

INTRODUCTION

The Critical Theory of Herbert Marcuse

The Education of a Revolutionary Philosopher

Origins

Herbert Marcuse was born in 1898, eldest son of a Berlin merchant. The Marcuses were Jewish but this was largely a matter of indifference during his childhood, a time of rapid assimilation. In fact Marcuse used to joke that on Friday evenings one could hear mothers calling out “Siegfried, Brunehilde, Shabbat!”

Marcuse’s adolescence took place in the period leading up to World War I. Germany was pulled in opposite directions by contradictory tendencies during this time. As in England where Victorian rectitude was beginning to give way to a freer, more experimental attitude toward life, so in Germany spiritual turmoil was rife especially among the youth and the artistic community. Meanwhile business prospered and, just as Marx had predicted, the working class expanded rapidly in numbers and political assertiveness in lockstep with the success of capitalism. It was no doubt impossible to foresee where all these tendencies would lead. Where they did in fact lead was to war, the greatest, most destructive war in human history up to that time.

The pointless cruelty of this conflict remains as its lasting memorial. In the trench warfare tens of thousands of soldiers were sent di-

rectly into machine gun fire. Ordinary young men were treated as mere cannon fodder by arrogant military leaders who had not yet understood that war could no longer be fought as before against modern technological means of destruction. Between 1914 and 1918 an incredible nine million people were killed and an additional twenty-three million injured. Yet no one looking back on the conflict has been able to explain convincingly why it had to take place.

In 1916 Marcuse was drafted into the German army. He was fortunate in being assigned to a rearguard unit and so did not see fire. But he suffered the disillusionment that was the main spiritual consequence of the war. Europe could no longer brag about its high level of civilization now that its appalling barbarism was apparent for all to see. In Germany, the traumatic loss of faith embraced the entire political system, not only the governing parties but also the socialist opposition that had supported the war enthusiastically at the outset. By the end, with millions of working people dead on all sides, it was clear that this was worse than a mistake, that it was a profound betrayal of everything for which the socialist movement stood.

It was too late for the official socialist party to gain the trust of skeptical youth. Like many other young people Marcuse was radicalized by the war and turned to the left splinter groups that split off from it. However, his enthusiasm was moderated by an experience at the end of the war that gave him pause. Revolution broke out in Munich and the military command lost control of the army in Berlin. Elected to the revolutionary soldiers' council in the capital, he watched with dismay as the rebellious troops reelected their old officers to lead them. From this experience he drew the conclusion that the most radical of the new left groups, Rosa Luxemburg's Spartacus League, was doomed to defeat. German workers were not ready for revolution.

After the war, Marcuse attended the University of Freiburg. While there his teachers included the founder of the phenomenological school of philosophy, Edmund Husserl. He graduated in 1922 with a doctoral dissertation on novels about artists in conflict with society.

Marcuse's approach in this thesis was strongly influenced by the early literary criticism of György Lukács. Lukács, a Hungarian who wrote primarily in German, was an important figure in the cultural world of Germany in this period. His early pre-Marxist writings ex-

pressed a kind of desperate utopianism that appealed to Marcuse and many others who experienced the war as the end of an era. Lukács applied Georg Simmel's idea of the "tragedy of culture" in a theory of the novel that emphasized the conflict between the energies of the individual and the increasing weight of social conventions and institutions in modern society. The individual is rich in potential for creativity and happiness, but society threatens to confine the "soul" within empty "forms."

In novels in which the protagonist is an artist, the conflict of art and life in bourgeois society exemplifies this theme. Overcoming or mitigating this conflict was to remain Marcuse's great hope, reappearing in his mature work in the concept of imaginative fantasy as a guide to the creation of a better society.

After completing his studies Marcuse worked for several years as a partner in an antiquarian book store in Berlin. The turn to a literary, or in this case a quasi-literary, career was not unusual for the sons of Jewish businessmen. Cultural aspirations were standard equipment in this rapidly rising stratum of German society. But all was not well in Germany. As he worked in his bookstore, the young Marcuse felt a profound dissatisfaction not only with the chaotic postwar status quo in Germany, but with the philosophical currents of the time, which failed to address the meaning of the events he had witnessed. A society capable of the monumental stupidity and inhumanity of European capitalism deserved to be overthrown. But by whom? And with what alternative in view?

The Attraction and Failure of Marxist Socialism

The answer seemed obvious to many young people of Marcuse's generation and background: Marxist socialism. In the nineteenth century, Marx had formulated his theory in the context of the reality of a new capitalist-industrial system, one in which men, women, and children alike were forced by the threat of starvation to work as much as eighty hours a week in dangerously unhealthy factories for pitifully small wages. When labor unions formed to improve wages and working conditions, the system responded with arrests, murder, and violent intimidation. The socialist movement in Europe and North America that sprang up in response advocated seizing the "means of production"—

the factories and natural resources—from the hands of their capitalist owners and operating them under the direction of the workers.

The ideological basis of the brutal exploitation of labor under early capitalism was the theory of so-called free markets: the individual worker was free to sell his or her labor to the factory owner, or to decline to do so; the capitalist was free to offer whatever level of wages he wished, irrespective of the needs of worker and family, and also to have sole control over working conditions at the factory. Moreover, the owner had no responsibility for the deaths or injuries the workers might suffer, and the workers' families had no claim on compensation. There was no moral or ethical basis to the relation between worker and owner, no sense that the disparity in wealth and social power between the two sides was anything but a "fact of nature," no recognition that this disparity in power and wealth corrupted from the outset the very notion of freedom that it pretended to celebrate.

These were the historical circumstances in which Marx formulated his theory in the mid-nineteenth century, and to a great degree those conditions had not changed much by the 1920s. After making some gains in the late nineteenth century, the working class was reduced to desperation and poverty once again in the aftermath of the First World War. With some exceptions there was still no adequate "social safety net." Violence and intimidation directed against labor unions, and especially against union organizers, both by corporations and governments, were still common.

Marx's ideas still seemed relevant for there was a sense that things had changed little since Marx's day. For many, the notion that the capitalist-industrial system was irredeemable was an evident fact, and so for them the idea of replacing it root and branch with a radically different socioeconomic order was alive and well. The means of achieving this new order was to be socialist revolution by the oppressed working class once conditions were ripe, industry developed, and capitalist leadership of society discredited.

These seemed to be precisely the conditions prevailing in Germany at the end of World War I, and yet the revolution had failed. The socialists and communists offered no convincing explanation for that failure, hence no hope of better success in the future. They continued to rely on an economic interpretation of Marxism that did not correspond

with the spirit of the time. Marx, who subtitled his major work, the three-volume *Capital*, “a critique of political economy,” often presented his thought as a rival economic theory of industrial society superior to the established theories in both explanatory and predictive power. But for many of those who had been through the war and its aftermath, the idea of an economically motivated revolution missed the point. The crisis of German society was at least as much spiritual and cultural as economic. A new concept of revolution was required by this unprecedented situation.

The spiritual chaos was a breeding ground for artistic creativity. No longer optimistic about socialist revolution, Marcuse was excited by various revolutionary aesthetic currents emerging in this period, but they offered no realistic prospect of moving the masses. Meanwhile the political situation in Germany gradually degenerated in the long prelude to the Nazi takeover.

It was in this context that in 1927 Marcuse read a much discussed book by Husserl’s former assistant and successor, Martin Heidegger. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger transformed Husserl’s phenomenological method into a remarkably delicate instrument for investigating the most basic human experiences and commitments. This book changed Marcuse’s life. It seemed to promise a way out of the dead end of traditional Marxism, a way forward to a new concept of revolution. Marcuse returned to Freiburg to take up his studies again, this time with the intention of entering the German university system as a professional philosopher. To understand his excitement, it is necessary to explain phenomenology briefly in both its original Husserlian and its Heideggerian versions.

Husserl and Heidegger

The early twentieth century was a time of fantastic cultural innovation in science, art, literature—and philosophy as well. William James in America, Bergson in France, and Husserl in Germany all struggled to break with the dominant assumptions of the philosophical tradition in pursuit of a more “concrete” grasp of life.

Husserl, for example, proposed a return to “the things themselves,” by which he meant a philosophy of immediate experience. This marked a break with the main schools of neo-Kantian thought in

Germany, which were primarily concerned with epistemology, the theory of knowledge. The overestimation of science called forth a reaction that appeared justified in the wake of the war. The question of science receded before a crisis of civilization that demanded an explanation of an entirely different sort. Husserl provided the method that would be employed for this purpose by phenomenologists and existentialists such as Heidegger, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty.

Husserl called his approach “phenomenology” because he was interested in describing as accurately as possible the “phenomena” of experience. Consider, for example, our perception of an object such as a table. As we walk around it, we see it from different angles. Each perception is a presentation of the self-same table, but each is different.

We assume normally that the perceptions are held together by the “fact” that they are all attached to a real table out there in the world. Husserl did not entirely disagree, but he argued that this assumption made it impossible for us to appreciate the actual process of organizing perspectives and holding them together in our consciousness. To gain an understanding of the mental process in which consciousness perceives the table in and through its perspectives, we need to suspend the “natural attitude” and attend to the “immanent” structure of experience.

What is then revealed is the “intentional correlation” of acts of consciousness with their objects. What appears on the one side as an act such as knowing is essentially bound up with an object, the known, and so also for seeing and the seen, remembering and the remembered, and so on. From the phenomenological standpoint acts of consciousness create meaning in experience. The multiple perspectives on the table come together as what we call a “table” and constitute it as such.

Husserl’s phenomenology led him beyond these initial considerations to a startling paradox. We usually think of consciousness as “in” the mind. In our everyday common sense understanding, the mind is an object in the world that is connected somehow to another object, the body. According to this objectivistic model, we explain our encounter with objects, such as the table, as an interaction between two things in the world, light rays striking the retina. But, Husserl claimed, this causal account does not get us to experience itself. That requires the suspension of the natural attitude with respect to mind and body as well as things.

Today we might explain Husserl's insight in terms of the difference we sense between a robot detecting the presence of the table and moving aside, and a human consciousness of the table. The robot operates very much like the objectivistic model of perception, but it has nothing we would want to call experience. Indeed it needs none and neither would we humans if we were simple creatures of reflex without a world.

Husserl concluded that experience is not a state of a mind-thing or brain, relative to human limitations, but an independent and irreducible realm of being he called "pure consciousness." Pure consciousness is a "field" coextensive with the world of objects in which those objects take on their meaning. So radical was Husserl's claim to the discovery of this new realm that he argued that God himself cannot grasp objects immediately but must perceive them perspectively just like humans. In sum, there is no "view from nowhere"; all encounters with reality are in principle first person encounters from out of a specific situation in the reality that is observed.

So far there is little about phenomenology to excite a young revolutionary intellectual. But Heidegger applied Husserl's method in a new way that bared not just ordinary perception but our human existence as persons. This proved a rather more interesting enterprise. Heidegger began by criticizing Husserl's continual reliance on the language of consciousness. The subject of experience is no kind of mind, even in Husserl's modified formulation. Rather, it is an existing individual, a whole acting self, essentially engaged with a world of objects it encounters in use. Meaning emerges in these encounters.

The intentional correlation now holds together human being and world in a unity Heidegger called "being-in-the-world." Note that "world" in Heidegger's sense does not refer to nature but rather to something like our notion of a "world of the theatre," a "Chinese world," or the "way of the world." There can be many such worlds, none merely subjective or private, but none absolute and unique either. These worlds are each a meaningful context of action rather than the sum of existing things. Significantly, "world" in this sense cannot be understood without reference to an acting and understanding subject whose world it is.

Heidegger went on to argue that our way of being in the world is fraught with tension. The things of experience are not simply "out there" waiting for us to find them. For them to be "revealed" as mean-

ingful, we must be drawn to them, preoccupied from out of our concerns. Worlds are thus a function of the future we project for ourselves and the salient objects that emerge on our path to that future. But we are not absolutely wedded to any one future, to any one world. Insofar as we are persons, we are necessarily in a world, but there is no ultimate reason why we must be in this particular world rather than another one with different meanings and structures.

This indeterminacy is a source of metaphysical anxiety, a kind of existential doubt. There is a gap between self and world into which questions can slip. We are capable of interrogating our world and ourselves. This is no mere accident of our being but is our essential defining characteristic. It is a necessary precondition for having a world in the sense of an organized whole of meaningful experience rather than a mere sequence of reflexive responses to particular situations.

This precondition is related to the still deeper fact that our experience always leads back in some sense to ourselves. Our experience is, precisely, ours. Or rather, *my* experience belongs to *me* and is inseparable from *my* being. I cannot exist outside of the world of experience, and experience is marked by its relation to me as a subject and actor. Experience has “mineness” about it. As for Husserl, so for Heidegger the first person standpoint is interpreted as the opening of a realm of meaning.

Heidegger went on to argue that these phenomenological truths are obscured in average, everyday experience. Ordinarily, human existence is sociable and conformist. This “inauthentic” relation to self and world tends toward a leveling down and forgetfulness. Individuals neither doubt nor affirm their own experience but act according to what “they” normally do. They say this, they do that, and so say and do I. I forget that I am a questioning being, a being to whom experience belongs personally and inseparably.

This is not wholly bad; socialization takes place through participation in “the they” (*das Man*). But “authentic” individuality is also possible at moments in which the individual becomes conscious of the limit death places on life. In such moments the individual can become aware of his or her individuality beyond any and all mindless conformism. In the light of death true action can give meaning to life as the individual lays claim to his or her own existence.

This account shows how far Husserl and Heidegger had traveled from the consensus of their day according to which the main task of philosophy was to ground the sciences. In fact, despite important disagreements, both Husserl and Heidegger hold that individual experience is an ontological foundation more basic than the nature of natural science. Knowledge in all its forms is derivative not merely in the sense that its claims are validated in experience, but more fundamentally, in that the very act of making claims presupposes the subject's belonging to a meaningful world. Both Husserl and Heidegger thus deny that a naturalistic explanation of reality can account for the totality of being. There will always be a vital remainder, the very fact of a meaningful world revealed in experience. Marcuse accepted this heritage of phenomenology and challenged the hegemony of science in modern culture and its practical basis, which he called "technological rationality."

Marcuse's "Heidegger-Marxismus"

One can see from this very sketchy description of Heidegger's complex theory why he came to be called an "existentialist" despite his rejection of this title. Like Kierkegaard and Nietzsche he promised philosophical insight into the most fundamental problems of personal life. Heidegger's work, Marcuse wrote at the time, "seems to us to indicate a turning point in the history of philosophy: the point where bourgeois philosophy transcends itself from within and opens the way to a new 'concrete' science."¹

Marcuse applied this "concrete science" to understanding the passivity of the working class in the revolutionary situation at the end of the war. What is more, the idea of authenticity suggested a way of completing Marxism with a new theory of revolutionary consciousness. Traditional Marxism had failed because it relied on the motivating force of economic self-interest when in fact revolutions are not made for simple economic reasons. Marcuse now had a far more powerful instrument for analyzing the "radical act" in which individuals "exist" through transforming their world.

In 1928 Marcuse became Heidegger's assistant as Heidegger had been Husserl's. He published a series of essays that drew critically on Heidegger's thought and attempted to synthesize it with Marxism. Marcuse's fundamental objection concerned Heidegger's basic con-

cept of world. Heidegger had attempted to uncover ultimate structures of the world as such, leaving the particulars of specific worlds to the side as sociological details. When in the later parts of *Being and Time* Heidegger did refer to these details, he raised them to a higher plane by identifying specific worlds with national communities of meaning, carriers of tradition.

Marcuse argued that in so doing, Heidegger obscured the divisions within communities. Indeed, from a Marxist standpoint, class divisions are ultimately more significant than nationality since modern capitalism destroys tradition and replaces it with a society based on self-interest. Authenticity in this situation becomes a matter of seizing the historical moment along with one's class in the affirmation of human possibilities against the deadening routines of the existing society.

While working with Heidegger, Marcuse went on to write a second thesis on Hegel that was to qualify him to teach in the German university. This thesis, entitled *Hegel's Ontology and the Theory of Historicity*, was published in 1932.² It is a remarkably rich and complex interpretation of Hegel strongly influenced by Heidegger. But it also departs from Heidegger in addressing the issue of history primarily in terms of Hegelian and Marxist notions of labor as the human power to *produce* worlds.

In Hegel's text labor is for the most part only loosely and metaphorically related to actual work in the usual sense of the term. Labor is understood as the act of negating the given reality in the creation of objects or institutions that reflect various aspects of human reality. But despite the vagueness of Hegel's reference to labor, Marx made the most of it and saw in him an important predecessor. Marcuse's appreciation of this Marxist take on Hegel is implicit throughout his thesis, but he gives it a Heideggerian twist.

This is plausible because labor also plays a role in *Being and Time*. An initial analysis of tool use forms the background to the notion of being-in-the-world. And as Marx would enthusiastically appropriate and narrow Hegel's concept of labor, so Marcuse would adapt Heidegger's concept of worldhood to mesh with his own Marxist approach. The world created by labor is in fact the Heideggerian world of experience awaiting and preparing the authentic act of the human subject whose world it is.

Marcuse's interpretation of Hegel was also influenced by Heideg-

ger's theory of history as is apparent from the Heideggerian term "historicity" in his title. Heidegger established the central significance of time in the constitution of worlds. It is the reference to an anticipated future that gives order and meaning to the present. But Heidegger worked out his theory of temporality most fully in relation to the individual human being and failed to explain clearly and persuasively how history is constituted at the collective level.

Here Hegel and Marx offer an important complement and corrective to Heidegger. For them the future is a collective project that emerges from social tensions that themselves reflect different projects borne by different social groups. The progressive projects realize potentials in the present that reflect developing human capacities. This notion of potential became the basis for Marcuse's later theory of the "two dimensions" of society, the dimension of everyday facts and the dimension of transcending possibilities that lead on to higher stages of historical and human development. With this reinterpretation of Hegel, Marcuse prepared his new concept of revolution adequate to the crisis of twentieth-century German society.

Astonishingly, this interpretation of Hegel came close to anticipating aspects of Marx's own early unpublished writings. In 1932 a previously unknown text emerged from the archives. These *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* revolutionized the image of Marx. Here in 1844 Marx argued that capitalism was not simply an economic system. Capitalism alienated workers from their essential nature as creatures capable of building a world through labor that "objectifies" their needs and powers. But this world does not belong to them. Instead it is appropriated by the capitalist and turned against its creators, perverting their whole existence into a debased struggle for survival. Marx attacks the destruction of the "human essence" in an economic system that reduces the worker to nothing but the abstract capacity for "labor-power"—abstract because in the early factory system labor was stripped of all particular qualities of skill and creativity and was measured solely in quantitative units of time.

In this text Marcuse discovered a Marx who was more than an economist, who spoke to the contemporary crisis of modernity as a whole. What is more, he found remarkable similarities to his own rather creative interpretations of Heidegger and Hegel. In a number of passages

Marx makes surprising claims that distinguish his concept of nature from that of the natural sciences and bring it closer to the phenomenological concept of experience. Marcuse did not have to stretch the point in treating Marx's affirmation of the unity of human being and nature as an intentional correlation of subject and object, a kind of being-in-the-world. What is more, like Husserl and Heidegger, Marx grants this experiential unity a supreme ontological significance. But unlike these phenomenologists, Marx's version of being-in-the-world has a radical historical character. He argues that the objectification of human faculties through labor under socialism creates a humanized nature in which we can finally be at home.

Marcuse emphasized these aspects of the *Manuscripts* and made of this early work of Marx the culmination and turning point of his own phenomenological education. His lengthy review, which can be read among the selections in this book, is the basis of his later thought.

The Decisive Break

We have now followed Marcuse up to 1932, a crucial year during which the political situation in Germany became increasingly threatening. Socialists and Communists were still deeply divided just as the right came together around Hitler. In the elections of 1933, the Nazi party emerged with over a third of the vote and powerful allies who gave it total control of the government. Then suddenly it was announced that the widely revered teacher, Martin Heidegger, was to be the first Nazi rector of the University of Freiburg. Marcuse had not seen it coming and the shock sent him reeling.

There has been much discussion of Heidegger's fateful decision to join the Nazi party. Was his philosophy itself a National Socialist doctrine? Was Heidegger guilty of anti-Semitism not only in his official capacity but more significantly in concealed references in his philosophical writings? Was *Being and Time* a dangerous book?

The answer to these questions is not obvious. Heidegger was by no means alone in making the leap from ivory tower indifference to misguided political enthusiasm. Nietzscheans and Kantians, even Thomists, rallied to the Nazi banner.³ The post-World War I crisis affected everyone in Germany, not only young leftists like Marcuse. Many in the academy turned to the right rather than the left for a solution.

The right drew its strength from the widespread sense of the exhaustion of the heritage of the Enlightenment, indeed of Western culture itself. Perhaps his students knew that Heidegger shared such sentiments, but this by no means identified him as a Nazi. The further leap from fairly routine culture-critical pessimism to Nazism required the belief in a new era of authoritative traditions and leaders. And one could hardly qualify as a Nazi without condemning the Jews, considered as carriers of corrupt modernity, and supporting their expulsion from normal social intercourse. Apparently, these were not views reflected in Heidegger's lectures and conversations before the rectorship.

The Heidegger "case" cannot be decided here. Deep ambiguities in Heidegger's abstract formulations facilitated the misunderstanding that led to Marcuse's remarkable invention of his so-called *Heidegger-Marxismus*. Indeed, so obscure and difficult are Heidegger's radical new ideas that after the fact it was also possible to see in them the sources of his disastrous political turn.

But it is significant that Heidegger had four Jewish students who were later to become prominent social philosophers of liberal or leftist persuasion. Hannah Arendt, Hans Jonas, and Karl Löwith all found themselves in the same position as Marcuse, shocked by their teacher's sudden political commitment and bereft of normal career prospects. That his Jewish students could have been so thoroughly mistaken about their teacher suggests that his thought was not as deeply tainted as many contemporary critics have argued.

The whole German world was falling apart but Marcuse had a more personal problem: he needed a job. He appealed to his old teacher Husserl who obtained for him an interview with Max Horkheimer, the head of the Institute for Social Research. The Institute was a group of academic Marxists who possessed some exciting new ideas and, just as important in this historical juncture, an endowment. These Marxists had applied their method to the study of class attitudes in Germany. The results worried them so much that they moved their money and operations to Switzerland before the Nazi seizure of power. Thus they were not only interesting interlocutors for the unorthodox Marxist Marcuse, but also possible employers.

In 1933, Marcuse moved to Switzerland to work with the Institute in exile. From there, the Institute moved to Paris and eventually to the

United States where Marcuse remained for the rest of his life. The Institute's famous "Critical Theory" and Marcuse's contribution to it are described in the next section.

Marcuse and the "Critical Theory of Society"

Explaining Critical Theory

Marcuse is identified with a group of German thinkers known collectively as "The Frankfurt School" because they were all affiliated at one time or another with the Institute for Social Research that had been founded at the University of Frankfurt in 1924.⁴ In addition to Marcuse, the most prominent members of the school were Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno. In recent years Walter Benjamin has been recognized as another important member.

The Frankfurt School was one of the main components of the early-twentieth-century trend called "Western Marxism." This phrase refers to Western European thinkers who were heavily influenced by Marx and whose interpretation of Marx's work differed notably from the version propagated in the Soviet Union.

The Frankfurt School defined its own unique version of Western Marxism during the 1930s, when its members were in exile from Nazi Germany and already scattered across the rest of Europe and as far abroad as the United States. The label they gave to their version was "the critical theory of society."

In an essay published in the Institute's house journal in 1937, entitled "Traditional and Critical Theory," Max Horkheimer defined the "critical theory of society" as:

1. "a theory dominated at every turn by a concern for reasonable conditions of life";
2. a theory which condemns existing social institutions and practices as "inhuman";
3. a theory which contemplates the need for "an alteration of society as a whole."⁵

Nowhere in this essay does Horkheimer explicitly identify critical theory with Marxism, but toward its conclusion the theory's Marxist roots become apparent:

Thus the critical theory of society begins with the idea of the simple exchange of commodities. . . . The theory says that the basic form of the historically given commodity economy on which modern history rests contains in itself the internal and external tensions of the modern era; it generates those tensions over and over again in an increasingly heightened form; and after a period of progress, development of human powers, and emancipation of the individual, after an enormous extension of human control over nature, it finally hinders further development and drives humanity into a new barbarism.⁶

The first sentence in this passage is a faithful rendition of the essential ideas in the most important writings of Karl Marx, who had opened his main work, the first volume of *Capital* (1867), with an exposition of commodity exchange. Its closing statement reflects the specific perils of the time in which it was written when European fascism held sway in Germany and Italy and was beginning to menace all of civilization.

In that same year and in the same journal, Marcuse published his counterpart essay, "Philosophy and Critical Theory." His emphasis was on the fundamental human values that ground the project of critical theory. These values, such as freedom, had been well explicated in conceptual terms in the tradition of Western philosophy, but for the most part philosophy seemed incapable of envisioning how they might actually be realized in social life. Marcuse summarized the commitment of critical theory to this task. Critical theory is identified by:

1. "concern with human happiness, and the conviction that it can be attained only through a transformation of the material conditions of existence";
2. "concern with the potentialities of man and with the individual's freedom, happiness and rights. . . [F]reedom here means a real potentiality, a social relationship on whose realization human destiny depends";
3. "the demand that through the abolition of previously existing material conditions of existence the totality of human relations be liberated."⁷

Once again, although the name of Marx is not explicitly invoked, his spirit pervades these passages.

But critical theory was much more than recycled Marxism. The need for a new foundation for the critical theory of society was dictated by the times. Circumstances were very different from those that inspired Marx. First, on the left of the political spectrum, there was the Soviet Union, “officially” a socialist regime ruled by a government answerable to the workers and paying homage to Marxian ideology. Second, on the right wing, there was the fascist movement, already ruling two European nations and threatening to spread police-states everywhere, flaunting an officially sanctioned program of racism, anti-Semitism, political murder, and the brutal repression of civil liberties.

In different ways both represented something new in the modern Western political tradition, a “totalitarian” ideology in which the state claimed the power to transform and oversee every aspect of social life—work, family, religion, culture, education, politics, and economy. Both also claimed to represent an international movement that would soon sweep away the existing forms of life in other countries. By the latter half of the 1930s there was little doubt that warfare among nations on a terrifying scale was being prepared.

For the members of the Frankfurt School, themselves among the early victims of the terror and repression that would soon spread far more widely, this was the concrete situation calling for a renewal of the critical theory of society. Both of the new developments required a response—although, based on what was known at the time, the threat from the right appeared by far the worse of the two.

To be sure, Soviet Marxism was converting Marx’s humane and ethical vision of progressive social change into the repressive ideology of a totalitarian state. But the full extent of this betrayal was not yet evident. The Frankfurt School responded to the early signs by emphasizing the centrality of the concept of human freedom (including political freedom) in the socialist vision, and by criticizing the reduction of Marxist thought to a set of crude formulas.

The threat from the right appeared to be the more serious for a number of reasons. First and foremost, it had arisen in powerful Western nations, nations that were heirs not only to the most modern industrial technologies, but also to a long tradition of European culture

based on the most important human values—enlightenment, science, rationality, individual and political freedom, universal education, equality, tolerance, democracy, and the rule of law. These values had been accepted by the partisans of socialism and incorporated into their own vision of a better future in the expectation that socialist revolution in the advanced European countries would realize them even more fully.

But in fact the very nations that had appeared to be “ripe” for the transition to socialism now appeared to be regressing, not advancing, and in the process they undermined the progressive achievements not just of modern democracy but of the preceding four centuries.

Second, the fascist movement was still growing in strength, and if it should succeed in conquering Europe and North America, then all hope of a better future would vanish indefinitely.

It should now be clear why Horkheimer and Marcuse, in the passages from their 1937 essays quoted above, described the critical theory of society as they did. They were reaffirming, not just the genealogy of the theory itself, but its commitment to both the continued need for social transformation toward democratic socialism, on the one hand, and to certain fundamental values of the Enlightenment tradition, on the other. In the longer run this was a fragile duality. After the Second World War, Horkheimer gradually came to believe that these twin commitments were incompatible, and that only the second of them should be defended. Marcuse, on the other hand, continued to believe—until the end of his life—that the two were inseparable.

But there was a third element in critical theory, not yet discussed, one which was shared by Horkheimer and Marcuse, although almost certainly more strongly by Marcuse, namely, the “utopian spirit” which, from the beginning, was a core element in that theory and its moral basis.

Utopia, which means both “no place” and “good place,” is one of the oldest traditions of thought in the modern West. The idea originated in a seminal work entitled *Utopia*, penned in 1516 by the English statesman and philosopher Thomas More. For the next three hundred years, a series of books of a similar nature appeared envisioning a more perfect society. Most of them were influenced by More and followed his format, including detailed and fanciful descriptions of the daily life

routines in their imaginary societies. In most of them too, one finds another of More's sly tactics, a critique of society as it then was, disguised as a merely descriptive account of a way of life that supposedly actually existed in some concealed, far-off location across the seas.

The great turn in the utopian tradition occurred during the nineteenth century with the coming of industrialism. Until then, the political economy of the good society was usually described by utopian writers as a form of communitarian agrarianism, that is, a farm-based economy with progressive social relations, including equality of possessions and work obligations, enlightened penal codes, peaceful relations with neighbors, universal education, satisfying craft labor, and (sometimes) more equal gender relations and democracy.⁸ With few exceptions, these were not "rich" societies although they all made provision for basic needs; the main point is that they were more just, more humane, and more enlightened. But now, with industrialism, for the first time it appeared that the society of the future could be all these things and far richer too, since now everyone could be freed from one of the main curses of earlier times, endless, backbreaking labor.

These themes found their way into that part of the tradition of social criticism that promoted an explicit vision of socialism or communism. Marx was well aware of these utopian speculations but he was skeptical of ethically inspired depictions of the future. Unlike most of the utopian writers, he believed he could show not only the need to transcend the unjust society in the name of something better, but also how to accomplish that goal. In effect, he argued that what was required was a far more exact account of how the prevailing society functioned, because the secret of its future lay buried in its present. In Hegelian fashion Marx argued that once one understood the precise nature of the changes that capitalist-industrial society had forced upon its predecessors, it would be possible to understand the forces growing within that would doom it in the future.

Those changes were the following: free-market relations and the commodity form of production, and their impact on human labor; the factory system, sweeping together diverse populations into larger collectivities; the collapse of older social class formations into just two polarized classes, capitalist and proletariat; and finally, the existential foundations of the revolutionary character of the proletariat, the class

that would abolish itself in the process of unseating the capitalists from power, the class that—unlike all its predecessors—would not reestablish political domination to serve its own interests but would instead bring to an end all class relations in human history.

Marx presupposed the truth of the utopian tradition—that a more perfect society was not only desirable but also entirely possible—without drawing a blueprint. We have from him only the marvelous epigram for the guiding principle of the future society, “from each according to his abilities, to each according to his needs.” Russell Jacoby has labeled this way of thinking “negative” or “iconoclastic” utopia, a longing for a better future that is deeply felt but refrains from even hinting at its social topography.⁹ And it is precisely this style of utopian vision that both Horkheimer and Marcuse explicitly referenced in their essays on the critical theory of society.

The Utopian Theme in Critical Theory

Expressing himself in the cautious and indirect language that he adopted in his period of exile, Horkheimer wrote of critical theory:

One thing which this way of thinking has in common with fantasy is that an image of the future which springs indeed from a deep understanding of the present determines men’s thoughts and actions even in periods when the course of events seems to be leading far away from such a future and seems to justify every reaction except belief in fulfillment. . . . But in regard to the essential kind of change at which critical theory aims, there can be no corresponding concrete perception of it until it actually comes about.¹⁰

Marcuse also linked the idea of utopia to the human capacity for fantasy. In his “Philosophy and Critical Theory” he refers to the famous set of three questions, which Kant had posed at the end of his *Critique of Pure Reason*: “What can I know? What should I do? What may I hope?” Marcuse comments:

What critical theory is engaged in is not the depiction of a future world, although the response of fantasy to such a challenge would not perhaps be quite as absurd as we are led to believe. If fantasy were set free to answer, with precise reference to already existing

technical material, the fundamental philosophical questions asked by Kant, all of sociology would be terrified at their utopian character. And yet the answers that fantasy could provide would be very close to the truth, . . . [f]or it would determine what man is on the basis of what he really can be tomorrow.¹¹

At the time when they wrote such lines, Horkheimer and Marcuse would have had the reality of their own circumstances clearly in mind: they were among those who had fled for their lives from a regime that would have arrested, tortured, and killed them either for their thoughts or their ethnicity, or both. As the darkness of fascism descended over the land of his birth, Marcuse reduced critical theory to its barest essentials:

In replying to the question, “What may I hope?” [fantasy] would point less to eternal bliss and inner freedom than to the already possible unfolding and fulfillment of needs and wants. In a situation where such a future is a real possibility, fantasy is an important instrument in the task of continually holding the goal up to view.

As we shall see, Marcuse never wavered in his adherence to this standpoint. His faith in fantasy was closely connected to beliefs about art that predated his turn to critical theory and survived the disappointments that led his closest colleague, Max Horkheimer, to abandon it at the end of the Second World War.¹² That unwavering commitment to utopia, to the possibility of a better future, is a defining feature of his life’s work and the most striking aspect of it that clearly sets him apart from the other principal figures identified with the Frankfurt School, with the possible exception of Walter Benjamin, who died at the beginning of World War II.

Although the Institute for Social Research was eventually reestablished at the University of Frankfurt in 1951, the heroic period of the Frankfurt School was over. The gap between Marcuse and his former colleagues is evident in discussions held in 1947 as to when and how to restart the Institute’s main publication, the *Journal of Social Research*, which had been suspended during their period of exile. In this context Marcuse drafted a programmatic document for Horkheimer in which he proposes that the theory must be adjusted to current circumstances

and become more closely tied to practice, that is, to explorations of how the dream of the better future might be realized.¹³

This untitled document argues that after the war the world of nations is split into neo-fascist and Soviet camps, and “what remains of democratic-liberal forms will be crushed between the two camps or absorbed by them.” Further, it remains true to the vision that a society of free persons can only result from the actions of a “revolutionary working class” because “it alone has the real power to abolish the existing relations of production and the entire apparatus that goes with it.”

The document acknowledges that the working class of the time is not ready to play this role because its own needs and perceptions have become “habituated” to the structures of the existing capitalist society. Thus traditional class antagonisms are frozen in place, and one cannot imagine any longer the possibility of a revolutionary consciousness arising spontaneously in the working class, as Marx had assumed it would. Therefore Marcuse draws the “logical” but to us rather startling conclusion that all this “has confirmed the correctness of the Leninist conception of the vanguard party as the subject of the revolution.”¹⁴

Marcuse’s project was stillborn for at that point in time his colleagues wanted nothing whatsoever to do with this kind of analysis and a program of studies based on it. And after Horkheimer returned to Frankfurt four years later, Marcuse never received from him a firm offer of employment at the Institute and the University of Frankfurt. He was fifty-six years old, still without a permanent job, still hoping in vain for a chance to rejoin his old colleague, when he reluctantly accepted the offer of a faculty position at Brandeis University in 1954.¹⁵ He moved to the University of California, San Diego, in 1965. His whole academic career was spent in the United States.

The Utopian Theme in Marcuse’s Later Writings

In a chapter entitled “Fantasy and Utopia” of his famous 1955 book, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, Marcuse developed most extensively the utopian theme that had once formed the heart of critical theory. The capacity for fantasy, in which the notion and desire for utopia is nurtured, is presented here as a permanent and necessary function of the human mind as such:

As a fundamental, independent mental process, fantasy has a truth value of its own, which corresponds to an experience of its own—namely, the surmounting of the antagonistic human reality. Imagination envisions the reconciliation of the individual with the whole, of desire with realization, of happiness with reason. While this harmony has been removed into utopia by the established reality principle, fantasy insists that it must and can become real, that behind the illusion lies *knowledge*.¹⁶

And then, for the first time in any of the works of the principal Frankfurt School social theorists, Marcuse goes on to lay out, not the design of a utopian future, but its prehistory and at least some of its specific preconditions and goals.

Marcuse imagines an early stage of human history, a “primitive” utopia, occurring during a time of low economic productivity, where there was a near equal distribution of resources among members of a tribe, little accumulation of wealth across generations, and a quasi-democratic structure of authority. (This “model” may have existed, for example, in the nomadic tribes of indigenous North American peoples who inhabited the Great Plains.¹⁷)

Opposed to this model is the phase of human development that begins with large-scale settled societies and an expanding population that brings political domination by a ruling elite made up of an alliance of priests and kings. Here a large economic surplus—material wealth beyond basic survival needs—is generated which, instead of being retained by the common people who produce it in order to reduce labor time, create leisure, and satisfy higher needs, is appropriated by the rulers as private wealth and for public monuments and warfare. The common people continue to experience life as dictated by necessity, hard labor, scarcity, and repression, compensated, as it were, by the promise that all would be made well in the afterlife of the soul.

Now Marcuse imagines a second version of utopia, occurring in a “fully developed industrial society after the conquest of scarcity.” He takes the level of economic activity in the United States prevailing at the time of writing (the early 1950s) as his starting point. If consumption was limited to “basic needs” such as food, housing, clothing, and leisure, the existing industrial technologies would be able to satisfy them for everyone with a drastically reduced workweek.

Marcuse draws the necessary conclusion: choosing this option means “a considerable reduction” in the prevailing standard of living, at least for those in the upper half of the spectrum of material wealth. What would be offered in return? The degree of repression necessary for life in civilized society is relative to the struggle with nature and the level of wealth achieved thereby. Where that struggle is artificially maintained at a level of intensity no longer required by social order, a “surplus repression” results that could be reduced through reforming social and economic institutions. This is the case in advanced industrial societies. Reducing necessary labor to an absolute minimum would offer new possibilities of human fulfillment to everyone. “[T]he reduction of the working day to a point where the mere quantum of labor time no longer arrests human development is the first prerequisite for freedom.” The striking fact is that *this “option” already exists.*

Marcuse interpreted this conclusion in terms derived in part from Freud. Extending Freud’s theory of the instincts, he argued that labor in the service of survival is the response to necessity, that is, the “reality principle,” which is set in opposition to the “pleasure principle,” that is, gratification of needs (including aesthetic needs, represented in culture). On this account repression appears to be a necessary feature of the human psyche. But where Freud had treated the instincts as quasi-biological constants, Marcuse reinterpreted them as historically malleable. In a free society “Eros, the life instincts, would be released to an unprecedented degree.” These words were published in 1955, during a decade in which American popular culture embraced a repressive, conformist, suburban lifestyle as the pinnacle of human achievement.

But for anyone who lived through the decades of the 1950s and 1960s in the nations of the West, Marcuse’s words are eerily prophetic of the social movement that would erupt there a mere ten years later. They are, in fact, such an uncannily accurate forecast of what was to come, such a precise representation of the underlying spirit of the counterculture of the New Left and the “hippies” that exploded onto the scene in the mid-1960s, that rereading them fifty years later one pauses in astonishment. No one who was even slightly touched by the events of that period would doubt the truth of the prophecy made in *Eros and Civilization* a short time earlier: “The utopian claims of imagination have become saturated with historical reality.”¹⁸

Taken at its best, the counterculture celebrated a rejection of end-

less consumerism, of rigid nuclear-family suburban lifestyles, of sexual repression—especially for women, of the fear of intoxication (except for alcoholic excess, still today the one officially approved recreational drug in American culture), of hypocritical churchgoing, and of the social ideologies that affirmed war, racism, and inequality. Without a doubt, the counterculture had its own darker side, in drug excess, in persistent male domination, in “communes” where the old games of leaders and followers were reproduced, in the failure to bridge the racial divide in America or to take up the cause of the poorest and most exploited social strata.

As a California resident Marcuse had a front-row seat, as it were, witnessing both the triumph and the denouement of this movement. But by 1968 Marcuse was more than a local figure. He had become a household name around the world—when he was already seventy years old!—in the double context of the growing resistance against the war in Vietnam and the “cultural revolution” represented by the student movement on university campuses and the streets of major cities not only in America but also in Europe, Latin America, and Japan.

For those who knew him one of the most remarkable features of his transformation into a leading figure of the new social movements was the contrast between his position and that of his former colleagues in the Frankfurt School. At the very time Marcuse’s book *One-Dimensional Man* became the “official text” at training sessions for the antiwar activists of the Students for a Democratic Society, Horkheimer and Adorno were nervously hunkered down inside their office building in Frankfurt, distancing themselves from those in the streets who were rallying in their name.

To understand this strange division, it is necessary to return to themes from Marcuse’s early sources as they affected his unique formulation of critical theory.

Technology and Revolution

The Two Dimensions

The critique of technology is the counterpart to the utopian hopes of the nineteenth century. Rousseau and Schiller, writing at the end of the eighteenth century, condemned the division of labor for splitting human beings into narrowly specialized fragments of a whole person.

With the development of manufacturing in England, and eventually of industrial production, doubts about the direction of progress were expressed more and more vocally, especially by writers in the romantic tradition. Nostalgia for earlier, more organic forms of social life was widespread in literary circles. While the art critic John Ruskin condemned capitalism for its ugliness, philosophers such as Kierkegaard and Nietzsche denounced the passionless conformism of a business-oriented society. Critics more sensitive to human suffering attacked capitalism for its inhumanity. Technology appears in these traditions as the villain, restructuring social life around mechanical, inanimate forms with the dire consequences the critics denounce.

The twentieth century is truly the century of technology. It is in this period that utopia is transformed into dystopia, an imaginary society as supreme in its evil as utopia is good. In the most famous of these dystopias, *Brave New World* (1932), human beings have become little more than robots, themselves no different from other mechanical components. Meanwhile, prophets of doom such as Oswald Spengler in Germany foresaw the “decline of the West.” Such pessimistic speculations had little influence on mainstream culture until the 1960s and remained the specialty of disillusioned literary intellectuals, with obvious resonances in the work of Heidegger and the Frankfurt School.

Despite a shared skepticism about the blessings of technology, neither Horkheimer nor Adorno was influenced by Heidegger as was Marcuse. Adorno’s contempt for Heidegger was notorious. Although Marcuse was critical of Heidegger’s betrayal of Enlightenment ideals, indeed, as he put it, of philosophy itself, he remained in some deep sense under Heidegger’s influence. This influence showed up interestingly in Marcuse’s 1964 book *One-Dimensional Man*.

Themes from both the Frankfurt School and existentialism lie in the background to this book. Toward the end of World War II, Horkheimer and Adorno worked in exile in Los Angeles on their classic *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944). This book announced the new and far more pessimistic direction of critical theory in the postwar period. They noted the astonishing success of Enlightenment in banishing myth in the development of modern science and technology, which culminated paradoxically by the twentieth century in the terrifying return of myth in the form of fascism and mass culture.

Dialectic of Enlightenment was an eloquent assault on the modern

triumph of pure instrumental rationality and its technology. The old notion of a reason that was more than instrumental, that was wise in its choice of goals, had been defeated. Its last chance, the failed socialist revolution, lay irrevocably in the past. Reason, they argued, had been stripped of any reference to humane ends and reduced to a mere tool of the powerful. The Enlightenment hope for a pacified and prosperous society in which individual happiness was available to all remained valid, but the prospects of its fulfillment were increasingly poor. They conclude, “The fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant.”¹⁹ Significantly for the later development of their views, they offered no solution to the dilemma they described, no renewed revolutionary possibility that could again set Enlightenment on a humane path.

Adorno and Horkheimer’s book was little read in the postwar period, but in 1949 Heidegger offered a similar diagnosis of the times in a far more famous text called “The Question Concerning Technology.” Heidegger argued that the modern world was shaped entirely by the technological spirit, which reduced all of being to a component in a vast system of instrumentalities. More fundamental than any particular goal pursued with the aid of the technological apparatus was this reductive tendency that affected every aspect of life. Even the human beings before whom being was revealed and through whom it took on meaning in experience were becoming mere cogs in the mechanism.

These two texts were the deepest theoretical expressions of the type of culture criticism that came to prominence in the 1960s. It seemed that *Brave New World* had actually arrived and the old idea of individuality was threatened with technological obsolescence. For many intellectuals dystopian fears now began to replace utopian hopes, although faith in science and technology remained the dominant mood at least in the United States. It was in this climate of growing technophobia that Marcuse brought out *One-Dimensional Man*.

In this book Marcuse argued that instrumental reason had triumphed over an earlier form of rationality that embraced ends as well as means. This was not simply an intellectual phenomenon but was rooted in the very structure of experience. It is not knowledge or technical devices that are primary but the technological relation to reality that makes progress in science and technique possible in the first place. Just as Heidegger had argued that the structure of experience is oc-

cluded by the technological “revealing,” so Marcuse held that “technological rationality” distorted and reduced experience to an impoverished remnant.

But Marcuse did not treat this transformation as essentially spiritual as had Heidegger. Like Adorno and Horkheimer he saw it as a social phenomenon based on the perpetuation of capitalism under the new conditions of advanced technology that had made the old “reality principle” obsolete. Now mass production, mass consumption, and mass culture prevail over traditional forms of consciousness and a society that “delivers the goods” integrates the working class once and for all.

In the course of explaining the historical character of the technological reduction of experience, Marcuse also referenced Husserl. In his later work, Husserl argued that science was rooted in the “lifeworld” of everyday practice. The technical operations of scientific reason reflect in refined form more basic nontechnical experiences, which are obscured by the natural attitude. Husserl had hoped that regrounding science in experience would open the way to restoring Enlightenment values.

Marcuse took over the notion of the lifeworld but argued that it is fundamentally political, as are the scientific concepts derived from it. When the scientifically purified concepts return to the lifeworld as technology, they reveal the project of the dominant social groups concealed in their abstract forms. In its very indifference to values, science already prepares this politically biased outcome. Marcuse’s daring position is summed up in the following passage:

Technology serves to institute new, more effective, and more pleasant forms of social control and social cohesion. . . . In the face of the totalitarian features of this society, the traditional notion of the “neutrality” of technology can no longer be maintained. Technology as such cannot be isolated from the use to which it is put; the technological society is a system of domination which operates already in the concept and construction of techniques. . . . As a technological universe, advanced industrial society is a *political* universe, the latest stage in the realization of a specific historical *project*—namely, the experience, transformation, and organization of nature as the mere stuff of domination. . . . As this project unfolds,

it shapes the entire universe of discourse and action, intellectual and material culture. In the medium of technology, culture, politics, and the economy merge into an omnipresent system which swallows up or repulses all alternatives. The productivity and growth potential of this system stabilize the society and contain technical progress within the framework of domination. Technological rationality has become political rationality.²⁰

Marcuse pursued this analysis in terms of the notion of the two dimensions of being he had introduced in his early thesis on Hegel. These two dimensions correspond to existence and essence, the bare empirical facts and the ideal toward which the facts tend in their process of development. Ancient Greek philosophy held the two dimensions in tension: essences are teleological goals toward which beings strive. If Aristotle defined man as a “rational animal” it was not because he believed all men achieve rationality but because this is the ultimate form toward which their nature tends.

The history of art testifies to the fidelity of human beings to this two-dimensional ontology by depicting an imagined better world in which the potential for peace, harmony, and fulfillment is finally realized. But in advanced industrial society the tension between the two dimensions is systematically reduced. New modes of experience and thought confine consciousness to the immediate facts. And insofar as those facts are governed by those who hold power, reason becomes conformist and compliant.

This pessimistic message resonated with the dystopian spirit of Adorno, Horkheimer, and Heidegger, and yet something surprising happens in the final chapter of this book. This chapter, entitled “The Chances of the Alternatives,” sketches a new concept of reason capable of uniting value and fact and guiding the recovery of a two-dimensional universe. A new science and technology are possible that would again incorporate humane ends in the very structure of rationality. Marcuse concluded, “The rationality of art, its ability to ‘project’ existence, to define yet unrealized possibilities could then be envisaged as *validated by and functioning in the scientific-technological transformation of the world.*”²¹

Marcuse refused to give up hope and suggested that we have the

technical power and the imaginative capacity to finally realize essence in existence, to create a good society. This explicit appeal to alternatives marked a significant departure unnoticed by many of Marcuse's contemporary readers and recalled by few today. But with the rise of the New Left and the counterculture, it became the main theme of his later writings.

The Agent of Revolution

Marcuse memorialized the counterculture's brighter side in his short book *An Essay on Liberation* (1969). The book's opening sentence referred to "utopian speculation," and in this manner he linked the new developments to the legacy of critical theory. He saw in the New Left movement of the day what he called the "new sensibility" of the counterculture: new popular music, new forms of language, a visceral need for peace and fellowship, all of which incorporated elements from oppressed subcultures. These elements included the explicit rejection of the dominant consumer culture, in addition to the waste and war associated with it, and the celebration of eroticism and "outlawed" forms of enjoyment. This spontaneous cultural movement offered the theory of social revolution a solution for what was otherwise a hopeless paradox:

By virtue of its basic position in the production process, by virtue of its numerical weight and the weight of exploitation, the working class is still the historical agent of revolution; by virtue of its sharing the stabilizing needs of the system, it has become a conservative, even counterrevolutionary force.

This paradox was, in fact, rooted in a dilemma as old as the Marxian theory of class revolution itself: in order to carry out its historical mission, as the class that will abolish all classes, the proletariat must, in effect, anticipate in its attitudes and acts a kind of future that has never existed in all of previous history.²² In Marcuse's words, "the awareness of the transcendent possibilities of freedom must become a driving power in the consciousness and the imagination which prepare the soil for this revolution [in the capitalist world]."²³

How was it possible to imagine that the working class—exploited, brutalized, largely uneducated, and kept in severe deprivation by the capitalist system—could take on such a mission? As far back as the sec-

ond decade of the twentieth century, Marxist theorists had grappled with this paradox. It was the subject of one of the most famous essays in Western Marxism, published by György Lukács in 1923: “Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat.”²⁴

This essay foreshadows the later dystopian critiques discussed above. The theory of reification, which is built upon Marx’s notion of “the fetishism of commodities,” argues that the capitalist labor process has a profound impact on the way in which workers experience the world around them. These changes transform the individual worker into a cog in the machine, an insignificant bit-player, spending the working day either on the mechanized assembly line of the factory, or in the immense office system of a business or government bureaucracy.

From the standpoint of the individual, these twin, highly rationalized systems of production appear to have a life of their own, that is, they appear to exist as powerful agents capable of determining the fate of the living, breathing person. The word “reification” incorporates the Latin root *res* meaning “thing.” The vast factory system and the corporate and bureaucratic structures are inanimate things that appear to be alive and that transform human beings into things obedient to their laws. The mechanical workings of the market and the bureaucracy and the actual mechanism of the machinery of capitalism now determine the individual’s fate.

At the same time as Lukács was working out the theory of reification within the context of Marxist theory, the great writer Franz Kafka, in his novels of the 1920s, *The Trial* and *The Castle*, gave the most telling and poignant representation ever conceived of a world of fully reified social relations. Novelists do not provide “solutions” to problems, of course. The solution adopted in theory by Lukács reflected the practical achievement of Lenin and his Bolsheviks in the Soviet Union: the notion that the Communist Party would be the agent capable of guiding the working class to its predestined future. But by the 1960s there was almost no one in the West—including Marcuse—who did not regard this proposition as either unlikely or, worse yet, intellectually and morally bankrupt. In rejecting this solution, Adorno and Horkheimer were stuck with a vision of unrelieved reification that left no room for hope.

What is most interesting about Lukács’s argument is not his out-

dated strategy but his explanation of the origins of the revolutionary consciousness that made that strategy plausible at the time. He argued that the reification of the worker was necessarily incomplete because the human life process could never be fully incorporated into the abstract forms of the business and bureaucratic systems. There would always be a residue appearing in misery, hunger, and the sense of injustice capable of inspiring revolutionary aspirations under the right conditions.

This tension between capitalist forms and the content of working-class experience was Lukács's Marxist reinterpretation of the conflict of soul and form he had explored in his earlier literary criticism. But it was no longer a matter of the isolated hero against society. Reinterpreted in terms of Marxist social theory, that conflict was no longer an accident of individual biography but was essential to the nature of the system and the very existence of the worker.

As a seller of labor power the worker was the embodiment of the capitalist category of the commodity, the "self-consciousness of the commodity." But this self-consciousness was fraught with contradiction. "The quantitative differences in exploitation which appear to the capitalist in the form of quantitative determinants of the objects of his calculation, must appear to the worker as the decisive, qualitative categories of his whole physical, mental and moral existence."²⁵ Simply put, for the capitalist lowering the cost of labor is a matter of business, while for the worker, to be "worth" just so and so much an hour, is to be hungry.

Until then Marxists had emphasized the objective contradiction between the economic interests of workers and capitalists in the hope that workers would eventually understand their suffering in the terms of Marx's economic science. What was original about Lukács's solution to the dilemma of the revolution was the identification of the very contradictions of capitalism in the structure of the lived experience of the working class. This was the "lifeworldly" source of the abstractions of Marxist science and of the practical efficacy of the strategies based on that science.

This approach no doubt influenced Marcuse's early revision of Heidegger's phenomenology. It is thus not surprising that when Marcuse confronted the old paradox of revolution in the 1960s, he arrived, per-

haps unconsciously, at a solution that resembled that of Lukács in important respects.

Marcuse's concept of a new sensibility was in fact an original version of the idea of an experiential revolt against the confining forms of a mechanical civilization. What makes this possible is the immense contrast between the possibilities for a better life sustained by modern technology and the perpetuation of competition, poverty, and war by a class system that cannot realize that potential without itself going under. The tension between the two dimensions has been recorded in art for millennia, but now it is no longer a question of abstract possibilities and idle hopes for a distant future. The second dimension is now *technically* realizable for the first time and the individuals are increasingly aware of this fact.

The utopian impulse confronts empirical reality in the consciousness of specific marginal groups such as students and racial minorities. They experience a literally somatic revulsion toward the system that confines them. These groups bring to the surface the possibilities of change not simply in the form of radical political opinions but in the very structure of their experience and their needs. As Lukács wrote in 1923, "the decisive, qualitative categories of [their] whole physical, mental and moral existence" stand in open conflict with the technological forms of their existence. It is in these marginal groups that one initially finds "the feeling, the awareness, that the joy of freedom and the need to be free must precede liberation."²⁶

Just as Marcuse completed this new book, in May of 1968, a student revolt triggered a much larger labor conflict in France where ten million workers went on strike, many of them demanding socialism rather than mere wage increases. For Marcuse these French May Events were a sign that marginal groups could play a catalytic role in a wider social movement. All the elements of a new theory of revolution were now united.

The May revolt was soon defeated and subsequently the New Left faded away. But a marker had been planted for the future so that those who may one day traverse this path again, and who resolve to push farther along it, will know what they must be capable of, namely, "the development of a radically different consciousness (a veritable *counter-consciousness*) capable of breaking through the fetishism of the con-

sumer society. . . .”²⁷ This was Marcuse’s final word on the subject. The endless and ever-expanding sphere of consumer needs, lashed by a perpetual cycle of fashion that drives its devotees back to the shops with no less desperation than the heroin addict’s hunger for the needle, is the sphere within which the contest must begin to be fought—if it is to be fought at all.

Marcuse’s last essays and speeches retreat from his most optimistic conclusions. In the 1970s he witnessed the “preventive counter-revolution” that suppressed the New Left and breathed new confidence into capitalism. Yet something fundamental had been achieved by the movement: the renewed imagination of revolution.

This achievement is reflected in his final reflections on feminism and the problem of nature. Marcuse saw in the feminist and environmental movements the emergence of a less aggressive stance foreshadowing a more humane world. In these reflections Marcuse returned to ideas he had first expressed in his interpretation of Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. There he had found a concept of lived nature that resonated with his phenomenological training. Not the nature of natural science, but that of direct experience expressed itself in beauty and called to us for respect and care. This call, like the call for compassion of suffering humanity, was the ground and the reason for hope.

A Summing Up

Simply stated, what chiefly distinguishes Marcuse’s career as a thinker and activist from those of his closest colleagues in the Frankfurt School is that unlike them he never gave up. For more than thirty years after their trails turned in different directions, Marcuse never ceased reinterpreting and reconfiguring the critical theory of society with a single aim in mind: to track the obscure path to the socialist utopia through the latest transformations in capitalist societies in an epoch marked by an astonishing rise in material wealth.

Some will ask: What was the point of this quixotic venture? The alternative visions—whether in the form of democratic socialism, or anarchistic dope-fueled hippie communes, or Soviet communism—were gone, they will say, never to return. Even if one granted, for the sake of argument, that some aspects of those visions were worthy of respect and

admiration, this would remain a purely academic exercise: their time has passed. Actually, many will contend, the dream of socialist utopia had turned into a nightmare as long ago as the 1920s, and there were very good reasons why, after 1945, people turned to technocratic liberalism rather than socialism as the vehicle of progress.

This may well be history's final judgment on the matter. If so, then in looking ahead, one might conclude that the task awaiting humanity is to expand the paradise of consumer satisfaction, which now makes life so satisfying for the privileged strata around the world. Perhaps. But consider these questions:

1. Is it *really* possible to imagine extending the consumer paradise to everyone on the globe? All six or eight billion? Who will then cut and sew and stitch and label the brand-name goods for these happy consumers? Who will clean and wash and cook and garden, who will man the guard posts at the entrances to their gated communities, who will fight their wars for them? Can one *really* believe that serried ranks of clever automated machines, toiling endlessly without protest in sterile unlit underground factories, caring for themselves without human intervention, will do it all?
2. If not this scenario, then what? Will the great inequalities in the world's distribution of wealth, both within and among nations, continue indefinitely? Will the overwhelming majority of the poor and downtrodden just have to settle for the crumbs from the table, as they do now? Perhaps these inequalities will even widen, rather than narrow, so that should any future redistribution occur, it will proceed *from* the poor *to* the wealthy, as has been happening within the United States, the richest of the rich, for the past quarter-century. But is it likely that, as the numbers of the less privileged grow, they will remain docile, taking the advice of their preachers to wait until the hereafter for a better deal? And is it acceptable to enlarge the proportion of the citizenry who are incarcerated in high-security prisons for most of their natural lives in order to protect the rights of the privileged?
3. If the first scenario is unlikely or improbable, and the second is immoral and deeply disgraceful, then what does the future hold?

And so, on the other hand, there may be a need to keep alive the spark of utopia after all. Its function for us today is primarily negative: to

undermine the complacency that makes the intolerable tolerable. Marcuse had the art of inspiring a longer view in the light of past experience and future possibilities. His critique of globalization, war, and the threats to democracy is still relevant. We need his “negative thinking” as much now as when he wrote the texts included in this collection. But that is not all.

Perhaps there will come a time when a demand will arise again for something resembling the old vision that inspired the democratic socialists: a society with fewer private goods than are enjoyed by the wealthy today but also richer in public goods and human sympathy—in parks, schools, and medical care; a society more just, more egalitarian, more helpful to the world’s poorest peoples, less warlike, less racist, and less frantic in the pursuit of money; a society more considerate of the needs of other animals, more respectful of wilderness and Earth’s remaining solitudes.

If that time comes, those who take part in the movement will want to read the writings of Herbert Marcuse.

The selections from Marcuse’s writings collected here are divided into three parts. A first part introduces Marcuse’s political thought, a second part develops his relation to the most influential theoretical trends he encountered during his lifetime, and the last part introduces some of his most important philosophical ideas.

Part I: This section begins with an essay on the fate of individuality in advanced society. The essay is notable for its analysis of neo-imperialism, which has been amply confirmed by recent events. The second essay presents Marcuse’s critique of science and technology. Part I concludes with his critique of tolerance. This last essay stirred up tremendous controversy and influenced the thinking of many in the New Left.

Part II: In the course of his career, Marcuse was influenced by and responded to three of the main trends in European thought: Marxism, existentialism, and psychoanalysis. The essays in this part exemplify his critical appropriation of Marxism and psychoanalysis and his negative critique of Heidegger and Sartre’s existentialism.

Part III: Marcuse’s thought was elaborated in dialogue within the tradition of Western philosophy. In the first selection he addresses

Aristotle, Hegel, and Nietzsche, all three major influences on his unique version of Critical Theory. The second and third essays discuss the social function of art and nature as they are experienced in modern times.

Notes

For the most thorough intellectual biography of Marcuse, see Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* (Berkeley: University of California, 1984).

1. Herbert Marcuse, “Beiträge zu Einer Phänomenologie des historischen Materialismus,” *Herbert Marcuse Schriften* (Frankfurt, Suhrkamp Verlag, 1978), vol. I, p. 358. This and other early texts are available in Herbert Marcuse, *Heideggerian Marxism*, eds. R. Wolin and J. Abromeit (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2005). For an interpretation of Marcuse’s relation to Heidegger, see Andrew Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History* (New York: Routledge, 2005).

2. Herbert Marcuse, *Hegel’s Ontology and the Theory of Historicity*, tr. Seyla Benhabib (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1987).

3. See Hans Sluga, *Heidegger’s Crisis: Philosophy and Politics in Nazi Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

4. See Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories, and Political Significance*, tr. Michael Robertson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994).

5. “Traditional and Critical Theory,” tr. Matthew J. O’Connell, in Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory* (New York: Herder & Herder, 1972), pp. 198–99, 208, 210.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. 226–27.

7. “Philosophy and Critical Theory,” tr. Jeremy J. Shapiro, in Herbert Marcuse, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), pp. 135, 142–43, 145.

8. See, e.g., J. C. Davis, *Utopia and the Ideal Society: A Study of English Utopian Writing, 1516–1700* (Cambridge University Press, 1981).

9. Jacoby, *Picture Imperfect: Utopian Thought for an Anti-Utopian Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 31–36.

10. *Critical Theory*, p. 220.

11. This and the following quotation are from *Negations*, pp. 154–55.

12. See Wiggershaus, pp. 386–92.

13. Now translated by John Abromeit and published under the title “33

Theses," in the *Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse*, ed. Douglas Kellner, vol. I, *Technology, War and Fascism* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), pp. 215–27.

14. *Ibid.*, Theses 1, 19, 25, 32.

15. Wiggershaus, pp. 390–92, 462–66.

16. *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p. 143; italics in original.

17. This example is suggested by the present authors, not by Marcuse himself.

18. The foregoing discussion is based on pages 150–57 of *Eros and Civilization*.

19. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, tr. J. Cummings (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), p. 3.

20. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), pp. xv–xvi.

21. *Ibid.*, p. 239. Italics in original.

22. See W. Leiss, "Critical Theory and Its Future," *Political Theory*, vol. 2 (1974), pp. 330–49.

23. This and the preceding quotation are from Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp. 16, 23.

24. The essay is included in Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, tr. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971). For commentary see W. Leiss, *Under Technology's Thumb* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990), ch. 5; and A. Feenberg, *Lukács, Marx and the Sources of Critical Theory* (Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield, 1981).

25. *History and Class Consciousness*, p. 166.

26. *An Essay on Liberation*, p. 89.

27. Marcuse, *Counter-Revolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), p. 32.