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MARCUSE: AN ASSESSMENT

An Austrian Marxist considers the political world view of Herbert Marcuse in an article originally titled, Prospects for ‘Modern Industrial Society’ — the Political World Scene According to Herbert Marcuse which first appeared in Weg und Ziel (No. 10, 1967), the theoretical journal of the Austrian Communist Party.

The writings of Marcuse are not so well known in this country, but his influence on young left, particularly student, circles is growing. Since this assessment was written Marcuse has further clarified his views and qualified some of the pessimism evident in his major works. This translation is by Jack Cohen.

THE CASE OF HERBERT MARCUSE is one of the most astonishing in the intellectual history of recent times. At one time on the staff of the Frankfurt Institute of Social Research, he later emigrated to the United States where he was always rather overshadowed by his former Institute colleagues, Adorno, Horkheimer and Fromm — and now, at one fell-swoop, he has suddenly become the idol of left-wing intellectuals in England, France, Italy and Western Germany. Every year sees new editions or translations of his books (published originally in the United States of America). Many of his own particular ideas and expressions now belong to the special, privileged, “in”-language of left-wing socialist students. Since 1964, when Marcuse first paid a return visit to Germany, the German translations of his books have had an incredible and profound effect.

Marcuse — philosopher, psychologist, sociologist — a man who knows his Marx and is greatly inspired by him, attempts analyses of modern society in a Marxist spirit, which are of great political importance. This is why, deliberately limiting the discussion of the problems raised in his writings, we wish to discuss his political world view in great detail.

Modern Industrial Society

Marcuse’s point of departure is the development of modern, “industrial society”, the classical model of which is the USA. It is
as he sees it, a society in which domination over individuals is more intense than ever before; a society which grows ever larger and richer, in which technical progress has resulted in a tremendous increase in the level of efficiency and a high standard of living, and which therefore restricts and subdues all opposition forces. Basically it is a society without opposition, which rests on an alliance of the business world with a working class interested in the maintenance of the status quo. All needs and freedoms are manipulated by the mass media, the opinion-forming factories.

The various parties and newspapers simply extol, in various keys, the virtues of a system which has transformed democratic advances into instruments of domination. The artificially stimulated needs of the different classes are not essentially different. The same lipstick and the same TV programmes suit the families of both bosses and workers and in such a system the revolutionary potentialities of the working class fade away more and more.

The triad of a mighty apparatus of production, highly developed services and totalitarian opinion-forming factories makes the whole system work. A system in which former personal dependence is replaced by dependence on an “objective order,” or the industrialised society, one in which above all, the employers are interested in government contracts and government intervention. Since in any case the direction of enterprises is increasingly delegated to managers, Technology emerges as a new form of rule and domination and the working class is oppressed above all by the technical apparatus which “produces the amenities of life and increases labour productivity”.

It is technique above all which instrumentalises men, which operates as the “vehicle of objectification” and which appears more and more in the guise of management — as more and more consumers’ goods are produced, so does the power of the bureaucracy increase. The effects of automation, which turns the worker more and more into a technician and which makes it impossible any longer to measure the degree of exploitation of the individual worker, the significance of “psychological energy” as opposed to physical energy, round off the features of modern industrial society.

Since increased living standards are unavoidable in this manipulated industrial society, the decreasing role of the oppositional forces is likewise an objective process. The working class is integrated in the welfare state, not simply a minority — the labor aristocracy — but, by and large, the whole class. The trade union leaderships are corrupted. They collaborate with the capitalists in joint Lobbies. The working class ceases to be an historical subject of the revolution. Those who are in opposition to modern industrial
society consist solely of the outsiders of society, the racially oppressed minorities, and those rejected types who have been called "white negroes" by Norman Mailer.

West and East equated

Marcuse takes the situation in the USA as his starting point and there is little in his analyses which we have not already encountered in the writing of C. Wright Mills, Vance Packard and Paul Baran. A characteristic feature of Marcuse's analysis is a certain vagueness in his description of the "technical society". He draws attention now and again to its class foundation but on the other hand, he declares this to be not simply a development inevitable in the capitalist countries of Western Europe, but also in the Socialist countries. This equalisation of East and West (Marcuse adopts, inter alia, the curious standpoint that democracy must advance in the socialist countries because of the place of technical control in modern industrialised society) is, occasionally interspersed with emphasis on the capitalist, class character of modern industrial society. Indeed towards the end of his book — *One Dimensional Man* (Routledge and Kegan Paul), Marcuse takes issue with many marxists, accusing them of having made a myth out of technique, of having underestimated the dependence of technique on extra-technical factors, a charge with which marxist readers are confronted continually as they read his books.

This is not the only woolly side of the always brilliant but frequently quite abstract presentation. What is also lacking is a concrete analysis of how the modern development of capitalism in the USA in all its aspects, is that towards which the advanced countries of Western Europe are proceeding. Many forms of modern capitalism and of state monopoly capitalism (nationalised sectors, state regulation) are much more pronounced in the capitalist countries of Western Europe than in the USA, a fact which is naturally of no mean importance with regard to the problems facing the Labor movement, which, in any case, has different traditions, has assumed different forms and, in the last analysis, has different kinds of trade unions in Western Europe than in the USA.

One-dimensional thought

One of Marcuse's fundamental ideas is that modern industrial society is a one-dimensional society with a one-dimensional consciousness and a one-dimensional way of life, one-dimensional thought and behaviour, including political behaviour, for the present differences and shades of opinion are merely "alternative techniques of manipulation and control". People have an irrational-rationality, a false consciousness imposed on them which is an acceptable kind of consciousness for the majority.
Only an elite feels fear, disgust and frustration, sensations, which can also be utilised for fascist ends. Language itself fixes and stabilises the meaning of words in the interests of the system, fixes the thought processes and decisions.

Transformed by the mass media, words become cliches and dominate language, both written and oral. People speak in the language of the advertisement, repeat what they are told by the opinion-forming factories. Ideas are ritualised and constitute the framework of the logic of a society which can permit itself to dispense with logic. Language becomes authoritarian because the means of communication have a quite hypnotic character and utilise language as an instrument of control. The language of politics is simply advertisement and the freedom of speech and thought guaranteed by constitutions do not in the least prevent the bringing of “one-dimensional man” into line (Gleichschaltung), the man whose free time is not really free because it is dominated by the mass media.

Two-dimensional culture which might project itself beyond the existing social system, “transcend” it, is incorporated into the established order. Sociology bases itself on detailed social research, reduces classes to groups and sections. Its empiricism is the ideology of one-dimensional society. One-dimensional philosophy abandons the conflict between essence and appearance in positivist fashion. Its one-dimensional analysis refrains from discussing the background of philosophical concepts; it is a self-sufficient, integrated part of the one-dimensional world. Cultural dimensions are likewise undermined. Literature and art no longer reflect agonised consciousness of a divided world. Art, robbed of its substance, is absorbed into the one-dimensional world in the same way. All conceivable alternatives become integrated into and essential elements of, one-dimensional society.

Marcuse’s gruesome picture of the “co-ordination” (Gleichschaltung) of thought, although often open to discussion and disagreement in places, nevertheless possesses a fascinating power.

Repressive tolerance

The decisive means for containing all alternatives is “Repressive Tolerance” which is “firmly rooted in the increasing satisfaction of needs as well as in technological and intellectual “Gleichschaltung”, which contribute to the general ineffectiveness of radical groups in a well-adjusted society” (Critique of Pure Tolerance — German edition, p. 105). Past democratic freedoms have lost their content. In view of the manipulation of people, general tolerance simply involves deception, on an even greater scale, especially as it is limited in any case by “institutional inequality”. This is one
of the few passages in which Marcuse's ruthless critique of bourgeois democracy is linked with an appreciation of its class basis.

The only attitude to this fraudulent repressive tolerance which integrates all alternatives, is one of total rejection and negation. Whoever accepts the rules of the game is integrated. It is on this basis that Marcuse accuses the great Communist Parties of France and Italy of being "doctors at the bedside of capitalism" (Praxis, Zagreb, 1965), the self-same capitalism whose rosy cheeks and robust bearing are vividly described by Marcuse himself. The organisation of demonstrations and all other forms of protest are really only an alibi for enslavement if they are organised within the framework of the system; if, for example, they are undertaken by a working class which has ceased to be a Factor and Subject of Revolution. The realisation of real tolerance must involve intolerance towards the dominant practices which tolerate conditions which one should not tolerate on any account. There must be no toleration for propagating rearmament, chauvinism, racism. The fight for real tolerance demands intolerance with regard to the militarisation of science.

It demands a "reversal of trends" which, in certain circumstances, may have to be achieved by undemocratic methods since, in the last analysis, all societies rest on force. It is necessary to achieve a form of living in which individuals are autonomous, in which maximum satisfaction of the most important needs can be secured on the basis of the minimum amount of labour and injustice.

Naive?

All this sounds really good and radical, but it is fairly abstract, especially as the radical terminology emanates from a position of weakness, hopelessness and pessimism which do not simply arise from the actual problems of modern capitalism but also from the aloofness, naivety and lack of understanding with which Marcuse approaches political problems. Boycott the rules of the game of a fraudulent democracy? — Splendid. But when attempts are made to abolish the rules of the game themselves and there are reactionary groupings seeking to do away with formal tolerance itself, what should be the attitudes of the revolutionary forces? Marcuse himself says in one passage that this "totalitarian democracy" is better than a dictatorship which destroys all past achievements. Good, then these achievements must be defended against fascist, pro-fascist, or reactionary assaults; but one is then accepting the existing rule of the game and, according to Marcuse, one then becomes integrated into the system of repressive tolerance. The problem of the defence of existing gains, of the fight for their extension, is infinitely more complicated than the way Marcuse describes them in his grandiose formulations. As a consequence,
Marcuse's theses concerning "the reversal of trends", the necessity ultimately to use force against the system, the obligation to confront intolerance with intolerance, etc. dazzle rather than enlighten because they do not base themselves on concrete facts but on naive and beautiful images.

Marcuse says that the democratic freedoms of the past have lost their content and that new freedoms are necessary. Unfortunately, although one looks vainly for an answer to the questions — "what kind of freedoms and how are they to be won?", one may find the assertion that even participation by the workers in the control of the factories would involve no real change as long as the working class is a basis of support for the regime. But this kind of statement hardly helps to solve the difficult problems connected with the fight to secure joint participation and consultation by workers in the factories. Here we are really at grips with new freedoms which go beyond the system of "Repressive Tolerance". And those who understand their Lenin will also know that one cannot accept the idea that this struggle is useless as long as the working class is not ready to change the social structure. What is necessary is to develop the consciousness of the workers precisely during the course of the struggle for realisable demands, to utilise "lightning flashes" in the consciousness of the workers, as Lenin calls them, in order to inject knowledge of important connections and necessities.

This example of Marcuse's ideas is of course not really important, since, as he is obviously dominated by the situation in the USA, he has no real hope that the working class will make any worthwhile contribution to the overthrow of the fraudulent system.

**Hope in hopelessness**

Marcuse regards this overthrow as absolutely essential. The equalisation of East and West is only occasional and the critique of modern industrial society develops unequivocally into a critique of modern capitalism, as can be seen in this passage: "... the increasing irrationality of the whole; waste and restriction of productivity; the need for aggressive expansion; the constant threat of war; intensified exploitation; dehumanisation". (*One-Dimensional Man*, p. 252). And the alternative to all this is a socialist one even though, in general, Marcuse tends to avoid using the term — "existence in free time on the basis of fulfilled vital needs" (p.231); "... the planned utilisation of resources for the satisfaction of vital needs with the minimum of toil, the transformation of leisure into free time, the pacification of the struggle for existence" (pp.252-253).

And, adds Marcuse, this transformation consists in the reasonable organisation of the realm of necessity, in liberating technique from
its exploitative features, in eliminating and diminishing step by step, power as the fundamental motive, in transforming the masses into a host of individuals and, as a result of a new definition of needs (how blessed it would be, sighs Marcuse, if we could only do away with advertisements and television) re-establish the right of privacy, the decisive basis of which is the social-control of production and distribution.

Without going into details, it is the necessity for a socialist alternative which is emphasised by Marcuse. And he becomes more explicit when he speaks of those shining hours in the history of humanity when brief explosions shattered the continuity of injustice and cruelty. Marcuse cites as examples, after the English and French bourgeois revolutions — the Chinese and Cuban revolutions (it is typical of his approach that he never even mentions the October Revolution). In addition, Marcuse does not hesitate to speak of the possibility of developing resistance to the point of overthrowing the system of repressive tolerance by force where legal means prove to be inadequate, and he has great fun attacking those who advocate non-violent ways, although it has to be said that Marcuse's own statements about the possibility of using force are general in the extreme.

The forces of opposition

But all this is closely connected with Marcuse's ideas about the forces which embody "real consciousness as against the irrationality which exists" and the hope for a necessary historical alternative within the pervading hopelessness. These ideas bear the indelible stamp of the situation in the USA, nevertheless Marcuse regards them as valid for all advanced capitalist countries.

We have already mentioned the fact that Marcuse no longer regards the working class as a Factor and Subject of the Revolution. Only when it attains consciousness of the irrationality of existing society and of the deceptiveness of repressive tolerance, can it become an element of negating practice. He has his doubts about the possibility of this happening. The only chance he sees are the eventual struggles by the workers against the effects of automation, that is, struggles against the advance of technology, an advance which he himself says is the foundation for domination in modern industrial society. For him, the potentially real, revolutionary forces are above all, those strata "which constitute the human basis of the pyramid, the outsiders and the poor, the unemployed and the unemployable, the persecuted colored races, the inmates of prisons and madhouses". These strata stand outside the system and the rules of its game; they constitute an opposition from outside even though they still lack a revolutionary consciousness.
The revolts which took place this summer, in which white unemployed workers often fought side by side with Negroes, seem to confirm Marcuse's ideas in many respects, at least as far as the USA is concerned, even though what was significant about them was that it was precisely the Negroes living in the industrial North who led them and not those of the backward South — quite apart from the fact that these struggles did not witness that unification of the most exploited sections of humanity with those of the most advanced and critical intellectuals, which Marcuse regards as providing the great world historical opportunity.

For Marcuse attributes the leading role in "the reversal of trends" to people who have learned to think rationally and for themselves, to that small handful of intellectuals who expose the false consciousness, who, scattered and isolated in modest positions and out of the way places, pave the way for reflection and, by means of radical criticism and the discrediting of the system of repressive tolerance, create the pre-conditions for the intellectual overthrow of the system.

"Critical Theory"

The advance of freedom depends more than ever on the advance of the consciousness of freedom. Marcuse's sympathies are with the students most of all, because in politics and in sexual matters, they make it clear that they do not recognise the rules of the system, also with those scientists in the USA who refuse to work for the state or the big corporations and seek to safeguard their independence by taking inferior jobs in small towns.

"Critical theory" — this is the formula which Marcuse uses to indicate marxism especially — is re-affirmed and corroborated by the necessity for an historical alternative. It understands what is possible and what is necessary, but practice does not correspond to it. The dialectical concepts reveal themselves as hopeless because the working class lacks a correct consciousness as a basis for correct practice. The German sociologist — Habermas — wrote that correct theory finds no takers amongst the working class.

Then is the theory correct at all? And can "critical theory" content itself simply with referring to a few basic principles without being able to outline the possibility and necessity for a "reversal of trends" even on the basis of a changed situation?

Marcuse writes that the theory remains negative because it promises nothing and can point to no successes; this last point surely applies only to the advanced capitalist countries. But has everything been done in these countries to adapt the theory to these developments?
The weakest side of Marcuse’s ideas is precisely that they do not attempt to solve this question in particular and content themselves with the thought that it may perhaps be possible to change society from its outer perimeter for there are no Negroes in Western Europe.

Problems and perspectives

Marcuse raises problems which require serious discussion. His critique of the fraudulent character of bourgeois democracy is brilliant, ruthless and witty, but it contains blurred edges and unclarities because although the class basis of the “repressive tolerance” is outlined, there is hardly any mention of Big Capital or of the monopolies. One need not necessarily be acquainted with Wright-Mills’ outstanding study of the Power Elite in the USA — the merging and inter-connection of state, the economy and the army to justify the statement that it is not possible to analyse manipulation in modern, industrial society, the role of the opinion-forming factories and the control of public opinion in one-dimensional society in isolation, separate from the monopolies. The managers and technicians despite their undoubted autonomy, remain executives acting on behalf of a social stratum whose power must be limited and ended if those social aims which Marcuse himself supports, are to be realised. Deficiencies in the analysis also have the effect of making it impossible to develop a clear outline of the line of battle. This is the significance of nationalisation measures which have been won as struggle, which must go hand in hand with forms of workers’ control, for the basic fact still remains that though the social ownership of the means of production does not yet mean socialism, there can be no socialism without it.

The occasional equalisation of “modern industrial society” in the West with that in the East likewise makes it more difficult to clarify and make more precise the practice which Marcuse demands. It is incontestable that industrialisation and the gigantic development of technique create problems which need not necessarily be different in countries with different social systems. Nevertheless, the problems of democratisation, of struggle for real tolerance, the effects of automation, etc. are different in those countries where the decisive means of production have been taken away from the capitalists. One cannot content oneself with referring simply to the very serious problem of bureaucracy and use this as a magic formula, making a differentiated analysis superfluous.

New freedoms

It seems to us that it is no accident that Marcuse’s reference to the “critical theory” lacks recognition of the sharpening con-
tradictions between the social character of production and the private ownership of the means of production. But this phenomenon which, in the period of monopoly capitalism substantiates the "critical theory" absolutely, and which underlines the anachronism, senselessness and the historically outdated character of the capitalist ownership of the means of production, is of enormous significance for the whole aim of socialism. Amongst other things, it justifies a strategy directed towards the winning of workers' control and concentrating on joint participation by the workers in the factories even though large sections of the workers have not yet broken away from the false consciousness of modern industrial society.

Marcuse says that the freedoms of the past no longer suffice; we must win new ones. We have already said that one cannot renounce the freedoms of the past even though many of them have been robbed of their content to a considerable extent, otherwise one only assists the efforts of those groups whose aim is to do away with these freedoms altogether. And do not these efforts prove that despite their limited, gelded and undermined forms, these freedoms are not a matter of indifference?

But these new freedoms — in what should they consist? There is no doubt that in this regard Gramsci had a deeper insight when he said that one of the features of the inadequacy of bourgeois democracy is the fact that the citizen as producer is not much esteemed. And, in fact, this is one of the most obvious forms in which alienation is expressed, namely that the men on the shop floor — where they spend the greater part of their time and their energy — have no rights of control or of joint participation worth mentioning. The ending of this situation is a precondition for really making working men the leading force in society. The effects of automation, which are much more complicated than Marcuse imagines, only intensify these problems because automation demands higher qualifications from large numbers of workers and the necessity for a higher level of education for large sections of workers and employees.

Role of the working class

Here we come up against the thorny problem raised by Marcuse — one which he has raised before. Does the working class in general and in the advanced capitalist countries in particular, still play a progressive role? Has it not been hopelessly integrated into the system in the advanced capitalist countries? Marcuse's writings are an amalgam of different theories — those of the Chinese Communists that the village will conquer the town and that the backward countries of Asia, Africa and Latin America will play the decisive role in the conflict between capitalism and socialism; those of
Fanon, that the proletariat in the colonial and semi-colonial countries are a privileged stratum and that it is only the peasants in alliance with these sections of the lumpen-proletariat which distinguish themselves in the struggle, who can carry through the anti-colonial revolution; the strategy of the Cuban Communists expounded by Regis Debray, according to which the Revolution in Latin America must come from the hills to the towns because the towns corrupt and enfeeble the labor movement; and finally the outlook of Stokely Carmichael who proclaimed at the Havana Conference that the Negroes can expect nothing from the white workers in the capitalist countries.

Marcuse bases himself on the position in the USA and celebrates the unity of the ghettos and slums of the rich countries with the Vietnams of the "third world". We do not believe that the countries of the "third world" can renounce the solidarity of the labor movement in the capitalist countries if they are to achieve the "redistribution of wealth" demanded by Fanon. We are, nevertheless, confronted with a real problem which cannot be disposed of simply by reference to the "critical theory" — that of the function of intellectuals as the "connecting tissue of the nation" (Gramsci) especially, which has been criminally under-estimated by the labor movement for a long time. But without the backing of the working class these can be no "reversal of trends" which, as Marcuse himself says, requires the social control of production.

The outsiders of society, those rejected by the system, can certainly organise fairly large-scale revolts — but never revolution. The difficult task consists precisely in finding such slogans, solutions and aims as will lead the working people — whose numbers are constantly increasing — to higher aims, those which "transcend" the previous ones. The mere "boycott" of the system, which in practice can hardly amount to more than words, does no harm to the system. Even the "hippies" who, on occasion, refer to Marcuse, and who do not respect the rules of the game of "repressive tolerance", are regarded by those in power in the system as mere jokers whose activities cannot do any harm.

Marcuse ruthlessly attacks all ideologies which do not go beyond the system, which do not stimulate thought — about the possibility and necessity for its dissolution and which base themselves on the status quo, etc. But it seems to us that his criticism is to a certain extent unjust to a number of thinkers and to various ideas. But since his analysis of the system is not always particularly correct; since he abandons the revolutionary task of finding forms of revolutionary struggle appropriate to our time and to our world, even though he uses radical language, he can lay himself open to the accusation that his ideas and views can also be integrated, that
they do not really represent any great menace to the monopolies — especially as he hardly mentions them.

*In the philosopher's brain*

This applies at any rate to the books quoted; translations of works which were first published in the USA a few years ago.

In more recent writings, Marcuse is much more clear and precise, especially in the July issue of the *Kursbuch*, in which he says that the "chances for liberation exist primarily when the means of production are socialised. The political economy of socialist countries requires peace, not aggressive expansion". He adopted a much more concrete position, in many ways, in his otherwise not so fortunate interview with *Der Spiegel* (August 21st, 1967). In this he referred specifically to big capital even though in slightly muted form, when he described the system which needs to be overthrown as that of "the big trusts, their publicists, politicians and consumers". In the same interview, directing pungent irony at himself, he said — "the powers that be can take the fact that I can travel anywhere here and say everything I want to, because they know quite well that they have nothing to fear from the Professor". The powers that be are not quite so accommodating with other forces which aim to "transcend" them.

There remains, to be sure, the great vision of an intellectual and moral revolution — one which we also share because "modern industrial society has now reached a point where new people are not only possible but also essential". The Revolution matures in the philosopher's brain, wrote the young Marx, also in the ideas of Professor Marcuse, even though we regard some of them as inadequate and incorrect.

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