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Political positivism and political existentialism. Revisiting Herbert Marcuse

Alex Koutsogiannis¹

Abstract: The paper argues for the political significance of two aspects of Marcuse's thought. The first is Marcuse's political reading of positivism and the second is his earlier critique of political existentialism. Both aspects can be employed by a critical understanding of current authoritarian trends. Notwithstanding major changes in the historical trajectory of capitalist societies, Marcuse's dialectical conception of the contradictions that cement modern societies was situated against the conservatism of both idealist positivism (in the adoration of facts against facts) and totalitarian socio-political order. An attempt at a parallel reading of these critiques may shed some new light in the re-appearing kinship of fragmented social totalities with the emergency condition. The paper is divided in three parts. The first part examines Marcuse's assessment of the political implications of the positivist method while the second focuses on a shift of paradigm, on Marcuse's critique of technological society. The last part of the paper is concerned with Marcuse's analysis of the social basis of authoritarian politics.

Introduction

Mainstream apprehensions of the recent economic crisis perceive its political manifestations in two major ways. One relates directly authoritarian solutions with social disenchantment and impoverization and the other thinks of the political as essentially bankrupt, at least in comparison to overriding economic interests. The rise of an aggressive, un-reflective and protectionist political practice is a tendency well observed in our days. Perhaps the regressive effects of the crisis make Marcuse's thought unhappily relevant, but this view can only be sustained

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insofar as his thought never ceased to apprehend fundamental aspects of advanced capitalism. Marcuse did not hesitate to embrace critically new conceptual tools that sociology, aesthetics or Freudian psychology had to offer for the understanding of the dynamics of modern societies.

Before Marcuse's death, post-war capitalism was already beginning to prove more elastic than predicted. In today's transmutations for example, finance capitalism along with the governance model of contemporary political institutions reshaped the nexus of value-orientations and production forces (including technology). In the political field, the new ideologies of transparency, openness and dissemination of power had to be tested for their applicability as well as for their underlying goals. Specific aspects of globalization processes questioned for a moment the legitimacy of the bureaucratic nation-state and pushed further a latent tension between politics and economics. This is, in very crude terms, the environment that surrounds the new social and political conservatism. What brings together established political forces of different liberal democracies is an almost systemic fusion of the demand for self-determination with separatist, protectionist and xenophobic political agendas. Through this fusion however, the social and rational requirements of self-determination appear to be readily endangered. It is precisely against this paradoxical symbiosis of freedom with aggression that Marcuse's understanding of the political becomes significant. Needless to say, Marcuse was not alone in investigating the contradictions endemic in the social relations of capitalism. His contribution, though multileveled, is of course quite distinctive on its own account, something that I hope to make clear in the process. The present essay focuses on two fundamental aspects of Marcuse's thought and argues for their importance in the critique of advanced forms of totalitarianism. The first is Marcuse's critique of positivism and the second is his critique of political existentialism.

Marcuse employs the concept of positivism rather broadly, on both philosophical and methodological terms. There are two branches or types of positivism that he initially attacks: naturalist empiricism and

the philosophy of common-sense experience. Both currents are charged for isolating social facts or phenomena from the historical possibilities of their realization. For example, aggravated by the disturbing effects of the exogenous and unpredictable world of norms and social relations, positivism adhered to the static aspect of social facts obscuring their historical-dynamic content.² Bound by their methodological dispositions, both the above currents acquired a political form as advocates of an established social totality. Marcuse's approach is in this respect more political than simply methodological, although himself would perhaps reject this distinction altogether. In combining philosophy with social theory, *Reason and Revolution* offered a political reading of positivism, in which critique was called to expound, in sharp contrast to formal logic, the contradictory character of its objects (part 1).

Marcuse had progressively brought new conceptual tools into this project following a social-theoretical route, where the critique of alienation had to be translated into the language of the social contradictions managed by advanced capitalism. In this thematization, expressed mostly in his *One-Dimensional Man*, the total state has given its place to a totalized society, this time under the guise of scientific (rather than immediately natural) objectivity. Political neutrality and social uniformity synthesize the new picture of relations of domination. The emphasis on the structural omnipotence of the capitalist world is not however a reversed adoption of the holistic paradigm. Even at his most "structural" moments, in *Eros and Civilization* and *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse devoted enough energy in calling for the revolutionary mediations in the ontological incompatibilities between objective knowledge and subjective praxis (part 2). Far from being a "pluralist" in the modern political sense, Marcuse retained a dialectical conception of social *totality* even during the despairing times of established fascism. I would like to ar-

2 Marcuse noted that Hume's empiricism was at least raised against a colossal ideological enemy, while modern empiricism is simply affirmative of the established order. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (London: Routledge, 1991), 173.

gue that an implicit endorsement of the concept of totality in Marcuse's social theory is not just of critical philosophical value (in which totality "contains" its negation) but of political value as well, insofar as Marcuse vehemently opposed particularistic or "esoteric" solutions to the totalitarian transformations of the political phenomenon.³

Although these transformations may also be denoted from a philosophical-anthropological perspective, found in abundance in Marcuse's writings, the guiding thread of an opposition to totalitarianism was simultaneously a question of political ideology. However, instead of proceeding directly with an immanent confrontation with the fundamental principles of liberalism, Marcuse inquired into the common social and economic premises of two politically irreconcilable systems (part 3). In his 1934 essay on the *Struggle Against Liberalism and the Totalitarian View of the State*⁴, Marcuse arrived at the well-known conclusion that totalitarianism did not alter the fundamental socio-economic structure of former liberal political systems. An examination of totalitarianism from this particular viewpoint not only exposes the antinomies between liberal ideas and practices but it mostly reveals the political pathways (as determinant forms) by which the historical continuity of capitalist social relations is ensured.

More generally, Marcuse is convinced that liberal politics were never essentially compromised by the exercise of centralized economic or political oppression. One of the strongest ideological protagonists to this union is the reduction of rational justification to the brute existence of a specific state of affairs. In its crude political form, existentialism surrendered to the relativist fluidity of the phenomenal world, blurring the borders between everyday experience and historical reality. Fixed in the emergency conditions of socio-economic crisis, modern authoritari-

3 Provided of course that the political phenomenon itself appertains to processes and arrangements that are not just plural and diversified but mostly collective and general.

4 Herbert Marcuse, "The struggle against liberalism in the totalitarian view of the state" in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. Jeremy, J. Shapiro (London: MayFlyBooks, 2009).

an trends exhibit a similar reduction of rational critique to un-reflected decisionism that appears perhaps more Schmittian than expected. The last part of this paper focuses on Marcuse's critique of political existentialism.

Political positivism

In his discussion of Weber's account of industrial capitalism Marcuse notices that a strict insulation of a purified techno-science from value-laden superstructures, would result in the inability to rationally criticize the latter. The more rigid the division, the more abstract it becomes. In the end, being able to separate essences from appearances with great clarity, knowledge becomes formal and static, denying nothing.⁵ Marcuse is very skeptical about the political implications of Weber's methodological presumption that it is possible to separate the Is from the Ought, ethics from science or an 'outside' contextual backdrop of knowledge from knowledge itself. There is no branch of reason that can be immunized from external interferences nor can it pronounce any rational judgment upon social or material relations without contextual substantiation.

For Marcuse, as well as for other members of this first generation of critical theorists, there is nothing wrong with taxonomical logic, as long as its elevation to a principled universality is averted. It is true that there are many distinct versions of positivist thought incorporated in this generalized schema and Marcuse's critique of positivism is no exception to this generalization. But what characterizes a pejorative understanding of positivism "in general" is the political value inscribed in the injustice done to the contradictory (and not just divergent) nature of the object of knowledge, namely a historically situated social totality, reducible neither to the neutral functionality of a *method* nor to the omnipotence of a comprehending subject. Adorno for example summarizes this along the following lines: "The more knowledge is functionalized and made a product of cognition, the more perfectly will its moment of motion be

5 See Herbert Marcuse, "Industrialization and Capitalism in the work of Max Weber" in *Negations*, 151-52.

credited to the subject as its activity, while the object becomes the result of the labour that has congealed in it – a dead thing.”⁶

Marcuse retained a political reading of this discussion in almost every occasion he encountered un-dialectical thought. Even during his earlier preoccupations with phenomenological Marxism and with Heidegger’s rejection of the absolute dualisms of western rationalism, Marcuse sustained a close link between the objective essence of social phenomena which “resist” the irrational contradictions that characterized capitalism. In his later writings, the dialectical method involved the dissolution of abstract historical categories into forms of *praxis*, as acts of liberation and yet in sharp distinction to a kind of decisionism (or “practicing voluntarism”) opposed to objective and knowledgeable social conditions. The subjective factor, such as the function of Marxist political parties, “is only the formulation of the objective factors, which, directing the political action, becomes an integral part and aspect of them.”⁷ The weakening of the revolutionary potential is an indication that the cognitive and voluntarist element is not embodied in the objective situation.⁸ In this latter case, politics succumbs to the “naturalistic” reality of capitalism and is unable to break with this determinism.

As is well known, *Reason and Revolution* exemplifies Marcuse’s critique of positivism, conceived in relation with the “philosophy of ‘common sense’ experience.”⁹ Alongside traditional scientific thought, common sense takes social totality as a given sum of describable facts. Facts are taken to be initially independent from cognition. Marcuse traces in Hegel’s philosophical development a critique of positivism, but even more, a critique of reification. I shall attempt here a parallel reading of these terms although Marcuse himself kept them relatively apart.

6 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1990), 91.

7 Herbert Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism. A Critical Analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1958), 146.

8 See *ibid.*

9 Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution. Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977), 112f.

First of all, positivism represents for Marcuse a kind of rationality (from Hume to the logical positivists) that is conservative and affirmative, quite opposite to Hegel's negative philosophy and Marx's historical materialism. As such, positivism remains tied to the world of objects, to facts against consciousness, to the universality of nature against the universality of the subject. Reification on the other hand is a subjective category, anchored in the other shore of the subject-object dualism. Marcuse often uses the term reification interchangeably with alienation and reminds us that since Hegel, reification rests on the externalization of human powers in such a way that the conflict between idea and reality or between consciousness and existence is perpetuated. Human beings (their desires, goals and above all *potentialities*) continue in other words to be confronted by a hostile and alien reality. But, in Hegel at least, alienation is intrinsic to the mediating activity of the subject, which realizes itself in its unimpeded externalization to the world of "things". In this respect, Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* represented for Marcuse the political expression of the historical dialectic, where the self-reduction of the subject to an external object assumes a very specific form: it is now a *person*, a contractor, or an object of purchase. Marcuse observes that a contractual relation (in Hegel's account of private property) results in the objectification of the contractual parts, yet such objectification must not be total: "The alienation of the person, however, must have a limit in time, so that something remains of the 'totality and universality' of the person."¹⁰

Marcuse argues that whereas Hegel's answer to this question rested, finally, in the consummation of alienation in the realm of thought where the subject always remains a free subject (an open potentiality, still under enslavement), Marx responded by demonstrating that only the alteration of the concrete conditions of social life can put an end to the contradiction between the conditions themselves, and man's universal essence, the latter having in Hegel "no refuge save the mind, where it was hyposta-

10 Ibid., 195.

sized as an abstract universal.”¹¹ Marcuse praises however both Marx and Hegel for extending the resolution of actual social *contradictions* (the “true” objects of thought) to a historical project whose feasibility rests upon the examination of the untruth of existing, or “common sense” facts. In Marx, the real objective condition is the universalizing force of alienated labour. The “logical” fallacy of this universalization is the separation of labour from its object and by extension the separation of facts from their historical singularity. Coterminal to this, is an anthropological fallacy of a substantial, ethical grounding. Marcuse quotes Marx’s *Paris Manuscripts* drawing attention to the human content of alienation that the early Marx understood as alienation between and within human beings. In the capitalist mode of production labour is deprived of its essential nature, of the fulfillment of human capacities. It is also deprived of its essential sociality, namely the positioning of individual freedom as universal freedom, the inter-dependence between the particularity of the individual and the universality of its social existence. Marx’s analysis goes for Marcuse far beyond the structure of economic relationships. Capital, private property and commodities are empirical crystallizations of the social mode of production. For Marcuse, Marx’s empiricism was neither positivistic nor ideological. The social content of economic relations is not emphasized “by virtue of any humanitarian feeling but by virtue of the actual content of the economy itself.”¹²

In 1941, amidst the 2nd World War, authoritarian ideologies owed already much of their sweeping influence to crude versions of positivist thought. In Marcuse’s eyes, these currents were mere vulgates of Hume’s empiricism and Hegel’s rationalism.¹³ The last section of the second part

11 Ibid., 284.

12 Ibid., 281.

13 Of course, this is not so for Heidegger’s existentialism. However, in spite of Marcuse’s disavowal of Heidegger’s affiliation to Nazism, the basic theoretical formulations on concrete individuality and authenticity continued to be integrated in his dialectical thinking. Andrew Feenberg argues that although some superficial similarities between Heidegger and Marcuse vanish quite early (sharing this view with Douglas Kellner), there is a considerable conti-

of Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution* is devoted to just that. With a proviso, that a new theoretical discipline made its appearance. Social theory, which began critically as the negation of immediacy or the refutation of prevailing appearances, was reduced (in some branches of it) into an ideological justification of the established order. In the reactionary conservatism of 19th century positivist philosophies of the state or society (in A. Comte), alienation is not a central theme. In political positivism in particular, such as this of F.J. Stahl's philosophy of right, in which Marcuse pays special attention, the critique of alienation would amount to a speculative rationalism whose aspirations cannot be fulfilled by the naturalness of the personality and the political order that corresponds to it. Marcuse notes that in his attempt to substitute Hegel's abstract universalism for a theory of concrete personality, Stahl grounded existing inequalities and contradictions on the nature of the substituting category of personhood. This interminability of inequality in nature demands that all forms of the "personality's" social existence (in the division of labour) must be governed.¹⁴ An overpowered state is thus not to be bounded by individual interests and avoid at all costs a de-concentration of its governing authority. Here, the vulgate is in full circle. For Marcuse, the political implications of crude naturalism anticipated the emergence of the modern authoritarian state.¹⁵ The result is a fundamental antinomy, the reduction of the former core of individuality to an objective and relatively undifferentiated part of the totality of "personal" relations "emanating from the Person of God and terminating, on earth, in the person of the sovereign monarch."¹⁶

nuity at a deeper philosophical level. This continuity is particularly traced in Marcuse's attempt at unifying aesthetics with politics, as well as in his conceptualization of technology. See Andrew Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse. The Catastrophe and Redemption of History* (New York & London: Routledge, 2005), xv.

14 Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, 371.

15 See *ibid.*, 372.

16 *Ibid.*, 370.

Had it not been for the need to respond to spurious critiques of totalitarianism (for example Popper's *Poverty of Historicism* published in 1957), Marcuse would perhaps never have returned to the political implications of epistemological questions, save those implied by his critique of technological rationality. Marcuse contends that Popper's ahistorical constructivism did not account for the actual roots of totalitarianism. Popper is particularly scorned for a "misplaced abstractness", substituting the real causes of violence, namely the societal function, with the abstract principle of non-violence and the philosophical (rather than sociological) refutation of holistic theories.¹⁷ Popper's central misapprehension of totalitarianism stems from the conflation of the methodological conviction that there can be no totality of *all* aspects and properties of a thing, with the political assertion that there can be no political system or state that could control all relations that comprise social reality.¹⁸ In this conflation totalitarianism is nothing but a "logical impossibility",¹⁹ a false generalization that for Marcuse minimizes the scope and prospect of violence or terror. Practically speaking, a totalitarian society does not, Marcuse observes, have to add up all dispersed parts of social life in a concrete whole, simply because a control of some key factors of social life could as well suffice in controlling this whole. More importantly, Marcuse contends that Popper's critique of holism misses the fact that the concept of a prevailing structure "does not preclude but calls for a 'selective' analysis - one which focuses on the *basic* institutions and relations of a society."²⁰ Finally, Popper's concept of "holism" is blamed for not discriminating between theories of total-

17 See Herbert Marcuse, "Karl Popper and the Problem of Historical Laws" in *Studies in Critical Philosophy*, (London: NLB, 1972), 194.

18 Against Adorno's and Habermas' accusations that Popper is destined by his methodology to a defense of the status quo, Popper replied as a rationalist philosopher proper, insisting that his theory on scientific method is different from his social theory (on piecemeal changes), and that an evaluated suggestion to a solution of a *problem* can be put forward by a man regardless of his attitude towards society. See Theodor Adorno et al., *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology* (London: Heinemann, 1976), 298.

19 Marcuse, "Karl Popper and the Problem of Historical Laws", 201.

20 *Ibid.*, 201.

itarian and an anti-totalitarian intuition, not recognizing that the latter employ a critical notion of inexorable laws “which sees in these laws the feature of an ‘immature’ and oppressive society.”²¹ The call is then made for the breaking of these laws rather than justifying them as natural and unchangeable. Marcuse is convinced that an unqualified rejection of the concept of inexorable laws reduces the capacity of accepted knowledge to influence a course of action. Hence the specific social conditions of a phenomenon (such as violence) are facts and forces that provide a ground for predictability that Marcuse comprehends as a “projection of tendencies”.²² By contrast, the denial of a fundamental discrimination between facts and underlying forces, would lead to the impossibility of distinguishing one factor from another, making thus scientific thought speculative again.

For Marcuse, the central political implication of Popper’s “un-critical” critique is a kind of neutral and subjectively unobstructed relativism, reaffirming in the last analysis a primordial self-alienation of rational thought from the anonymous social totality. More to the point, Marcuse makes clear that the absolutization of social indeterminacy in Popper’s “pluralist philosophy” fails in its attempt to oppose liberalism to totalitarianism. This is because totalitarianism pertains to societies characterized by “piecemeal” rather than “holistic” doctrines. The laws of the market and of unobstructed competition cannot in other words guarantee the harmony between private interests and general welfare. Marcuse brings to memory what Marx knew already, that liberalist societies are not immune (due to their “misplaced” drive for independence) to an increasing centralization of economic and political power.

The argument on the non-immunization of liberal democracies against totalitarian politics must not however be confused with a crude conflation of the two political systems. To each regime corresponds a different standpoint of critique. Faced with the horrific practices of Nazism and its ideological contours, Marcuse shifted his problematic to the irrational kernel of totalitarianism. Advanced capitalism is not however an easi-

21 *Ibid.*, 202.

22 *Ibid.*, 199.

er target. Social processes of alienation were re-employed by Marcuse's later political thought, still under the conviction that they are not mere cancellations of an esoteric compulsion to freedom. In *Eros and Civilization* (1955) the question of repression is met with a dialectical and no less sociological understanding of the psyche's structural workings²³. It would appear that this "individualization" of the concept of freedom in the viewpoint of repression, is at odds with Marcuse's central sociological orientation. However, in spite of anticipated and well-observed cleavages, Marcuse's thought is in my view dialectical throughout. *One-Dimensional Man* (1964) represents in this regard a breaking point. In discussing the political function of technology, Marcuse adopts a non-individualist standpoint in the critique of advanced industrial society, while not dispensing with the question of freedom. Far from reproducing the liberal anxiety on the restriction of individual powers by society, Marcuse adopts a holistic approach, in which social contradictions are exposed for what they are, from the viewpoint of the category of totality. In what follows, I shall try to demonstrate how a nuanced use of this category allowed Marcuse to incorporate the individualist connotations of the concept of freedom into a dialectical critique of conditions of domination in advanced capitalism.

Totality and Domination

It is true that Marcuse never inquired in any explicit manner (unlike Adorno and Horkheimer for example) into the critical value of the notion

23 For Wiggershaus the book was Marcuse's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Wiggershaus argues that while Horkheimer and Adorno presented only a fragmented groundwork for a positive conception of Enlightenment, Marcuse expounded more directly the pathways that may lead "beyond the reality principle". The argument is about Marcuse's refutation of Freud's thesis on the indispensability of instinctual repression for civilization. See Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School - Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge and Oxford: Polity Press, 2004), 499. Marcuse is of course no less political here. One of the main purposes of the book is to ground the possibility of freedom on both the instinctual and social aspects of domination.

of totality. Since Lukács, this category has nevertheless played a vital role in the development of critical theory from its early stages. Horkheimer in particular often appealed to this category in arguments against undialectical empiricism or idealist metaphysics. He insisted that one-sided thought (whichever its philosophical standpoint and no matter how universal it pertains to be) is always fragmentary and fails to reach the actual content of phenomena. The demand for inter-disciplinarity would make sense only within a projection of the unification of disciplines in the knowledge of broader tendencies. At the same time, “for the materialist, judgments which embrace all reality are always questionable and not very important, because far removed from the kind of activity which generated them. In metaphysical systems, on the contrary, the stress tends to be just the opposite: knowledge of the particulars is usually taken simply as an example of knowledge of universals.”²⁴

Horkheimer did not qualify the notion of totality with any stronger transcendental powers such as those derived from a historically and socially “purified” science, or those involved in the construction of a harmonious social whole. In their hurry to conclude with history’s final ends, both attitudes failed to grasp the contradictions that generate the alienation between theory and practice or between politics and science. They thus fail to account for the social embeddedness of knowledge. For Horkheimer it was clear that the distinguishing characteristic of modern social totalities is their “disruptive element” rather than their “unitive” one (the “living reality” of bourgeois power in its former glory)²⁵. Social totality is undoubtedly dialectical and contains its own negation. In the latter, theory (science) and practice are not initially separated, in order to be united as distinct entities at a later stage of attained knowledge. As Horkheimer observed, those who (initially) placed facts against superstition and prophetic insights were individuals and groups who

24 Max Horkheimer, “Materialism and Metaphysics” in *Critical Theory. Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O’Connell and others (New York: Continuum, 1982), 20.

25 See Max Horkheimer, “Authority and the Family” in *Critical Theory. Selected Essays*, 128.

stood in a different relation to theory than the fragmented sciences do. Their negative action meant that “They did not move in an unbroken succession from scientists into men of action and back again into scientists. Their fight against the *status quo* combined the true unity of theory and practice. ... Their specific action was contained in their very mode of perception, just as the praxis of the faulty society was embedded in its misguided science.”²⁶

It seems that the above “groups and individuals” represent a specific type of action (so far variously manifested) for which dialectical totality is something more than a wider perspective of critique. This action is therefore not just theoretical but has a practical importance, it is a revolutionary principle that the Lukács of *History and Class Consciousness* hoped to see flourish in the consciousness of the proletariat. In a well-known passage Lukács asserts that the decisive difference between Marxism and bourgeois thought is not the primacy of economic motives but the point of view of totality. With this, Lukács aimed at two interrelated targets. On the objective side (to use his typical train of argument), bourgeois science is based on an abstraction from totality, namely “the isolation of elements and concepts in the special disciplines”, an approach not necessarily unscientific if not the contrary. “But what is decisive is whether this process of isolation is a means towards understanding the whole and whether it is integrated within the context it presupposes and requires, or whether the abstract knowledge of an isolated fragment retains its ‘autonomy’ and becomes an end in itself.”²⁷ In this latter case, politics for example would be reduced to a mere administrative science, a mere fragment of its actual scope. There is also a subjective side, where only a “total subject” as a collective subject can posit the “totality of the object.”²⁸

According to Lukács both views are not mutually exclusive. To pos-

26 Max Horkheimer, “The Latest Attack on Metaphysics” in *Critical Theory. Selected Essays*, 161.

27 Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, 1990), 28.

28 *Ibid.*

it the importance of the movement of thought in history is not to deny the importance of the “objective” factor. It only means that the latter is *integrated* in a more concrete and comprehensive totality.²⁹ In 1967, in his preface to the new edition of the book, Lukács acknowledged the distortions that may result from his positing of the category of totality at the centre of analysis, overriding thus the primacy of the economic.³⁰ But at the time he wrote *History and Class Consciousness*, it was pertinent for Lukács to respond to orthodox vulgates of Marx’s transcendence of Hegel’s dialectic and to oppose a resulting scientism, which ignored the “truth” of the historical dialectic that Marx brought to fruition through his appropriation of Hegel’s philosophy. Be that as it may, the category of totality continued to work as a more implicit or explicit methodological backdrop for critical theory in general, including attempts at its contextual or methodological reconceptualization.

Marcuse was of course not unaware of the complications involved in an unwarranted use of this category and was certainly observant of its misinterpretations. Skeptical perhaps, of the theoretical (high level of abstraction) and political (‘totalizing’) vulnerability of the concept, Marcuse preferred to put this category in the background, yet not quite unproductively. His *One-Dimensional Man* represents in this regard a transformative endeavor where concepts such as advanced capitalism, technological rationality and modern industrialism are all employed for the denotation of a new social-historical structure. The historical positioning of these concepts must also “be grounded on the *capabilities* [my italics] of the given society.”³¹ However, seen from the point of view of totality, industrial societies are built upon a fundamental contradiction: the need for refusal and subversion was no longer embodied in the action of effective social forces. For Marcuse, this paradoxical fusion, -a central theme of the book- was indicative enough for the need to employ new conceptual tools of critique.

29 Ibid., 188.

30 Ibid., xx-xxi.

31 Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, xlvii.

Marcuse had first to recognize that up to a certain extent, the ability for theoretical abstraction is premised upon the fact that a specific social totality is already formed. As a crystalized social structure, reified as it is, it must also be capable of turning theoretical reason into social practice. It reflects, therefore, a new rationality in its own right.³² Hence there must be in every society a certain point where theory and practice are integrated, constituting observable realities in spite of their contradicting nature. Next, Marcuse inquired into the historical nature of his society, pointed its differences with the pre-technological model³³ and questioned its political significance. Through this dialectical course, he was able to expand the scope of analysis into the ideological function of the new technological rationality. I think that Marcuse's nuanced holism made possible the exploration of the political significance of modern technology, the latter conceived not as the mere sum of technical capabilities but mostly "subjectively", as a way of thinking and acting, as a dominant social norm or as a legitimizing rationality.

Once again, positivism, along with formal logic has been Marcuse's target of criticism, this time from a significantly different social paradigm. The transformation consisted in the pervasive power of one-dimensionality: the neutralization of political opposition³⁴ and social contradictions, the adoration of facts (at the expense of values)³⁵ and the democratization of totalitarianism.³⁶ Nonetheless Marcuse did not disregard the liberating aspect in the advancement of productive forces. As he notes in *Eros and Civilization*: "Technology operates against the oppressive utilization of energy in so far as it minimizes the time necessary for the production of the necessities of life, thus saving time for the development of needs

32 See *ibid.*, 146.

33 In this stage however, freedom meant liberation from the toil entailed in individual and social reproduction, a "necessity" that according to Marcuse can be still active insofar as the "truth" of human existence is prevented by enslavement (*ibid.*, 128).

34 Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 20-1.

35 *Ibid.*, 147.

36 *Ibid.*, 52.

beyond the realm of necessity..."³⁷

However, the dominant rationality of this advancement culminated in the social ingression of technology's scientific neutrality, by whose ideological "objectiveness" the available spaces of negation were considerably restricted. This is, in a sense, a political move and not an ontological propensity to expansion. It is through the political use of technological means that scientific rationality has become a social paradigm. This fusion of society with techno-science is not however harmonic. Andrew Feenberg argues very convincingly I think, that the play of social contradictions differs significantly between science and technology, insofar as science, interacts only *indirectly* - unlike technology - with the "life-world". In Feenberg's view, this discrimination may prove useful in responding to conservative objections, according to which the critical theory of technology sacrifices scientific freedom, throwing thus the baby with the bath water. Feenberg proposes a distinction between a non-teleological critique of science and a teleological critique of technology, in an attempt to safeguard the latter from holistic, undialectical ontologies.³⁸ It is true that Marcuse never discriminated systematically between science and technology. Both share of course similar forms of rationality. But he had no illusions as to the main opponents of the political critique of technological (rather than scientific) rationality. He worried not so much for the unattainable scientific purity of technological knowledge as with the historical conditionality of its exploitation. Enraptured by the demand for positive knowledge, advanced technological society reified in Marcuse's view the faculties of rational abstraction to the point of de-historicizing their conclusions.

37 Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (London: Sphere Books, 1969), 84. Marcuse immediately notes that in spite of its liberating operation, technological civilization had to "defend itself against the specter of a world which could be free" (Ibid., 85). This echoes Adorno and Horkheimer's well-known view of an *Enlightenment* turned against itself. I shall touch upon this discussion very briefly emphasizing Marcuse's differentiation.

38 See Feenberg, Andrew, *Transforming Technology. A Critical Theory Revisited*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002, 174-75.

In order to prevent an overextended relativisation of critique in the historical viewpoint, which would be a disaster for a dialectical approach that distinguishes between continuation and eruption, Marcuse had to call back the option of unifying theory with praxis, rational abstraction with political action. Of course, Marcuse did not advocate a linear connection, whereby knowledge is imported to social action from the outside. He supported instead a conception of the acting subject as the *object* of this knowledge and thereby a capable bearer and component of this knowledge. Far from conceptualizing socio-political action as an unmediated, fixed product of ideologically sanitized knowledge (transmitted to an alienated populace), Marcuse maintained the idea of integral praxis, conceived as an action integrated with the objective contradictions of advanced, capitalist societies. His fundamental problem was to turn the critique of social contradictions into principled action, bringing thus true negation back to its feet. Marcuse's aspiration would be severely compromised if the dualisms of facts and values or between theory and practice, society and science are taken as absolute, for there would be no objective point of view left to account for actual conditions of domination, whichever their historical form or level of brutality.

The path that leads from the rational understanding of social conditions of domination to a superseding action would be blocked, once these particular conditions are rationalized as autonomous, and henceforth theoretically detached aspects in relation to an overwhelming structure. The relation becomes then very spurious. In Marcuse's words, "the insanity of the whole absolves the particular insanities and turns the crimes against humanity into a rational enterprise...the annihilation of five million people is preferable to that of ten million..."³⁹ The rationalization of domination is effectuated through its dispersion in semi-autonomous segments that are deemed inevitable, however manageable

39 Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 52. Marcuse wrote of course in the Cold War era. But issues of mass impoverishment and toil, not to exclude mass physical annihilation - with various means and in a relatively short timescale - are evidently not eliminated.

and legitimized. In many instances of *One-Dimensional Man* domination appears as the ultimate referent of capitalist society.

This all-powerfulness of the capitalist “whole” has attracted much criticism, of course not confined to Marcuse alone. One of the points made was that instrumental rationality was not very successful in its all-absorbing function. With regard to Marcuse’s own theory in *One-Dimensional Man*, Douglas Kellner argued for example that Marcuse’s treatment of the structuring power of capitalism led, to its own detriment, to the limitation of the importance of contradictions and struggles between the state, economy and culture. Marcuse’s theory thus failed to take account of the fact that the expanding function of social control is in large part capitalism’s defensive manoeuvre against the offensives of social struggles and crisis tendencies.⁴⁰ In a broader tone and targeting the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Habermas questioned the extent to which instrumental reason has actually permeated the world. Insofar as the process of enlightenment lays claim to reason only in the form of a purposive-rational mastery of nature and of humans, reason itself is mutilated. For Habermas there are, however, healthier spheres of reason, in science, law, morality and aesthetics that are not dominated by the positivistic “assimilation of validity claims to power claims”.⁴¹ But when the Enlightenment itself comes under “suspicion of not producing anymore truths”⁴², the above spheres are also mutilated.

Earlier, in his now classical study on the ideological character of technology and science Habermas pointed to an essential antinomy in Marcuse’s view of technological rationality. On the one hand technological rationality has a liberating function with respect to the realm of necessity and on the other it is an instrument of domination. Habermas’ objection concentrated on the second function, reading in Marcuse’s theory the ro-

40 See Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1984), 273.

41 Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994), 110-13.

42 *Ibid.*, p.116. Habermas refers here to ideology critique, not as another theory among others, but as a critique of power relations.

mantic theme taken from Husserl and especially Heidegger, that the immanent logos of technology is one of domination, of rational control over nature and humanity.⁴³ Habermas dramatized this point even further, seeing for example in Marcuse's upholding to the intrinsic non-neutrality of techno-science, an unrealistic critique, an unfeasible "world project" on the creation of a "different science", based in different social organizations and different modes of thinking. For Habermas this amounts to a familiar attitude in Jewish and Protestant tradition on the "resurrection of the fallen nature".⁴⁴

It seems however that in his rather harsh critique, Habermas undervalued Marcuse's primary goal to retain the dialectical core of a critique of domination by means of a revision: the blunt totalitarianisms of the 30's and 40's had given their place to the overwhelming dominance of technological civilization. In the latter, Marcuse knows too well, human suffering has been alleviated by the welfare state and a higher standard of living, while freedom was significantly served by the democratization of political institutions – at least in advanced industrial and for that matter, "post-industrial" societies. Marcuse rarely considered this positive development as pure illusion. He preferred to place it in one of the poles of a fundamental contradiction, which, considering its dialectical essence is the characteristic mark of the new society. Habermas had in fact shared a similar positive evaluation of the conquests of modern technology and democratic governing. In this light he attempted to substitute the critique of ideology and domination with the critique of obstructed communication, a project that purported to offer an updated ground of critique, in which concepts such as relations of domination or the contradiction between forces and relations of production were no longer beneficial.

To the plausible accusation of a holistic ontological determinism on Marcuse's part, one must simply reply by turning to Marcuse's main en-

43 See Jürgen Habermas, "Technology and Science as Ideology" in *Toward a Rational Society. Student Protest, Science and Politics*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (London: Polity Press, 1989), 85.

44 *Ibid.*, 86.

emies at that time. To be sure, Marcuse himself struggled in many of his later writings with the utopian element contained in the demand for a structural radicalization of individuals and societies and many times over he defended a non-reductionist interpretation of capitalism. Instead of isolating the qualitative differences between spheres of rationality (technological, economic or political) Marcuse incorporated these spheres into a determining social tendency without endangering their autonomy. For example, neither instrumental rationality, nor abstract ethics can by themselves address the complexity of freedom and of its historical possibilities. There is indeed no point in proceeding with logical abstractions from the appearances of immediacy without an interest towards the possibility of freedom. Rationality may contain in itself a liberating value, and it may simply be employed for such purposes (and of course against them). Both cases are immanently political.

This is perhaps the reason for Marcuse's reluctance to de-politicize the concept of domination in front of more essential powers, such as the naturalization of economic relations or of relations of alienation. Very roughly, Marcuse's political orientation is built upon three definitional regions: social contradictions, political power and freedom. The endemic to capitalism contradictions of the realization of freedom through affluence or of the "welfare state" through "warfare state", are not ontological postulates (turning for example enlightenment into myth) but specific political conditions that safeguard a systemic rationality against its historical potential. They are rational but no less un-dialectical. Freedom is thus attained, but only at the expense of its dialectical essence. Nonetheless partial freedom may be a very conscious and informed action. Marcuse hinted quite often at this consensus, a kind of social pact based on voluntary serfdom. But what is decisive for the establishment of a specific power nexus within capitalist societies is a process of political *de-subjectification*, trapped as it were, in the immediacy of pertinent facts.

In many of Marcuse's major works (especially in *Eros and Civilization* and in *One-Dimensional Man*), *de-subjectification* amounts to the expulsion of the individual from history of which it is itself the author. The in-

dividual is also exiled from the particular society of which it is an active part. However, opposite to the liberal axiom on the repression of individual freedom by society, Marcuse in an almost Rousseaudian fashion argued for the possibility of substituting a heteronomous condition of *inner-freedom* for an autonomous social existence. The critique of one-dimensionality can henceforth be also understood as a demystification of individuation processes in affluent societies.

Back in 1936 in his essay on authority (in the chapter on Luther and Calvin), Marcuse had already contested the breach in the relationship between “worldly” and inner freedom. In the reformed Christian faith of the 16th and 17th century Europe, esoteric freedom ought never to be turned - Marcuse quotes Luther - to “something completely of the flesh”.⁴⁵ The breach is of course managed and controlled in the amalgamation of the two types of freedom in which esoteric freedom leaves the social world undisputed and becomes therefore essential to the latter’s preservation. For Marcuse, the critical task would then be the breaking of this self-contradictory unity in a movement of an *equal* power, one however that surpasses the immediacy of social domination and aggression, entwined as they are, with the actualization of freedom. Marcuse’s words are blunt enough: “The ‘holism’ which has become reality must be met with a ‘holist’ critique of this reality.”⁴⁶

It is from this viewpoint that Marcuse assessed totalitarianism in its typical fascist expression. And it is from a similar philosophical predisposition that he was able to align the critique of positivism with a contextually Marxist critique of alienation and domination. The destruction of the point of view of totality that Lukács feared it to be a disruption of the unity of theory and practice⁴⁷ is to a despaired Marcuse the obliteration of social *opposition*, depicted on the one hand in the integration of the working classes to the established social order (including the concom-

45 Herbert Marcuse, “A Study on Authority” in *Studies in Critical Philosophy*, 62.

46 Marcuse, “Karl Popper and the Problem of Historical Laws”, 208.

47 See Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 39.

itant neutralization of a large part of institutional politics) and on the other, in the actual political defeat of Marxist political parties in favour of an overarching political existentialism.

Totalitarianism and Liberalism

In his 1954 epilogue to *Reason and Revolution* Marcuse writes: "The defeat of Fascism and National Socialism has not arrested the trend towards totalitarianism."⁴⁸ We can agree with him that in late industrial civilization, the development of human potentialities and the realization of freedom still take place within a framework of a socially expanding domination. Marcuse knows of course that this framework cannot be adequately refuted on ethical grounds. A simplified critique of brute force or of conditions of actual impoverishment is obviously inspired by ethical goals but it is not necessarily political. Equally, various social advancements such as the rise of living standards, or mass participation in parliamentary democracies do not adequately address the question of freedom. The problem is fairly deeper and he poses it in the following way: "If the contradictory, oppositional, negative power of Reason is broken, reality moves under its own positive law and, unhampered by the Spirit, unfolds its repressive force."⁴⁹ Marcuse points at various indicators of this condition that bring to mind some basic themes raised in the once popular discourse on globalization: homogenization of values (and hence repression of individual freedom), concentration of economic power and the retreat of confrontational politics. Nonetheless it is quite difficult to identify, *sensu stricto*, current political reality with totalitarianism.

While traditional totalitarianism (until the dictatorships of the 70s) was more irrationalist, reversing some critical edges of romanticism, yet within a functionalist state apparatus, advanced totalitarianism appears to be simply neutral and moderately rational. An overpowered, oppressive state is not anymore the issue. For some, this is already a serious gain that must be treasured. But how can one be confronted with ad-

48 Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, 433.

49 *Ibid.*, 434.

vanced forms of totalitarian control that originate in territories outside a conventional state dominance? And how can the modern state reclaim its lost jurisdiction without resorting to authoritarian practices? Which are, in other words, the social preconditions of the totalitarian state?

As early as it may seem, Marcuse touches upon these questions in 1934, in his essay on liberalism and the totalitarian view of the state. In this essay Marcuse links totalitarianism with liberalism, a view later shared and discussed by many members of the School. I think that liberalism's exclaimed concerns for today's authoritarian tendencies can be disputed with the aid of some basic tenets of Marcuse's argument that still inform a critique of advanced totalitarianism. For Marcuse, it is clear that liberal societies are not essentially threatened by established totalitarianism, much less by lighter versions of it, in current tendencies or trends. The liberal ideal of freedom can easily be "repressed" in states of emergency but the blunt identification of individual freedom with private property and economic antagonism continues to shape the social structure of both liberalism and totalitarianism. Marcuse refers to a variety of political experiences: liberalism was not entirely hostile to an oppressive state, it has never really been pacifying and has acceded to many state interventions in the economy. These experiences alone do not coincide with a superficial and a-historical critique of liberalism: the attack on parliamentarianism and the party system, along with a vague critique of egotistic individualism and private interests (as against the interests of the nation) did not essentially alter the social and economic structure of liberalism. All this had its ideological foundations, which sought to offer an apology for the irrationality of the situation. Marcuse questioned the apologetic functionalization of two philosophical currents: naturalism and existentialism.

For its part, irrationalist naturalism is blamed for reducing human history to the history of eternal natural laws. Nature is presented as concrete identity, it is beyond and "before" individuals and as such it can only be actualized in a totality: of the nation, the people, and the race. In this kind of naturalism history is reduced to a chronology of events, to a

timeless sequence of an unfolding sameness. The new reality of National Socialism represents for Marcuse an unreflective totality of fixed *axioms*. Totality is no longer the conclusion but the axiom.⁵⁰ Existentialism, in its political rather than philosophical facet is also suspected by Marcuse of reducing social reality to the facticity of a political organization, which is supposed to actualize the abstractions of heritage, race and community (in distinction to other communities, cultures and so on). This subjugation of social life to an existential *friend and foe* relation may appear at the surface as the outcome of a political restructuring that was deemed “necessary” (in a state of emergency). For Marcuse, there is nothing more erroneous than to substantiate the new political situation on a successful usurpation of state-power. The fascist state was above all a fascist *society*⁵¹ and this society did not appear to be in immediate opposition to its liberal parliamentary past.⁵² In this regard, current authoritarian tendencies cannot also be explained as crises of the political system alone.

Marcuse argued for the social basis of the affinity between totalitarianism and liberalism in both philosophical and political counts. First of all liberalism projects the resolution of conflicts between interests to a harmonious social unity that would emerge when things are left to follow their natural inclinations without any disturbance from the caprices of human activity. Totalitarian political thought shares with liberalism the belief that the balance between conflicting economic interests will be established in this harmonious whole.⁵³

Secondly, the rationalist foundation of liberalism sprung from a demand on the security of private economic activity, guaranteed by law but also remaining essentially unfettered. In both cases, the liberalist organization of social life is *privatized* to the degree that it is tied to the *individual* activity (however multiple) of the rational economic subject. “In the end, of course, the rationality of liberalist practice is supposed to demonstrate

50 Marcuse, “The struggle against liberalism”, 4.

51 See Marcuse’s forward to the 1968 edition of *Negations* in *Negations*, xvii.

52 See *ibid.*, xvii-xviii.

53 See Marcuse, “The struggle against liberalism”, 8.

itself in the whole and characterize the whole, but this whole itself is outside the sphere of rationalization.”⁵⁴ The rational determination of a historical society upon which individuality is to be realized is blocked by the “privatization of reason”. Social totality is thus surrendered to irrational forces: “an accidental ‘harmony’, a ‘natural balance’ ”.⁵⁵

Thirdly, the social structure of the monopolistic capitalism of that time was presented by the theory as the new classless society. As Marcuse observes: “The whole that it presents is not the unification achieved by the domination of *one* class within the framework of class society, but rather a unity that combines *all* classes, that is supposed to overcome the reality of class struggle and thus of classes themselves...A classless society, in other words, is the goal, but a classless society on the basis of and within the framework of – the existing class society”.⁵⁶ In this respect the new political reality represented no actual supersession of the social basis of the established order.⁵⁷ Class struggle was instead appropriated and neutralized by an existential anthropology in which facts (such as decisions and events) are valued in themselves irrespective of any normative content. Class struggle was thus politically diverted from its historical signification and became one *form* -among many- of supra-historical, existential relations.

No matter how hard Carl Schmitt tried to substantiate the transcendence of social and economic divisions on the political unity of society, the societal designation of the enemy-other (against which this unity is achieved) was not accordingly substantiated. Class struggle had no place in this designation, neither any rational norm and ideal that could jeopard-

54 Ibid., 11.

55 Ibid., 12.

56 Ibid., 14.

57 Of course the promise for social pacification in the interior was not met. Other members of the School such as Neumann and Horkheimer pointed on the social inequalities and economic antagonisms that continued to comprise the social structure of the National Socialist era. Neumann’s *Behemoth* is most illustrative of this. See also Max Horkheimer, “The Jews and Europe” in *Critical Theory and Society*, eds. Stephen Eric Bronner & Douglas Kellner (London & New York: Routledge, 1989), 85-6.

dize the goal for political harmony. In a sophist fashion, Schmitt's political existentialism succumbed to the relativism of charisma, where only those "in charge" are to define in a more or less successful way what is right and what is wrong. Marcuse asks: "What, then, remains as a possible justification? Only this: that there is a state of affairs that through its very existence and presence is exempt from all justification, i.e. an 'existential', 'ontological' state of affairs – justification by mere existence. 'Existentialism' in its political form becomes the theory of the (negative) justification of what can no longer be justified."⁵⁸ The exclusion from politics of any normative content that could lie outside the realm of positive facts ascertains the conservation of present reality.

Marcuse did not go as far as to accuse Schmitt of misconceiving liberalism. However, his short critical passage through Schmitt's political theory only reflects his broader conviction that liberalism is not just about the excessive freedom of calculation and profit. Neither did he confuse liberalism (as Schmitt did) with the disorderly democracy of a split political society, an anathema since Plato's *Republic*. Marcuse was convinced in other words that from their inception, liberal ideals were essentially *political*, even at their most fierce confrontation with state power. The relation between freedom and obligation lies at the heart of the liberal conception of the state. The primary cell of this relation is the individual. But the de-privatization and politicization of existence promised by the totalitarian state was not the actualization of a structured polis within which individual freedom was eventually served.⁵⁹ Marcuse hints at the "immemorial" questions of political philosophy, those concerning the type of community to which individuals are bound, as well as those concerning the type of individuals that are to realize their autonomy in a rational organization of society. In this political anthropology Marcuse hoped to demarcate the ontological postulates of the political from the anti-individualist currents of his time. As he writes: "...Nor can totally delivering over the individual to the state that factually exists at a given

58 Marcuse, "The struggle against liberalism", 21.

59 See *ibid.*, 27-28.

moment be demanded merely on the grounds that man is 'ontologically' a political being or that political relationships are 'existential'. Unless it is to annihilate human freedom rather than to fulfill it, the political obligation of freedom can be only the free practice of the individual himself."⁶⁰

Marcuse never explicitly opposed the liberal notion of individuality with an abstract anti-liberalism. What he actually did, was to elucidate the political directions that a specific social functioning of individual freedom might take. He was thus not content with the mere dissociation of totalitarianism from liberalism on the grounds that the first is more irrational or oppressive than the second, or on the grounds that the first immobilizes the institutions of public deliberation previously realized by the second. At the core of both social systems lies a *contradictory* perception of the individual, which is on the one hand obsessed with profit and rational control and on the other suffocates as a member of the oppressed classes or as a monad in a homogenized social totality. If both ends are at least analogous, Marcuse's evaluation can go deep enough into the occulted contradiction between free competition (of individuals and armies of devotees) and democratic institutions, and argue that the relativity and "openness" involved in modern processes of political deliberation and decision is essentially un-dialectical. It is not sufficient in other words to oppose abstract or total truths to instituted pluralism. If the "dialectics" of discourses on pluralism, transparency and openness do not address the sources of the above contradiction, they inevitably lose their critical function and become susceptible to populist or existentialist criticism. Indeed, it involves less risk to reproach modern democracies for the "ineffectiveness" of their political systems - which leads unreservedly to authoritarian or business-like alternatives - than to critically unveil the advantages of existing social and political formations, or of knowledge and technological progress. To Marcuse's mind, these advantages can be exploited for the benefit of primary goals: the satisfaction of existential needs and the abolition of alienated labour.⁶¹

60 Ibid., 28.

61 See Herbert Marcuse, "Epilogue to Marx's 18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon"

Epilogue

The totalitarian possibility lurks where the political conditions available for the actualization of the liberating aspects of current social reality are nulled under the pressure of a specific class structure. In his epilogue to the 1963 English translation of Marx's *18th Brumaire of Louis Napoleon* Marcuse notices Marx's attention to the contradiction between "the political form and the social content of the rule of the bourgeoisie"⁶². Louis-Napoléon's coup d'état in 1851 marked not just the restoration of imperial France in the concentration of political power. The new authoritarianism was in Marx's analysis the expression of a fundamental division between the socio-economic interests of a social class and the established mechanisms for procuring social and political rights. Marcuse emphasizes the ideological function of the latter, in which bourgeois interests are presented as the general interests of society. With this familiar ideological abstraction, social divisions tend to diminish in front of the immediacy of "existential" policies. But even in more peaceful times, internal inequalities often become secondary with respect to various cries for political stability and social cohesion. Since Hobbes, a crucial argument reappears: the concentration of power makes administration swift and effective. However, none of this functionality would be legitimized, or be at all possible without mass mobilization. Seen as the final externalization of inner freedom, mass democracy temporalizes liberty and equality and thereby abandons the transcending effort. As Marcuse observes: "The evolving capitalist society must increasingly reckon with the masses, fit them into some condition of economic and political normalcy...The authoritarian state requires the democratic mass-base."⁶³

in *Marxism, Revolution and Utopia. Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, Vol.6, eds. Douglas Kellner and Clayton Pierce, (London and New York: Routledge, 2014), 121.

62 Ibid., 118.

63 Ibid.

Marcuse's line of thought reveals here the following paradox: while the generalization of freedom is threatening to the established order it can also perform a legitimizing function, if reduced to a mere mass-democracy. To be sure, the latter has today progressed into an aggregate of multiple forms of "scientific" and political rationality. But to lose sight of the totality by which these forms appear in unity as a cluster of particular social or class interests, is to diminish the question of freedom into the particular rule of one social class. The legitimizing power of the majority principle technically sidesteps this problem with various constitutional or normative means, ready to be exercised for the "strengthening" of executives. Yet this is still a major technicality. In the *18th Brumaire* Marx unearths the actual content of Louis Bonaparte's battle with the French National Assembly. Before the final dissolution of the latter, the executive power had already "enmeshed and controlled" all possible manifestations of civil society (to which parliament is to submit), from the most public to the most private ones, making thus the National Assembly redundant.⁶⁴ For Marx, this political pre-establishment of class despotism amputated the "independent organs of social movement". The political interests of the bourgeoisie were in fact interwoven with the excessive state as they have been with civil society institutions: "Thus the French Bourgeoisie was compelled by its class position to annihilate, on the one hand, the vital conditions of all parliamentary power, and therefore, likewise, of its own, and to render irresistible, on the other hand, the executive power hostile to it."⁶⁵

As the above point suggested (in some functionalist interpretations of Marx's work) the essence of the liberal state is reflected in its instrumentality even if the bourgeoisie finally contradicts its ideology and attacks its institutions in times of crisis. This renowned argument (of the state as superstructure or instrument) has been critically discussed in Marxist political theory from Gramsci to Althusser and Poulantzas. Marcuse's

64 See Marx, Karl, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1984), 53.

65 *Ibid.*

appropriation of Marx's political thought developed, however, on a rather different terrain. Instead of focusing directly on a Marxist theory of the state, Marcuse, as well as Horkheimer and Adorno examined the political effects of the social dynamics of their epoch. Marcuse's distinctive approach was to proceed with an anthropological dialectic that led him directly to the content of political relations of domination (other than those of power-politics). For Marcuse, social conditions of alienation and domination made all the important difference with respect to an "outdated" power of authoritarian rule. There are two paths that follow from this. One is to read Marcuse's political thought substantively: contextualizing the specific characteristics of modern capitalist societies and re-connecting them with Marxist political theory. The other is to take his sociological orientations more literally and put him in a discussion with authors such as the later Poulantzas or Foucault.

Whichever the choice, I think that Marcuse's political thought is open to a contemporary assessment either as a substantive theory of political action or as a critical social philosophy. Both options were in a sense reflected in the social movements of the New Left in the 60s and 70s. There is no reason why they should cease to complement class-centered, as well as structural critiques of modern capitalist societies. To put it briefly, Marcuse's dialectical anthropology widened the historical horizon of capitalism allowing thus a clearer view of its fundamental modifications. It has also created a theoretical space for a deeper understanding of the perseverance of capitalist contradictions and their political management. In this comprehensive point of view, certain or more particular domains of a political philosophy *proper* are inevitably left unexamined. It would be more appropriate to assume that -given the thesis on the integration of the working classes - old theoretical problems such as the distinction between democracy and representation involved in Marcuse's thought the political radicalization of social movements, whose actions entailed something more than a competition for office or a protection of particular rights. The break with the "naturalistic" determinism of modern capitalism was for Marcuse an essential precondition for the re-embodiment

of the political moment in the fundamental contradictions of capitalist societies.

It is in this light that one can read positivist thought politically. Part 1 attempted a brief sketch of this reading by emphasizing Marcuse's major objections to positivism: the immunization of knowledge from external interferences and the subsequent injustice done to the contradictory character of objective and determinable social conditions. The critique of alienation was developed (not only in Marcuse's work) precisely upon the need to address this injustice and to emphasize the schismatic nature (appropriation through separation, freedom through repression), of a negative reality, one of the most important reproductive elements of capitalist social totality. The category of totality serves here a double purpose. On the one hand it is a critical tool that relates particular phenomena to the whole, which is precisely the foundation, and to a certain extent the cause of these phenomena and on the other hand, Marcuse's use of the concept of freedom (a "bourgeois" concept according to Adorno) was such that it resisted the idea of an external totality, either as an absolutist state or as capitalist society dominating its individual components. In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse's most structuralist work where the second purpose is the strongest, technology is presented as primarily conditional on historical contingency in lieu of its enslavement on the "naturalness" of things.

Part 2 reflected upon some critical discussions on the issue of holism, as implied at least by Marcuse's treatment of the technological structure of affluent society. Between the two main vulnerabilities of the concept of totality, namely ontological abstraction and political totalization, Marcuse definitely renounces the second, while the first is perhaps admitted in the background, something that in my view is not necessarily an active remainder of Heidegger's aura. His critical disposition however towards the social-historical structure of advanced capitalism meant that the concept of society was not in itself less tangible or analytical. As Marcuse saw it, the suppression of reason in the pervasive power of one-dimensionality was a definite fact, however coterminous with an exhaustion of

the dominant, -once revolutionary- paradigm of the separation between facts and values or between empirical and moral rationalities. But Marcuse never projected an identity between them.

Totalitarianism, in all its forms is precisely coterminous with forced and unmediated identity, namely with manipulable social uniformity and with the neutralization of contradictions. In spite of its anti-particularistic ideology, totalitarian political order never dispensed with the liberal core of industrial societies (part 3). While Marcuse initially attacked liberal political ideology, the implied interdependence between capitalism, as a social system and totalitarian state-bureaucracy soon became a major discussion-theme among members of the School.⁶⁶ Marcuse was not actively involved in this discussion and the political critique of liberalism transmuted in his writings into a social-theoretical critique. Be that as it may, Marcuse never lost sight of the negative political significance of an abstracted notion of the individual and insofar as the debate had to be transferred to this terrain, he maintained that neither the total state nor a homogenized society (not just a politically assimilated majority) met the criteria of a structured polis within which individual freedom is to be realized. Still, Marcuse's aim has been to de-privatize reason and explore the possibilities of a rational determination of society as such. Marcuse then had to juxtapose the positivist ideal of constructing society's governing laws with a more realistic ap-

66 See for example Max Horkheimer, "The Jews and Europe" in *Critical Theory and Society*, 77-94. See also Franz Neumann's 1937 essay, "The change in the function of law in modern society" in *The Democratic and the Authoritarian State*, ed. Herbert Marcuse (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1957), 22-68. In his *Dialectical Imagination*, Martin Jay provides an overall account of the Institute's preoccupations with the relations between capitalism and bureaucratic centralization. Jay distinguishes two major approaches in this discussion. One represented by Neumann, Gurland and Kirchheimer focusing mainly on major changes in legal and economic institutions and another (represented by Horkheimer and Marcuse) that shifted its focus from the economics of advanced capitalism to technological rationalization. See Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination. A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 166.

proach, for which social totality is contingently dynamic and yet a critically recognizable reality.

Both critiques of authoritarian rule, fascist and present, are just that. Purposively situated in their society, both reflected the distinctive tendencies of their epoch, but they were also developed as communicating vessels, steered by tenets that transcended a trivial or a purely normative factuality. This is not an unfounded conflation between political systems. No one can reasonably deny that in spite of their pathologies, democratic systems of governance are preferable to dictatorial regimes. And indeed, political authoritarianism today looks rather sectarian and “corrective” than totalitarian. It does not claim to have fulfilled historical destiny, representing a “revolutionary” stage, but it does lay claim to undisputed knowledge, to the capturing of facts and of political exigencies. I think that taking the risk of leaving aside, momentarily, Marcuse’s meta-politics of imagination and aesthetics, his earlier critique of positivist empiricism and political existentialism may clarify the momentum gained by current authoritarian trends. It can be argued for example that advanced authoritarianism does not stand opposite to post-modern conditions of secluded, dispersed and otherwise “transparent” modes of thinking and acting. And it finally brings to mind the older agony felt in front of the malformation of a democratic polis into anarchic despotism.

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The lively voice of Critical Theory

Berlin Journal of Critical Theory (BJCT) is a peer-reviewed journal which is published in both electronic and print formats by Xenomoi Verlag in Berlin. The goal is to focus on the critical theory of the first generation of the Frankfurt School and to extend their theories to our age. Unfortunately, it seems that most of the concerns and theories of the first generation of the Frankfurt School are neglected in its second and third generations.

We believe that the theories of the first generation of the Frankfurt School are still capable of explaining many social, cultural, and political problems of our time. However, in some cases, we need to revise those theories. For example, the culture industry in our time can also work with a different mechanism from that described by Adorno and Horkheimer. In our age, the majorities can access the media and even respond to the messages which they receive – this is something which was not possible in Adorno and Horkheimer's time. But this doesn't mean that the culture industry's domination is over. Thus, we may need to revise the theory of the culture industry to explain the new forms of cultural domination in our age.

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