectical thinking. One of his most important essays-" A Note on Dialectics"- published in the 1960 edition of his second book on Hegel, *Reason and Revolution*, explains what dialectical thinking is for him. To think dialectically is to look at one's society at any given moment and see in tandem the development of forces for liberation whereby the possibility of liberation is already there, and the

forces for further oppression. And so society is never this static thing that simply has the present structure. There is something always contained within itself which provides possibilities for it being otherwise.

MW: What is compelling to you as a philosopher about Herbert Marcuse?

AF: Well, one of the things that drew me into philosophy was the freedom to think, I felt liberated just reading philosophical texts and learning how to think and to think critically. And I've always been concerned with issues of justice and, of course being African American from the South there's the race issue. I have always been attracted to the kind of philosophy that helps me think about day to day problems and issues. Being one who is concerned with oppression and social justice, the Frankfurt School seems to give me the theoretical lenses for grappling with those issues more than almost any other philosophy that I know of. And Marcuse is particularly interesting because of his very profound critique, a critique that goes so deep that sometimes it sounds pessimistic but it's not because even as he explains the social mechanisms that are in place to prevent any kind of social change and liberation at the same time he's quite aware of developing possibilities for liberation. So, he'll write a book like *One-Dimensional Man* where he's describing our society as one-dimensional and there are all these mechanisms for what he'll call putting subjectivity or thought under erasure. Whereas he'll then write a book like *An Essay on Liberation* focused on the mechanisms in our society that are mechanisms for liberation.

To elaborate a bit… when we think of subjectivity we think of agency. We think of some degree of freedom; we think of the subject as having some knowledge of his or her own self interest and some ability to achieve his or her desires. Under capitalism for example, this kind of consciousness-this subjectivity- is whittled down or put under erasure. That is, the system is designed to make one blind to one's best self-interest. To make one feel as if one has no agency. The system is what it is, there's nothing I can do about it; it won't change. I have to adapt to the system. This is the way things are. So, one becomes incapable of thinking about change or thinking that things can be otherwise. Any economic system…it's not like God spoke one day and said 'let there be capitalism'. It's a human invention created by the human will. And it's maintained by human beings. If it's the case that capitalism didn't always exist but came into existence through the agency of human beings, an alternative can also come into existence through the agency of human beings. But capitalism creates a kind of language and value system that blinds us to those possibilities.

MW: One of the arguments I put forth in my article "Borders and One-Dimensionality" (http://www.envplan.com/abstract.cgi?id=d13138p) is that the conditions under which Marcuse wrote remain and have deepened. What is your interpretation of how critical theory is particularly important today?

AF: Let me say a word about how I got into Marcuse. I read a little bit of Marcuse and the Frankfurt School as a grad student in the 1990s. He was one I always wanted to know more about. I was teaching at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia and majors in their senior year have to take a seminar so in the spring of their junior they meet with the chair and they decide on a topic and they find somebody in the department who is an expert. I decided I was going to beef up on Marcuse. We read Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* and *One-Dimensional Man*. We were reading *One-Dimensional Man* when 9/11 occurred. And there was something about that moment. We had

an epiphany. The book came so alive because I noticed the post-9/11 rhetoric was in line with what Marcuse had been saying. When you are living in an oppressive society there is a need for an external enemy. People in that society turn toward the external enemy and they forget or pay no attention to the kind of abuse from which they are suffering on a daily basis in their own society. And so my question is- and I think some people have written articles about this- is how many babies died of malnutrition on 9/10? How many murders or rapes were there on 9/10? People are suffering and dying horrible deaths every day. But that kind of suffering and death is normalized and accepted. So it takes something monumental or catastrophic to get our attention. Well, Marcuse is describing this right? The focus is on the external enemy- we are all under threat now- but a lot of us are under threat every single day. If you are a certain gender or a certain sexual orientation or race or class or live in a certain neighborhood, you're under terroristic threat every single day of your life. But nobody is fighting that kind of terrorism.

That sort of woke us up. So that's one thing. The other thing is Marcuse was engaged in a kind of critique that was prematurely put back on the shelf. I think academics can be sort of a fashion parade from time to time. You have your theorists that come in and out of fashion. People read someone for a while but are constantly after the next big thing. But if you're dealing with someone like Marcuse who is dealing with real concrete social problems, that's interesting for a while but maybe it's not sexy enough. He was eclipsed. I think two things happened. One is the academy turned to a kind of liberalism, at least in social and political philosophy. The champion of liberal social and political philosophy is John Rawls. In the critical theory tradition, when (Jürgen) Habermas moves towards his community of ethics, you get a kind of abandonment of the deep critique Marcuse was involved in. Habermas himself talks about systematically distorted communication. But he moves away from that because he says: okay look, if communication can be systematically distorted that presupposes that there can be a non-distorted form of communication. He starts to write about the ideal speech situation. And creates this theory of communicative action where he begins to apply this to different realms, religion, law, etc. That is important and I think that work is extremely important. But at some point you have to get back to a critique of what's actually happening in a one-dimensional society.

And then on the other side you've got the advent of postmodernism. The theorists that become popular from the Frankfurt School during this period are Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin because their work looks a little bit more like the work of the postmodernists. And postmodernism is a necessary form of critique. I believe that something like deconstruction is absolutely necessary. As is a Foucauldian analysis of power. But after you deconstruct you have to think in terms of reconstruction. Sometimes in postmodernism there is no hope for real change. Let's dismantle monolithic discourses but let's not really offer anything more liberating. And this is where Marcuse could come in. In my own work I try to put him in conversation with all these strands of thought.

MW: Marcuse has largely fallen out of favor in contemporary theoretical circles because of his commitment to reconstructing Reason and his failure to anticipate postmodern attacks on grand narratives of liberation…

AR: That's a really good point and I'm glad you raised it. For me, reason is associated with thinking. You can't really separate the two. What often passes as reason in our society is not reason at all. It's a kind of systematic organization that appears to benefit people in some way but that's exactly what Marcuse critiques in *One-Dimensional Man*. He has a kind of critique of reason too. It looks reasonable to fall in step with capitalism but you're falling in line with something very unreasonable in the whole scheme of things.

In Chapter 5 of *Eros and Civilization,* titled 'A Philosophical Interlude', he pauses for a moment and tries to explain Freud in the context of western philosophy so he talks about Hegel and Nietzsche and Plato. The point is that in the western philosophical tradition, the focus has been on logos, which is the typical disinterested kind of reason, rationality, as in we are rational creatures. You have over 2000 years of literature on consciousness but a kind of consciousness or reason that is disembodied, which doesn't exist. The important thing about Freud is he brings desire, instinct and drive back into the picture. The western tradition has kind of side-lined Eros, but Marcuse doesn't. He rejects that. Eros is more than something to be subdued and controlled by logos. But he doesn't necessarily want to replace logos with irrationality or 'not reason'. He wants to restore Eros to its rightful place alongside logos.

There's another part of your question that I want to address. If you are interested in liberation you can't escape some kind of grand narrative. But that doesn't have to be fixed, it can be moveable and malleable and it's developing as it goes. In *Postmodern Theory,* Best and Kellner argue that in the Marxist tradition, which the Frankfurt School is a part of, there's emphasis on macro-level theory, whereas in postmodernism the focus is on the micro. And for these authors they believe that you have to have both, it's not an either or. If you look at the micro level of the individual or the institutions, they are all connected or related somehow.

MW: In your book *Critical Theory and Democratic Vision* (https://rowman.com/ISBN/9780739119310/Critical-Theory-and-Democratic-Vision-Herbert-Marcuse-and-Recent-Liberation-Philosophies) you elaborate your theory of liberation philosophy. I wonder if you might talk a bit about that and how it relates to some of the social unrest we are currently experiencing in cities of the US.

AR: Well, you know I studied theology before I got into philosophy. One of the theologies that I was attracted to most is liberation theology. The idea is to read the text of their religious tradition from the perspective of the poor and oppressed. That is not to say that interpreters choose a position to read it from and ignore everything else. People already read that way. For example, when I lived in Philly I would team teach with Andy Lamas at University of Pennsylvania from time to time. He went in on one occasion and turned out the lights and lit candles and started cutting out pages from the Bible. Students were shocked. They said: what are you doing that for? And Andy said: well, don't you do the same? They said no. He went on and asked: you don't cut and paste as you read? So, he proved to them that they did indeed cut and paste as they read. We learn to read text through the lenses of our society and our culture. We see some things and we don't see others. There's a whole side to the Christian gospel that we don't see because we've been taught to read it through a capitalist lens. So, Andy goes through the text and says 'okay, tell me the Genesis story'. The students sort of lay out the story. The story they lay out is the second creation story in Genesis, not the first. They skip over the first. Why? Well the first one is actually

more egalitarian. God speaks in the plural and God seems to be sexless. In the second one, God is one God, does not speak in the plural and God is male. The first story seems to support egalitarianism; the second one, hierarchy. The story they go to is the story that supports hierarchy. We are in a society that conditions us to think and behave in terms of hierarchies and power structures. Every reading we do is a cut and paste job.

Liberation theologians decide that they are going to read in a different way. What does God have to say about the oppressed, for example? They start reading the text with questions of poverty and oppression and racism in mind. You get a different read. So I was influenced by that and I began to wonder: what if I did the same thing with philosophy? If you notice, philosophers have a lot to say about human beings in general but nothing to say about human beings in particular nor how human beings struggle and deal with life on a day to day basis. You can make a universal claim and it simply applies to all evenly. But experience says otherwise. It is not to say that there are no universal claims to be made, there are some. You have to work through the particulars of human existence too. Liberation philosophy is an intentional reading of philosophy with liberation in mind, reading from the perspective of the poor and oppressed in society. If I read Sartre, for example, I might ask what does this have to say to the situation going on in Ferguson? What's happening in Appalachia? If we're going to talk about the good society, the good life, justice, reason, the human condition, these broad universal terms that we use, we've got to be able to deal with the particulars of existence. I can't talk about these concepts without looking at specific infractions of justice, the violations of the good life, the destruction of life. Charles Mills, a philosopher of race, makes a distinction between ideal theory and real theory. He criticizes people like John Rawls for developing ideal theory and promotes theory that starts on the ground where we are and tries to work toward a theory of justice from there.

MW: This has to do with the quest for re-invigorating a revolutionary subjectivity correct? How can we do that using theory?

AR: You have these moments of what Marcuse would call rebellion. He makes a distinction between a rebellion or a revolt and a revolution. When you have a revolution that entails real social change, which is hopefully long-term. A rebellion is a kind of moment where there is an uprising and then people go back to business as usual. I think what happens, and I learned this from Angela Davis and some Black Feminists, is this idea of intersectionality, which describes how various forms of oppression all intersect in various ways. What happens though is that people get isolated into their own pockets and their own particular concerns. So, Black people are concerned about racism, and I want to say that poor people are concerned about poverty, but they are probably the greatest duped group in our society. There are many mechanisms by which they are duped and not likely to rebel and Marcuse lays some of this out in *One-Dimensional Man*. Then there are gender issues, sexuality issues, etc. But this is why you need a macro-level analysis to see how these oppressions intersect. It is an entire system that needs to be overthrown. But rather than challenge the system people work within the system to make things better for them as individuals.

You can have something like the Civil Rights Movement that changes things in terms of law but racism has ways of re-inventing itself, making itself invisible. It doesn't just go away even with a Black president. America is no less racist, regardless of people saying we are in a post-racial

society. We've seen evidence that it is not. It's like Marcuse says, society gives you enough to titillate you, to keep you from engaging in a revolution. That's what FDR's New Deal was about; keep people from engaging in a revolution which they were about to do. To really have the democratic good lives that we want the entire system has to be changed. People in their separated isolated groups are fighting for what would make things better for them rather than focusing on the connections. The Frankfurt School writes about how we identify with the powerful and our leaders. Marcuse discusses this in terms of mimesis- you know, we mimic the masters. We internalize the values of the masters.

Marcuse suggests a new subjectivity which he calls the Great Refusal, a kind of consciousness that is able to see through the blinders that society throws over our eyes –it's another way of talking about Marx's notion of class consciousness. Marcuse talks about the structures of our desires changing and how that is a necessary component. For example, I talk to people who at one time were racist and they talk about the experience they went through, the people they met which led to them being non-racist. They acquired a new subjectivity.

I think the basic form of alienation hasn't changed, not even since Marx. So this makes this type of inquiry useful. There are more mechanisms in place to make us think that we belong, we fit in and that we are not alienated. Marcuse was more aware of this than Marx. Capitalism adapts in such a way that it appears to provide the goods. This is where he has so many great and poignant lines like 'a smooth undemocratic freedom'. In one of my favorite passages in my edition of *One-Dimensional Man* he talks about if an employee and an employer go to the same vacation resort they feel equal, or if they watch the same sports team or if the neighbor drives a Cadillac, they feel the same. There are these little things that are in place that make one feel like the boss is 'one of us'. There are places the boss can go that you can't. There are places designed to exclude you. If you're a member of the working class, you do not decide what your labor is worth. Someone else decides that.

MW: I'd like to finish up by talking a bit about the International Marcuse Society.

AR: Well I became so fascinated with Marcuse's work that I decided to read as much as I could, then I got a book idea, I started collecting everything by and about Marcuse. As I was doing research for that book, I realized that it was going to be the 50th anniversary of *Eros and Civilization*. I got this idea to have a conference to celebrate this and I emailed Doug Kellner, really the only Marcuse scholar that I knew at the time, and a couple of other people to organize this at St. Joseph's in Philadelphia in 2005. I got some funding and that allowed me to bring in some people. We had about 25 people for that meeting and we enjoyed ourselves so much, we had a business meeting and decided to start a society. All we did at that point was agree to have a conference every 2 years and I hosted the 2nd one. We had some graduate students from York University and they hosted the next one which was a bit larger. Then my colleague Andy Lamas offered to organize it at Penn in 2011 and that's when it blew up. Because of his enthusiasm and energy we had over 300 people speaking and almost 1300 in attendance. Angela Davis gave the keynote. After her talk we all marched to the Occupy site in downtown Philly and helicopters were flying over. That was a great moment. 22 or 23 different countries were represented. The International Marcuse Society is now an official non-profit organization.

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