

# Marcuse's Modern Marxism: Utopia for the Twentieth Century

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*There are many utopias. No one has ever seen them except in imagination, and yet they are real enough, for they have influenced our destiny over the centuries.*

----- Alain Martineau

The socio-political philosophy of Marx and Engels emphasizes both the capacity as well as the inevitability of oppressed peoples to take up arms in a desperate effort to do away with conditions which do not correspond to their true material and psychological needs. This is the process by which the fulfillment of Marx's *species-being* may eventually become a reality --- a struggle which will annihilate those circumstances which produce a great deal of misery, ending them through conflict. As one of the most successful political theories of the twentieth century in terms of the widespread influence it has had for over a hundred years now, Marxist doctrines translated into political practices have themselves contributed toward a considerable amount of human suffering, as the examples of the Bolshevik and Khmer Rouge revolutions demonstrate. While there is a great deal of justified criticism against labeling these revolutions as being authentically Marxist, the fact remains that to a large extent, many of the violent tactical formulas which were considered justifiable by Marx and Engels have been translated and adopted by twentieth century political movements, quite often with the result that an oppressive order is exchanged for another order which in turn becomes equally oppressive.

This may be due, in part, to the fact that the tactics which Marx believed were necessary to liberate humanity and usher in utopian conditions were prescribed for the framework and social conditions of the nineteenth century Industrial Revolution in western Europe. Undoubtedly, the transition from the previous century to the present has brought with it unprecedented changes in levels of technology, economic and social conditions, political structures, environmental crises --- as well as a transformation within our individual and social consciousness themselves --- which have never before been witnessed by humanity. If Marxism is to continue to hold promise for our effort to liberate ourselves from undesirable social conditions, there is a need to adapt it so that it may address the peculiarities of the twentieth century, those which Marx himself could not have seen. Additionally, the humanist and

utopian ideals of Marx and Engels, such as freedom from bondage as well as social harmony, ought to be preserved and promoted.

The contributions of twentieth-century Marxists are invaluable to us for this reason. Through these philosophers, the insistent utopianism of Marxism may be preserved, while the analyses and prescriptions become updated and made more appropriate for our own struggles against social conditions which continue to be less than ideal, though radically different from those which plagued nineteenth century Europe.

The work of Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979), a German-born Jew who sought to place twentieth-century lenses on Marx's nineteenth century vision, is of this innovative sort. In his effort to develop a means by which humanity could usher in what Marx termed the *true human community*, Marcuse was heavily influenced by the political theories of his predecessors, such as Rousseau, Babeuf, Schiller, Fourier, *et al.* Additionally, Marcuse was also keenly aware of the need for Marxism to take into account the changes within modern society.

### Marcuse's Background

Marcuse is perhaps most notable for his work which was completed during the 1930's, while he was living in New York City and actively involved in the Frankfurt school -- a group of intellectuals who sought to revise and expand the theories of Marx. Marcuse's interest in Marxism and the structure of his own philosophy has perhaps everything to do with utopian elements in his own upbringing. Born of Jewish parents in the period of German history known as the Weimar Republic, he bore the mark of the desire to utilize human agency as a means by which to produce a better condition for living, as well as the everlasting, indelible influence of the German Social Democrats upon his political tendencies. (Martineau 7) As a result, he held firmly to the belief that not only was it possible and desirable for humans to achieve a set of ideal social conditions, but that this transformation would require not only a radical restructuring of socio-political systems, but would also depend on a transformation of mass awareness away from *false consciousness* and toward an understanding of utopian ideals.

### Marcuse's Analysis of the Twentieth Century

The failure of political revolutions to produce an ideal society despite repeated attempts far into the twentieth century prompted Marcuse to begin evaluating socialism's appropriateness and relevance to modern conditions. In particular, Marcuse had to reconcile two apparent facts: the first being the failure of scientific socialism's promise to bring about a condition of utopia, and secondly, despite the fact that Marcuse, like Marx, was outraged about the disparity in the distribution of

wealth, the modern industrialized capitalist nations had achieved levels of material comfort for many of their citizens which relegated much of the abject physical suffering seen during Marx's time to historical obscurity. Despite this ostensible improvement in the complexion of human life, social conditions and the extent of human fulfillment were still far from being ideal. To a large degree, Marcuse was able to address these miscalculations of Marxism by supplementing it with the psychological philosophy of Freud. (Manuel & Manuel 793) Thus, social conditions are to be interpreted not only upon production relations and labor needs, but also with regard to an individual's psychology and consciousness. Through this synthesis, it becomes easy to understand the inefficacy of socialist politics: Marxism could not achieve utopia without first affecting an individual's awareness, and the mere eradication of the most odious levels of poverty would not alone serve to solve the problem of human misery. Therefore, Marcuse strives for what Marx had been unable to imagine, and progression toward a utopian goal in the twentieth century can be envisioned as having two distinct halves: one in which material conditions are initially met, and a second which seeks a qualitative revolution in status-quo consciousness. (Martineau 69)

Additionally, due to the phases of rapid change between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, Marcuse was convinced that the Marxian proletariat exists only as a memory of the distant past. Modern capitalism, militarism, culture, technology, education, and politics operate in concert, abstracting the relationships which bind people to one another --- and to their surroundings in general --- to such a great degree that the clearly defined proletariat class of Marx's day has been transfigured into a shadowy, obsolete, conceptual entity. Marcuse explains this in One Dimensional Man:

Today, the rational and realistic notions of yesterday again appear to be mythological when confronted with the actual conditions. The reality of the laboring classes in advanced industrial society makes the Marxian *proletariat* a mythological concept; the reality of present-day socialism makes the Marxian idea a dream. The reversal is caused by the contradiction between theory and facts . . . . (188, 189)

Further, these same modern conditions and institutions negate the thrust of Marx's historical materialism, the theory of change which his scientific socialism ultimately rested upon. According to Marx, workable, practical socialism should not be the result of utopian ruminations, such as those held by his more romantic contemporaries such as Fourier, whom Marx and Engels criticized for ideological utopianism. Rather, they felt the most ideal set of conditions will be the result of a synthesis of action with philosophy based upon a scientific analysis of the patterns of social evolution throughout history. Marcuse, on the other hand, holds that the conditions of the

twentieth century do not operate according to the theory of historical materialism, and therefore he suspects that it is also quite possible for social change to proceed from ardent utopian aspirations themselves. In An Essay on Liberation, Marcuse explains the significance of the *utopian conception*.

A utopian conception? It has been the great, real, transcending force, the *idee neuve*, in the first powerful rebellion against the whole of the existing society, the rebellion for the total transvaluation of values, for qualitatively different ways of life ... The new sensibility has become a political force. It crosses the frontier between the capitalist and the communist orbit; it is contagious because the atmosphere, the climate of the established societies, carries the virus. (22)

The shift in consciousness represented by utopian wistfulness --- the convictions that human life has an inherent and precious value, that the possibility of an ideal society is no fanciful chimera, and finally that resources exist by which we may realize these visions --- leads Marcuse to place a great deal more emphasis upon the importance of education for revolutionary progress. Marx's dialectical materialism placed faith in the inevitable struggle of economic classes against one another in a thesis/antithesis duality, and to a certain degree, especially in Marx's early writings, the need to educate the revolutionary class is essentially incidental in the face of his ideological determinism. Marcuse takes this incidental education and amplifies it, making it paramount and utterly indispensable. (Martineau 48, 49) Rather than dialectical materialism and class warfare, the education of citizens with regard to utopianism is a primary location for the driving force of social advancement and revolution. Those responsible for the final success of the revolution and the Herculean task of fostering social progress are no longer the messianic Marxian proletariat, but a group of people who would have the ability and desire to educate the masses about what is most beneficial and desirable in all areas of cultural living. (49) The working class, of course, has never been fully eliminated, but for various reasons, Marcuse felt that their indoctrination under capitalism, their susceptibility to artificial need, was far too powerful to place them at the heart of the revolution. For Marcuse, the overthrow of capitalism was not nearly so profoundly pregnant with utopian potential as the overthrow and eradication of stagnant status-quo consciousness in favor of its utopian antithesis. Interestingly, this shift in the locus of responsibility from the *universal class* toward cultural educators serves to remove the class basis from the socialist revolution to some degree.

## From the Party and the Workers to the Educators and the Artists

In contrast to Marx, who believed that the suffering of the impoverished, huddled masses in the face of the opulent few would incite the proletariat to revolution, Marcuse believes that the conditions of modern society are so fundamentally dystopian that everyone, regardless of class and material sundries, will suffer painfully, universally. For this reason, he casts aside Marx's revolutionary dictatorship of the proletariat, a theoretical transitional phase which was to occur after the initial violence of revolution, during which the most oppressed class would become the ruling class, and by operating in its own interests would inadvertently eliminate all class distinctions, ushering in ideal egalitarianism. Marcuse turns his favor toward an educational *dictatorship* of the wise, based on instilling intellectual liberty and utopian ideals in all individuals. Although this was a topic which he was constantly being put to the task of defining and redefining, his comments in Eros and Civilization shed some light, if not on a *precise* description for this program for instilling utopian awareness, at least upon Marcuse's general train of thought, buoyed by his romantic optimism, despite his unwillingness to dictate a blueprint for what had not yet fully come into being.

From Plato to Rousseau, the only honest answer is the idea of an educational dictatorship, exercised by those who are supposed to have acquired knowledge of the real Good. The answer has since become obsolete: *knowledge of the available means for creating a humane existence for all is no longer confined to a privileged elite*. The facts are all too open, and the individual consciousness would safely arrive at them if it were not methodically arrested and diverted. The distinction between rational and irrational authority, between repression and surplus-repression, can be made and verified by the *individuals themselves*. That they cannot make this distinction now does not mean that they cannot learn to make it once they are given the opportunity to do so. Then the course of trial and error becomes a rational course in freedom. Utopias are susceptible to unrealistic blueprints; *the conditions for a free society are not*. (225) (italics added)

Marcuse preserves the task of the philosophers, a worthwhile egalitarian undertaking bequeathed to him by Marx, as being that of continuously reinterpreting the world and bolstering the consciousness of individuals in order to facilitate change, to apprehend and begin to realize a utopian goal. The knowledge and awareness transmitted by this sort of democratized education would be inherently partisan, since it would be based on what Marcuse terms *critical theory*, which he describes in *Philosophy and Critical*

*Theory* as being a method for understanding value within ourselves and the world around us which directly opposes the current status-quo consciousness.

Bourgeois society's domination reveals itself not only in the dependence of thought but also in the (abstract) independence of its contents. For this society determines consciousness such that the latter's activity and contents survive in the dimension of abstract reason; abstractness saves its truth. *What is true is so only to the extent that it is not the truth about social reality.* And just because it is not the latter, because it transcends this reality, it can become a matter for critical theory. (Quoted in Herbert Marcuse's Utopia) (italics added)

Marcuse goes on to explain the importance of critical theory with regard to establishing comparative value judgments in more detail in the introduction of One Dimensional Man, saying:

The established way of organizing society is measured against other possible ways, ways which are held to offer better chances for alleviating man's struggle for existence; a specific historical practice is measured against its own historical alternatives. From the beginning, any critical theory of society is thus confronted with the problem of historical objectivity, a problem which arises at the two points where the analysis implies value judgments.

1. the judgment that human life is worth living, or rather can be and ought to be made worth living. This judgment underlies all intellectual effort; it is the *a priori* of social theory, and its rejection (which is perfectly logical) rejects theory itself;
2. the judgment that, in a given society, specific possibilities exist for the ameliorization of human life and specific ways and means of realizing these possibilities. Critical analysis has to demonstrate the objective validity of these judgments, and the demonstration has to proceed on empirical grounds. (x, xi)

The partisan nature of one's understanding the egalitarian alternatives to miserable modern conditions, which is gained through critical theory, is evidenced by the fact that it contains utopian ideals, and for this reason stands in direct opposition to present-day systems which produce such a great amount of inequality and suffering. Therefore, Marcuse defines the moral responsibility of intellectuals as the promotion of this sort of *radical education*. Alain Martineau comments on the nature and extent of this responsibility.

... one has a moral duty to promote any theory that can be used for social subversion. Marcuse felt this duty to be all the more imperative because philosophical theory and all forms of critical thought are today facing a greater task than ever, since historical conditions tend to silence the spirit of criticism. Philosophy underlies the will to transform the world and make it free and rational, Marcuse pointed out. Its task cannot end until its goal is reached. Philosophy has not achieved its goal, however, since theory and practice do not yet coincide. Even though the philosopher may realize that unity of theory and practice is a purely utopian goal, he must never stop working for it until this end is attained. (72)

According to Marcuse, philosophy has a vital role to play in the system of revolutionary education which he believed would contribute toward efforts to bring about more desirable conditions and an end to unnecessary human misery. Specifics can be found in his presidential address to the APA in which he recommends reinterpretation of historical philosophy, and construction of "political linguists, because language has become 'an instrument of control and manipulation.'" He also suggested they investigate physiological and psychological epistemology, and finally, the promotion of 'philosophic aesthetics.'" (Quoted in Herbert Marcuse's Utopia)

Discussion of art becomes appropriate at this point, since Marcuse was not referring to philosophy per se. Philosophy has limitations in that it is the theoretical half of Marcuse's formula, while tangible art, specifically literature, is the other. There is an interesting analogous relationship between the role of the proletariat, which Marx defined as the *universal* class, and Marcuse's emphasis on philosophical aesthetics, in that both are the tangible manifestations of desire for utopia which provoke awareness and action. For Marcuse, however, art seems to have at its foundation a function much like that of critical theory, in that it provides insight and analysis into our current malady, as well as embraces universal elements such as our desire for happiness, holding out hope that there is an attractive, fulfilling alternative to our present predicament. In The Aesthetic Dimension, Marcuse explains the revolutionary nature of art, which parallels the revolutionary nature of education. This similarity ought to be seen as the connection which binds education and art together as the two interdependent halves of a utopian sphere.

I shall submit the following thesis: the radical qualities of art, that is to say, its indictment of the established reality and its invocation of the beautiful image (*schoener Schein*) of liberation are grounded precisely in the dimensions where art *transcends* its social determination and emancipates itself from the given universe of discourse and behavior while preserving its overwhelming presence. Thereby art

creates the realm in which the subversion of experience proper to art becomes possible: the world formed by art is recognized as a reality which is suppressed and distorted in the given reality. This experience culminates in extreme situations (of love and death, guilt and failure, but also joy, happiness, and fulfillment) which explode the given reality in the name of a truth normally denied or even unheard. The inner logic of the work of art terminates in the emergence of another reason, another sensibility, which defy the rationality and sensibility incorporated in the dominant social institutions. (Marcuse 6,7)(author's italics)

Marcuse's emphasis upon art as a tool for utopian reform or revolution, rather than the workers, removes a measure of class theory from modern Marxism. Marcuse intended to take this redefinition of class consciousness into the realm of aesthetics when he criticizes Marxist philosophy of art in The Aesthetic Dimension. Marcuse insists that, because genuine art is a process which has been removed from the relations of production in modern times (versus pop art and propaganda), it cannot be understood on the basis of class consciousness alone. In order for art to be an effective mechanism, it must also transcend this class consciousness in favor of the stimulation of individual consciousness toward universal utopian ideals. Unlike Marx, who saw art from eras past, such as the works of Sophocles, or art produced by the wealthy as useful only in providing us with a spectacle which marks where we have already been, lessons already learned during the *childhood of humanity*, Marcuse believes that neither time nor the class content of art can negate the validity of the utopian ideals it expresses. (15) As he commented wryly, "Clearly, the class struggle is not always 'responsible' for the fact that the 'lovers do not remain together.'" (24) Art in its genuine form appeals, not to class consciousness, as Marx assumes, but to the 'species-being.' "According to this [Marxist] conception, the consciousness of the proletariat would also be the consciousness that validates the truth of art. This theory corresponds to a situation which is no longer (or not yet) that prevailing in the advanced capitalist countries." (30) Rather, "By virtue of its transhistorical, universal truths, art appeals to a consciousness which is not only that of a particular class, but that of human beings as 'species beings', developing all their life enhancing faculties." (29) Generally apprehensive about the fate of true art under Soviet communism, in his conclusion to The Aesthetic Dimension, Marcuse recommends a transformation of orthodox Marxian aesthetics in order to reflect and address new-fashioned social peculiarities. On its own, antiquated Marxian aesthetics will merely confuse our understanding of art, how we define ourselves through it, and what we will be motivated to achieve as a result. "The institutions of a socialist society, even in their most democratic form, could never resolve all the conflicts between the universal and the particular, between human beings and nature, between individual and individual. Socialism does not and cannot liberate Eros from Thanatos." (71, 72)

### Marcuse's Paradox of Technology and Our Procreative Energies

Frank and Fritzie Manuel, who research the history of utopianism in Utopian Thought in the Western World, comment on Marcuse's recognition of the dismal peculiarities of the twentieth century as follows:

In our civilization there was ugliness, stupefaction, surfeit, no chance for the burgeoning of a true higher consciousness . . . . He diagnosed acutely what had happened to philosophical knowledge, which had become technologized. When the technological spirit dominated a society everything in it partook of the same ruthless concreteness, immediacy, unambiguity, exactitude, precision. Because of its concentration on presentness, its pursuit of novelty, and its orientation toward practical achievement, this spirit neglected or wiped out the past, or, what is the same, technologized it . . . . Men became so saturated with the moment and its fullness that there was not a brain cell left to conjure up totally different possibilities, to imagine dialectically the opposite of what is. (796, 797)

What was clear to Marcuse was that neither orthodox Marxism, nor that variety which was modern communism, was going to end human suffering or bring about utopia in the twentieth century. In fact, Marcuse felt certain that modern communism and capitalism produced the same dystopian effect. Because he placed such emphasis upon revolutionary education and philosophic aesthetics, he spent a great deal of time engaged in formulating the best plan for students and universities to become the agents of this metamorphosis, either through gradual reform or blatant revolt.

Despite his belief in the utopian potential waiting to be exercised within the spheres of education and aesthetics, occasionally what was not clear to Marcuse was whether other elements might be potential bearers of the same manner of transformation and progress. As Manuel and Manuel note, later in his life, Marcuse began to consider that the element of technology, the spectacle which, when fraught with capitalistic impurity, simultaneously reflects and creates the miserably alienated modern condition, might be a vehicle for the expression of utopia if it could somehow be washed clean and directed towards more worthwhile ends. In "Das Ende der Utopie," Marcuse reasoned that abstract theoretical notions of utopia could no longer serve as means by which modern society would be transformed, since modern society was so effectively organized against utopian idealism. Instead, he looked squarely into the visage of technology, which, once harnessed and utilized appropriately, had the potential to bring utopia out of obscurity and into actuality. Manuel and Manuel describe this as "Marcuse's Paradox."

Though the blasphemy did not come to his lips, even Marxism itself had offered only finite possibilities [for the use of technology]; but now that the forces of production generated by twentieth-century science and technology had lifted off the lid, anything was conceivable and utopia could fly to the highest vaults of heaven. And so Marcuse had turned a paradox: His utopia was realistic. It was firmly grounded in the actual productive capacities of advanced technology which, given the correct creation-organizational system, could do anything imaginable. (798)

This is an interesting addition to the position of Marcuse, who earlier had been lauding the universality of utopian ideals. Once again, however, it illustrates his awareness that communism in practice, which was not based upon a twentieth-century utopian perspective, would ultimately end as great a failure as capitalism. Marx himself had envisioned only a very limited role for the implementation of technology in order to achieve utopia, in which the machines of production are violently seized by the proletariat, with the result that the propertied bourgeoisie are no longer able to siphon the cream of other people's labor without laboring themselves, and class distinctions are nullified --- everyone must work, and no one shall own without contributing their labor. Marx's vision of technology is expanded in this sense by Marcuse. As powerful a mechanism for change as modern technology is, it is not impossible to imagine, after the eradication of the capitalist, dystopian influence, that it has the capacity to free human energies from bondage to *deadly boring work*, improve the quality of life for a vast number of the dispossessed, construct alternative methods of production and human consumption which currently threaten the resources of the biosphere, and, according to Marcuse, liberate the repressed or wasted sexual energy which is a natural source of human creativity. In this respect, Marcuse augments Marx, who had resoundingly rejected the sexual utopianism of his contemporaries.

The emergence of human beings as *species beings* --- men and women capable of living in that community of freedom which is the potential of the species --- this is the subjective basis of a classless society. Its realization presupposes a radical transformation of the drives and needs of the individuals: an organic development within the socio-historical. Solidarity would be on weak grounds were it not rooted in the instinctual structure of individuals. In this dimension, men and women are confronted with psycho-physical forces which they have to make their own without being able to overcome the naturalness of these forces. This is the domain of the primary drives: of libidinal and destructive energy. Solidarity and community have

their basis in the subordination of destructive and aggressive energy to the social emancipation of the life instincts. (Marcuse 16, 17)

Marcuse recognizes that the escapist relationship which many individuals have with technology --- through which artificial needs such as conspicuous materialism are indulged and springs of procreative energy are absorbed and diffused --- renders an individual pathetically weak, robs them of their creative autonomy and instinctual desires for interpersonal relationships with others. Marcuse believes that the liberation of technology would not only enhance egalitarianism and improve the quality of life, but also would free up sexual energy, a foundation for creativity and a basis upon which we can understand our connections to and concern for others, much of which is presently being wasted upon the spectacle of technology in the form of visual media distraction, for example.

### **Conclusion: Marcuse and the Modern Age**

Despite the way in which Marcuse's paradox in "Das Ende der Utopie" contradicts the universal utopianism of his other works, it is important to note the manner in which he transforms Marxism so that it corresponds to the twentieth century. Marcuse's analysis of modern conditions calls for the end to the primacy of struggles based solely on class conflict, supplementing them with revolutionary education and utopian art, contrived to stimulate and reinforce the awareness within all individuals of an ideal alternative to twentieth-century dystopia. His interest in the catalyst capacities of technology is also an appropriate avenue for the investigation of potential utopian agents in present-day society, in which the status-quo is sustained through misappropriation and desecration of technology by the capitalist matrix. The creative nature of sexual energy, a topic which made Marx shudder with horror, is incorporated by Marcuse into the thrust of utopianism, and this directly addresses the manipulation and overindulgence of desires by advanced capitalistic countries in order to maintain a dulled and distracted population. In addition, this sexual capacity for creativity adds an important degree of dimension to the Marxian conception of the self. The procreative urges which inspire playfulness and creativity are also a means for establishing social cohesiveness.

Although several tenets of orthodox Marxism are exchanged for interpretations which carry a strong hint of Freudianism, this is critical for the continued effectiveness of an analysis based on Marxism in the twentieth century. Those who would insist that these modifications are corruptions which transfigure Marxism beyond recognition would do well to remember that the socialist contemporaries of Marx and Engels, such as Fourier, who were profoundly influential upon Marcuse, also incorporated such elements into socialist ideology. In this sense, although Marcuse may make a break with

Marx, he does not necessarily make a break with utopian socialism. Still, Marcuse is as innovative as he is sensitive in his desire to urge socialist philosophy towards the twentieth century. Marcuse succeeds in his efforts to invigorate Marxism and socialism, giving them a much needed infusion of dimension and modernity which is absolutely necessary in order for them to continue to be applicable into the twenty-first century, the period looming before us, which will perhaps be marked as being the most catastrophic to date.

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