

Praxis Exiled: Herbert Marcuse and the One Dimensional University

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Leading Frankfurt School theorist, Herbert Marcuse, possessed an intricate relationship with higher education. As a professor, Marcuse participated in the 1960s student movements, believing that college students had potential as revolutionary subjects. Additionally, Marcuse advocated for a college education empowered by a form of praxis that extended education outside the university into realms of critical thought and action. However, the more pessimistic facet of his theory, best represented in the canonical One Dimensional Man, now seems to be the dominant ideology in the contemporary college experience. With the rise of the corporate university, knowledge is commodified and praxis is supplanted by rampant consumerism. Once a haven for critical theory, the college experience has been overtaken by capitalism, substantially limiting the revolutionary potential for college students in favour of an institutionalised, one dimensional university.

HERBERT MARCUSE AND THE LEVELING OF THE COLLEGE LANDSCAPE

Herbert Marcuse had a profound faith in the power of student populations. In the 1960s, students carried well-thumbed copies of his most notable work, *One Dimensional Man*, to demonstrations and protests, reciprocally elevating Marcuse to an esteemed position among theorists during that time. Marcuse, himself, participated in these movements and served as a key speaker in lectures celebrating the critical, the radical, and the *avant-garde*. Though a keen critic of capitalism's subtle deprivations and a theorist openly pessimistic about the expanding intrusiveness of the technological society, there is an underlying hopefulness pulsing through Marcuse's work. Like any true Marxist-inspired theorist, Marcuse envisioned a better future, one ushered not necessarily by the proletariat, but rather by the hundreds of thousands of college students spread across the United States.

Marcuse's faith in college students stemmed from multiple origins—idealistic and pragmatic. Those enrolled in universities held the most

substantial stake in the 1960s counterculture movement. This movement, temporarily shielded from the pacifying tendencies imbued within advanced capitalist labour, embraced philosophies of the left, particularly those reflecting materialist polemics, such as Marcuse's work, where actual conditions engendered powerful critical arguments. At the same time, Marcuse's texts, indicative of those engineered by the Frankfurt School, often were compositionally and rhetorically difficult, and thus college students represented the most appropriate population for Marcuse's philosophical and critical program. Yet, regardless of the motivation, the revolutionary potentiality within the college students seemed undeniable, and perhaps it was this potential that served as the true genealogical channel to Marcuse's faith. And this revolution would not be the Marxian sort consisting of rightful seizure, nor would it be realised in the cultural upheavals of sex, drugs, and pop art born in the campus and readily assimilated into the capitalist machine. Instead, the revolutionary potentiality of college students lay crystallised in pragmatic inevitability. It would be unleashed a decade or two later when these students would progress into the realms of industry, media, and government and shatter the one dimensional society into countless shards, each flickering with the Marxist (and even Hegelian) actualisation of human potential long fettered by capitalism.

Unfortunately, some 'inevitable' are prone to faltering. The revolutionary potential of 1960s college students would be subsumed in the miasma of capital. Marcuse would write about the apparent failure of the New Left, but not even his critical mind could predict the betrayal of the student movement. Their knowledge and energy, once crucial ingredients to the critical mind-sets of college students everywhere, would ossify and harden into the intellectual fuel that would stoke the engines of postmodern capitalism. A form of Marcusean one dimensionality has advanced into universities, represented in the corporatisation of higher education and its numerous stifling implications. Theory, previously the lifeblood of practice, is now torn away, isolated, and commodified in order for college students to become more receptive to a consumer mentality that ensures capitalism's longevity. David Noble (2002) commented on this tendency within higher education, characterising the commodification of education as capitalist-driven degradation of the educational process that 'requires the interruption of fundamental education process and the disintegration and distillation of the education experience into discrete, reified, and ultimately saleable things or packages of things' (p. 28). College as both explicit training for future employment as well as a space rife with socialised consumption functions as the very non-terroristic, yet pervasive, form of capitalist control that Marcuse so effectively deconstructed several decades earlier. To revisit this transformation is to learn about the startling relevance of a theory despite its failure; for ultimately, Marcuse's reflections on advanced capitalism read truer today than during the time they were composed. Yet, unlike back then, these theories are without a home, exiled from the critical landscape of college now levelled by capitalist ideology and the rise of the corporate university.

STUDENTS AS REVOLUTIONARY SUBJECTS

As member of the Frankfurt School, Herbert Marcuse stood at the vanguard of critical theory, composing rich philosophical critiques that blended Neo-Marxism with other philosophical and psychological movements, including those of Heidegger and Freud. More importantly, Marcuse's theory, more than perhaps any other Frankfurt School thinker, dwelt outside exclusively esoteric realms and thus represented a critical theory more easily transmutable into practice. A simple reason for this contention lies in the notion that Marcuse was more fascinated by problems concerning being than his peers in Frankfurt. In lieu of the sweeping philosophical statements of Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Walter Benjamin, Marcuse directed critical focus inward. His most notable text, *One Dimensional Man*, narrows critique with considerable precision, effectively sidestepping the Marxian tendency towards mass categorisation in order to properly analyse how deeply advanced capitalism's influence penetrated. Gendered rhetoric aside, *One Dimensional Man* is about you and your life. The ontological nuances resonating within the text not only criticise a particularly American manner of existence, but simultaneously speak to American cultural inheritance of individualism.

Through these theoretical inroads, Marcuse's theory became entrenched in the 1960s student movements. While teaching at the University of California at San Diego, Marcuse took advantage of the notoriety garnered by *One Dimensional Man* to influence his students to 'shift their energies . . . to the larger mobilization of an anti-war resistance' (Katz, 1982, p. 173). In addition to contributing to the anti-war movement, Marcuse 'also engaged the emerging feminist, environmental, gay and lesbian, and other oppositional social movements of the era, and his writings, lectures, and political interventions became part of the history of the times' (Marcuse, 2005, p. 3). There is considerable depth and variety concerning Marcuse's involvement with the mobilisation of students, touching several crucial points along the progression of the nascent radical student counter-culture. Moreover, Marcuse understood the college student as a revolutionary subject, one that would not entirely supplant the working class, yet Marcuse 'assuredly considered them an indispensable element' (Maier, 1984, p. 43) in a revolutionary project. Indeed, one may argue, as Morton Schoolman (1980) does, that students held something of a 'privileged character' that enabled their radical movement to thrive 'because the students were removed from the larger culture rooted in the process of mass consumption and production' (p. 312).

This component certainly held both an opportunity and a challenge for Marcuse to contend with as he sought to elevate student movements. True, students were, in some sense, sheltered from the influences of capital, but as will soon be discussed, that shelter is now not as sturdy as in previous decades. Nevertheless, within the former framework of higher education, the crucial components of a social movement could easily be assembled. Young people in large numbers, connected by social and educational purposes, could unite for political purposes. These students had access to not

only the texts of critical theorists, but also the critical theorists themselves who, like Marcuse, frequently taught at universities.

However, despite this encouraging atmosphere, Marcuse proved quite adamant about moving the students' political theory and action outside the campus walls. In a 1968 lecture at Brooklyn College, Marcuse (2009) argued that 'By its own inner dynamic, education thus *leads beyond the classroom*, beyond the university, *into the political dimension*, and into the *moral, instinctual dimension*' (p. 35, his italics). Marcuse here encapsulates the student movement in a trajectory that begins in classroom and jettisons outwards, but what is important is that the student movement is not merely physical, but theoretical as well. Piercing through the institutional chamber, a student movement functions as actualised praxis, critical theory, and critical action harmoniously uniting. The critical journey, rife with revolutionary potential, represented one of the most sincere actions against Marcuse's primary targets: societal one dimensionality and its numerous consequences.

THE PROBLEMS OF ONE DIMENSIONALITY

Marcuse's critique of capitalism, which would serve as the framework for his theory of one dimensionality, is among the most dialectical ever offered. Marcuse is never content to render purely negative critiques of the capitalism's explicitly oppressive characteristics: exploitation, inequality, and the manipulation of labour, but instead continually connects them with the capitalism's seemingly positive aspects: technological development, increases in production, and the possibility for a comfortable existence. In the essay, 'From Ontology to Technology,' Marcuse (2011a) writes:

All progress, all growth of productivity, is accompanied by a progressive repression and a productive destruction. The social division of labor engenders this fatal dialectic through which . . . all progress contains its own irrationally, every gain of liberty contains a new form of servitude, and all production contains restrictions that are equally efficacious (p. 139).

In the advanced stage of capitalism, which he characterises as a 'the increasingly frenetic spiral of progress and destruction' (Marcuse, 2005, p. 191), every step forward comes with the erasure of the path. Capitalism's tendencies towards its own conception of progress are not born *despite* its destructive potentiality but *through* it. More troubling, this dramatic interplay is coded and absorbed into the very fabric of everyday existence, subtly concealed, and it is through this deception that one dimensionality takes place.

Marcuse's biographer, Barry Katz (1982), describes *One Dimensional Man* as a study of the 'assimilation of the public and private, inner and outer, through the extension of the realm of necessity . . . into the realm traditionally reserved by ideologies of the bourgeois era for the free devel-

opment of the self' (p. 165). Marxian theory was somewhat ill equipped to describe advanced capitalist oppressive tendencies that extended outside the workplace into the social lives of citizens. Through technology, the media, and a converging standardisation of values, capitalism need not employ physical force or terror to obtain compliance. Instead, an unending stream of commodities (and the false need joined to them) 'carry with them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions, which bind consumers more or less pleasantly to the producers, and through the latter, to the whole' (Marcuse, 1964, p. 12). Therefore, we are provided with a supremely ontologised critique of capitalism in which an attack on individual authenticity now becomes a crucial facet of the capitalist agenda.

Within this framework, Marcuse owes a debt to his former mentor, Martin Heidegger, whose work reestablished the prominence of ontology in philosophical discourse. Heidegger's ontology may not have been as critical or materialist, but it enabled Marcuse to situate Marxism into the lens of the individual. In the one dimensional society, as Box (2011) points out in a recent essay on Marcuse, 'individuals must exercise a repression of their wishes and desires beyond that which would be needed merely to get along cooperatively with others' (p. 172). One dimensionality is the negation of the critical theory. At times a disciplinary mechanism, at times a compulsory mind-set focused primarily on consumption, it is a condition through which a society relinquishes the difficulties of proper criticism in favour of general agreement with the tides of capitalism.

However, capitalism is not the only target in *One Dimensional Man*. Marcuse's critique also pertains to the technological society. Again, Marcuse demonstrates the influence of Heidegger in regard to advanced technology being an 'enframing' device that narrows our senses to a technological worldview, enabling us to dominate nature and by extension other human beings. Stanley Aronowitz (1999) further elaborates, 'Technological rationality . . . has penetrated every fiber of social being; not only has negation become unthinkable, but liberal capitalism . . . fixes limits so alternatives that are not instrumental to systematic reproduction are silenced' (p. 145). Much like Jacques Ellul's critique offered in *The Technological Society*, not only is technology a non-neutral tool in the hands of a capitalist system, but also its true invasiveness is internalised. Reason is usurped by technological rationality that dulls one's critical senses in order to reflect an array of non-humanist mentalities: positivist, consumerist, and bureaucratic.

The dialectical relationship between capitalism and technology had long been mentioned in any number of Marx's discussions; however, *One Dimensional Man* expounds upon this relationship more fully as Marcuse describes the consumer society as 'the direct offshoot of the systematic manipulation of technology [which] has silenced the individual and made him apathetic or hostile to the idea of dissent' (Ocay, 2010, p. 60). Ultimately, what marks *One Dimensional Man* as a canonical work in critical theory is its ability to blend a variety of critical frameworks and implications into a single work and apply them so readily to numerous situations.

Language, for instance, is gradually stripped of its critical ability in order to become ‘the functionalized, abridged, and unified language . . . of one dimensional thought’ (Marcuse, 1964, p. 95). Marcuse further contends:

If the language of politics tends to become that of advertising, thereby bridging the gap between two formerly different realms of society, then this tendency seems to express the degree to which domination and administration have ceased to be a separate and independent function in the technology society (1964, p. 103).

One dimensionality is a product of an intricate amalgam of capitalism, technology, and instrumental rationality, which penetrate the thought, language, and action of society. The loss of the critical is supplemented by the extension of consumerism as a mass standardisation and uniformity shadows the entire popular culture. In order to reinvigorate a critical modality to society, Marcuse would look to higher education where his theory held the strongest ground. As previously discussed, Marcuse’s involvement in the student movements and faith in students’ revolutionary potential function as countercultural movements outside the realm of one dimensionality. This involvement reflected the central tenets of Marcuse’s philosophy of education, which stands as both a promise and challenge to traditional concepts of education, moving it away from basic instruction to a model for liberation.

MULTI-DIMENSIONAL EDUCATION

Like much of his theory, Marcuse’s educational thought is decidedly two-dimensional. Education has the potential to act as a vehicle towards liberation as well as one of oppression. Stephen Brookefield highlights the dual nature of Marcuse’s educational theory by discussing how adult experiential education both possesses facets that ‘legitimise’ a one dimensional society, and can also operate as a means of critique ‘if it focused on deconstructing experiences and showing their one dimensional nature and if it avoided the uncritical celebration of people’s stories’ (Brookefield, 2002, p. 272). Such contentions mirror what Marcuse (2009) labelled ‘the dialectic of education in this society’ in which education can effectively steer the political process; but at the same time, education serves as an institutionalised rationality that ‘contains’ knowledge ‘in order to protect this society against radical change’ (p. 34). As a philosopher, the epistemological underpinnings of education held particular interest to Marcuse. Education’s relation to knowledge—how education conceived and transmitted it—would unfold as the entry point for Marcuse’s educational thought. For Marcuse, education must be one with a critical theory, and as Charles Reitz (2009) rightly argues of Marcuse’s educational philosophy, ‘there needs to be a key unity in education of critical thought and radical action’ (p. 238). Once more, we revisit the notion of praxis, which could easily be represented as an educational practice, demonstrated in 1960s

student movements. These praxis-based educational objectives represented the new direction through which education could pull society away from one dimensionality. In 'Liberation from the Affluent Society,' Marcuse speaks (2005) of a 'new' sense of education:

Being theory as well as practice, political practice, education today is more than discussion, more than teaching and learning and writing . . . we must see that we can we can generate the instinctual and intellectual revulsion against values of an affluence which spreads aggressiveness and suppression throughout the world (p. 85).

The revolutionary potential within education would be unlocked if education would be saved from itself. A total reconceptualisation of education would have to occur, a *negative* education of sorts, which 'would be a strange, most unpopular, and unprofitable education . . . it would require the debunking of all heroism in the service of inhumanity, of sport and fun in the service of brutality and stupidity, of the faith of necessity of the struggle for existence in the necessity for business' (Marcuse, 2011b, p. 78). Education as critical theory would serve as a comprehensive reimagining of the ontological and epistemological basis of society as well as reunification of theory and practice towards the actualisation of that vision. Although this mode of education was undoubtedly radical, it still served as an effective mobilising force for student movements and had a place in the college environment. Gradually, this would fall by the wayside as the corporatisation and commercialisation of higher education that Marcuse anticipated would exile critical thought from the higher education, replacing praxis with a method of training that facilitated integration in the one dimensional society.

CONTEMPORARY REINFORCEMENT OF ONE DIMENSIONALITY

Even in 1960, Marcuse was aware of the growing corporatisation of higher education. This is not particularly surprising, for one dimensionality is a condition that affects all facets of society, and education's relationship with labour as well as the campus culture's conductivity towards consumerist tendencies enabled Marcuse's fears to be realised. As Peter Seybold (2008) effectively summarises, 'Capitalists seek not only to mould the university to their own interests, but marginalise challengers to corporate hegemony. To accomplish this task, university culture must be commodified, and the logic of capital must thoroughly penetrate the university's administration' (p. 120). The bond between college and capitalism had not always been so harmonious. As Frank Donoghue (2008) writes in *The Last Professors: The Corporate University and the Fate of the Humanities*: 'the greater capitalists of the early twentieth century saw in America's universities a set of core values and management style antithetical to their own' (p. 2). During this period, the cloistered academic, concerned with unprofitable liberal arts, represented a waste of human capital for the developing

industrialisation of the United States. However, this conflict would gradually resolve itself largely due to the economic opportunities universities provided, as well as the steady coalescing between college and labour markets.

Now college culture, once a haven for critical theory, mirrors that of commercial realms with an unsettling precision. The rhetoric and mentality of corporations are actualised in 'universities' claims to marketplace 'excellence', a consumerist, anything goes curriculum, and increasingly desperate popular reliance on the college degree as security against obsolescence in the globalized economy' (Fink, 2008, p. 231). Indeed, the very fetters of consumerism that Marcuse criticised in *One Dimensional Man* have entangled today's college students who, according to Molesworth, Nixon and Scullion (2009), 'are well versed in the pseudo-sovereignty status afforded them by the consumer culture. Their experiences in commercial marketplaces and their confidences as consumers, allow them to carry the same attitudes to . . . education' (p. 279). The education consumer society has numerous implications that corrode the college experience and disrupt gestures towards Marcuse's vision of critical theory and praxis. It is no more clearly realised than in the unceasing proliferation of online courses, which truly represents Marcuse's concerns of commodification of knowledge, technological invasiveness and social consciousness usurped by institutionalised standardisation. In 'Foundations of Corporatization: Lessons for the Community College,' Juli A. Jones' (2008) description describes online education in somewhat Marcusean sentiments: 'One of the most significant trends in the drive to meet customer demand is the push to develop distance/online education. This format allows colleges to do more for less (and with less). Efficiency can be obtained through the use of technology, few faculty, and reliance on adjuncts' (p. 215).

Once more, technology and consumerism meld together in a reciprocal relationship, generating an environment in which critical thought is glossed over via a standardised digital curriculum and the possibilities for praxis are upended by distance and customer convenience. In what has become a highly-esteemed account of the corporatisation of higher education, *The Knowledge Factory*, Stanley Aronowitz (2000) discusses how distance learning 'is likely to emulate the American cultural ideal of possessive individualism' (p. 253). The technological society is not one ruled by neutrality, but is reflective of the values of the dominant structure. Online education is not merely a point of accessibility towards higher education, but was engineered with explicit market principles in mind, and for Marcuse and other critical theorists these principles more often than not stand in direct opposition to critical thought and action.

Of course, distance education serves as an application of a growing epistemological movement in higher education: the commodification of knowledge. This movement operates as the direct inversion of Marcuse's educational thought, as the most basic component and function of education is contaminated by the continual reimagining of the college experience as a gesture towards profit. In *University in a Corporate Culture*, Eric Gould (2003) discusses how the technological rationality prevailing in

education has created the for-profit university that ‘insist[s] . . . knowledge is *only* a commodity. . . . The practices of for-profit schools result from extending and undercutting the traditional market’s own development of commodity knowledge by lowering costs, improving efficiencies, and radically simplifying the nature of the product’ (p. 34). In the for-profit university, students have a corporatised educational system in its purest form, and while traditional colleges will resist some characteristics of for-profit schools, the demands of competition will compel many to adopt policies that treat knowledge as packaged content to sell and students as consumers, primed for seamless integration into the one dimensional culture. Some students are resisting this trend, particularly graduate students who are exploited simultaneously as consumers as well as sources of labour. Jennifer Washburn (2005) discusses the hostility among graduated students who are increasingly relied upon to transmit curriculum in her book, *University Inc.: The Corporate Corruption of Higher Education*: these students become ‘keenly aware that by allowing universities to exploit their cheap labour, they are helping to eliminate the very full-time positions for which they are purportedly being trained’ (p. 211).

The connection that professors, like Marcuse, once held with their students is being warped into a competition revolving around academic labour in which, to obtain their credential, graduate students must, in some sense, contribute to their own field’s obsolescence. Although these students are understandably resistant to such measures, the commercialisation of higher education enables students to willingly become pawns in the system. Such a case was recounted by Derek Bok (2003) in *Universities in the Marketplace* in which two undergraduates persuaded ‘a corporation to pay all their college expenses in return for spreading the company’s message among their fellow undergraduates’ (p. 110). This very story represents a complete reversal of Marcuse’s efforts in the 1960s. No longer does the university environment serve as a space for the political praxis enlivened by critical theory. One dimensionality, and its swarm of technological and capitalist accompaniments, has standardised the higher education system with a singular institutionalised rationality, consigning Marcuse’s model for a critical education to a mere vision reposing in college libraries.

CONCLUSION: PRAXIS BEYOND EDUCATION

Marcuse’s educational promise is one unfulfilled, and his critical theory is exiled. Certainly, various academic departments in colleges across the United States teach critical theory, but those same professors must be aware of the cruel irony that, devoid of praxis and often transmitted at a distance through online means, such teaching efforts are indicative of Marcuse’s very concerns. The consumer culture and the campus culture are indistinguishable. Marcuse’s theories are pre-packaged and commodified for uncritical consumption. The 1960s student movements can only be examined nostalgically, as that critical current has evaporated. This is not to argue that college students no longer possess revolutionary potential or no

longer exercise models of praxis that seek to change society. The Occupy Movement was powered, in part, by college students, many of whom were familiar with Marcuse's texts, and this represents but one of an array of movements crafted by young people who are critical of a capitalist society. Nevertheless, when Marcuse argued that true education must extend outside the university, the roots of that praxis began and were fostered in that college environment. Marcuse's work as both a scholar and professor served as an intellectual and organising force that facilitated student movements, but stronger competing forces have disrupted the possibility of student praxis. College cultures now embody one dimensionality, unifying student populations with a continuous stream of commodities as the college itself is governed by capitalist rationality—all of which creates a pervasive atmosphere adversarial to critical thought and countercultural movements. For a student movement to happen, students must truly venture *outside* the college, embracing a form of self-exile, lest their critical efforts somehow be appropriated by the larger corporate culture of their university.

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