

Doing Critical Theory

Reviewers: A State University of New York Cortland Theoretical Community

ESCAPE FROM FREEDOM by Erich Fromm. New York: Avon, 1941. 333 pp. \$2.25

ONE-DIMENSIONAL MAN by Herbert Marcuse. Boston: Beacon Press, 1964. 257 pp. \$3.95

HAVEN IN A HEARTLESS WORLD by Christopher Lasch. New York: Basic Books, 1977. 230 pp. cloth \$12.95; paper \$4.95

SOCIAL AMNESIA by Russell Jacoby. Boston: Beacon Press, 1975. 191 pp. \$3.95

This review was written collectively by the faculty and student members of a three-credit seminar on critical theory. The four faculty members initiated the seminar project with the goal of transmitting the tradition and problematic of critical theory as formulated in such classics as *Escape From Freedom* and *One-Dimensional Man* and in such contemporary works as *Haven in a Heartless World* and *Social Amnesia*. Yet the goal of the project went beyond the mere teaching of critical theory to undergraduate students, because teaching as a technical exercise contradicts the emancipatory intentions of critical theory. This intention can be better understood in light of the problematic stated below.

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The critical theory of one-dimensionality specifies the totalization of domination where hitherto socially unclaimed domains of existence are rationally integrated into the logic of the exchange and technological process. Not only the workplace, but the family, the social sciences, the helping professions, the political left, popular culture, and the inner reaches of consciousness come under the control of rational forms of domination. In this context, an objective theory of subjectivity is necessary—a theory which specifies the dialectic of object and subject, of historical society and the self. An objective theory of subjectivity apprehends history and society in such a way that we apprehend—we know, and, by that knowing, change—ourselves. In this way, the critique of the established reality simultaneously is made possible by and eventuates in a move to transcend that reality. This possibility is grounded in the Hegelian insight, faithfully adhered to by Marx and the Frankfurt School theorists, that knowledge of the object (the social life within which we are all implicated) is simultaneously an act of changing the status and meaning of that object. Put differently, the critique of one-dimensional society is made possible by a project which, if successful, proves that this society is not truly one-dimensional.

The creation of an objective theory of subjectivity requires the availability of open spaces, spaces which exist outside the logic of domination. To the extent that the open spaces granted to us in this society increasingly come under the spreading wing of administration or, related to this, disappear as more and more people in the name of psychic liberation pursue a narcissistic, subjective search for subjectivity, we must create our own open space where critical thought can be pursued, sustained, and revitalized. Theory, then, must organize itself and reflect on those conditions that enable it to organize itself. Theory must become critical, and critical theory is neither formally taught nor passively learned. Rather, it is done, it is acquired by establishing those conditions that falsify the truth of the present and affirm the goal of human emancipation and the promise of a better, more decent life. In this view, doing theory in a society in which theory is done is an act of considerable value and importance.

In these terms, most of us realized from the start that the seminar would be successful to the extent that it subverted itself by becoming a theoretical community. A theoretical community is an open space where theory is grounded in a community of people committed to the

pursuit of knowledge and where the community is guided and given meaning by theory. Not merely a refuge for critical thought and an occasion for celebrating good news or allaying panics in the face of bad news, the theoretical community is an ongoing practice which is continually reflexive of itself. Theory and community inform and thereby transform each other, and if their mediation is successful, we understand the critique of advanced industrial society offered by critical theory precisely as we invalidate it. Negative critique becomes positive critique, and the pessimism of critical theory—a pessimism which drenches the powerful analyses of Marcuse, Lasch, and Jacoby—becomes the source of optimism.

Given our project, which was even less clearly defined at the beginning than it is now, we required readings indebted to the tradition of critical theory, particularly as it is rooted in the synthesis of Marx and Freud. The books briefly discussed below are dialectical analyses that offer both a history and a theory of advanced industrial capitalism; they are critiques that both demystify and negate this society and provide direction to our practice as a community.

Fromm's *Escape From Freedom* was the first, and the least difficult, of the books. Guiding Fromm's historical analysis of the development of industrial capitalism is the original project of critical theory: "The Dialectic of the Enlightenment." In nineteenth century industrial capitalism, freedom and reason, which once stood as allies in the battle against superstition, ignorance, and the domination they justified, are separated, and reason is reduced to the rationality of scientific knowledge, technology, the marketplace, and bureaucratic organization. Reason as rationality, although it promotes a freedom from the exigencies of nature, a freedom from hunger and toil and the overwhelming ties of community, ultimately blocks movement toward positive freedom. Capitalist rationality frees people from external social constraints, but does so in such a way that people are not free to realize their human capabilities. Domination does not disappear, rather its external forms give way to internal ones. Precisely for this reason, the Marxian analysis of capitalist domination must be joined to Freudian psychoanalysis in order to understand the socially produced, yet psychically grounded, constraints on freedom. Only in these terms can we grasp the totalitarian conformism characteristic of the capitalism of the 1930s and 1940s. The authoritarian personality of fascist capitalism and the automation conformist of monopoly

capitalism, Fromm suggests, have their roots in the same historical developments. The separation of freedom from reason, of emotions from performance, of love from work wrought by capitalist rationality damages the personality, creates feelings of powerlessness and aloneness, and produces individuals who experience freedom as insecurity or a burdensome task to be avoided by subordinating the self to the commands of a leader or mass culture.

Fromm's analysis provided us with the opportunity to discuss the historical development and dynamics of modern capitalism, to examine Marx's critique of social repression and Freud's of individual repression, and, in this way, to introduce generally the central problematic of critical theory. Of particular importance in this context was our assessment of Fromm's proposed solution to the totalitarianism of SS troops and mass advertising; namely, "positive freedom consists in the spontaneous activity of the total, integrated personality . . . [and] this freedom man can attain by the realization of his self, by being himself." In large measure, this "solution" is made possible by Fromm's humanistic interpretation of Freud, one which, by denying the reality of unconscious forces and psychic conflicts, can forget Freud's profound discovery that there exists an irreconcilable conflict between psychological man and social man. By diluting Freud in the name of humanism, Fromm sacrificed the dialectic and thereby distanced himself from critical theory which takes the fundamental tension between subject and object, nature and culture, and transforms it into a dialectic of refusal and revolution. With a deeper appreciation and a more carefully crafted critique of both Freud and Marx, the evaluation of advanced capitalism offered by critical theory (particularly by Marcuse, Lasch, and Jacoby) makes clear that the personal growth self-help solution suggested by Fromm as a transcendent mode is ultimately still another form of social control in one-dimensional society. We return again to this issue—the political limitations of Freudian revisionism—in the last book discussed in this review, Jacoby's *Social Amnesia*.

Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* restates the major themes addressed by the Frankfurt School in their development of critical theory from the 1930s onward. As a result of the extension of technical rationality to all domains of human and social existence in advanced industrial societies, the dialectical tension which once characterized the relationship of the individual, the working class, art, and philosophy

and society has vanished. One-dimensionality means that what is given and what is possible become collapsed into the same object. The individual and the working class, unable to transcend the established status quo, can no longer step outside of the existing order so as to assess objectively its institutions in terms other than those of the society's own stated values. Conceptions of freedom, equality, happiness, and justice, once contradictory of the established arrangements, are now reconciled to and equated with the existing order of things. Further, the machinery of total administration no longer admits the expression of those needs whose satisfaction would require the transformation of the society. Human needs are one-dimensionalized, made equivalent with the requirements of prevailing institutions, and ideologically defined as the expression of freedom, happiness, equality, and justice.

The logic of total administration, spreading outward from the workplace to encompass the family, popular culture, education, and everyday consciousness, is expressed not only in the reification of once socially transcendent ideals, but also in the operationalization of concepts in the social sciences, philosophy, and art. In this way, the second dimension of human existence—the domain of language, communication, imagination, fantasy, play—is suppressed and responds only to that which is socially given. In outlining the conditions necessary for the realization of critical reflection and freedom, Marcuse emphasizes the imperative of maintaining the classical definition of reason as the ability of the person to reflect on his/her existence in terms of objective truth and ethical norms. This humanized conception of Reason is distinct from the reified conception of technical rationality which, embodied in science, technology, and bureaucracy, has only led to the total administration of human existence.

The reading-discussion of Lasch's *Haven in a Heartless World* immediately following Marcuse proved to be well-chosen, as Lasch clearly describes the penetration of administrative rationality into the family, one of the last remaining refuges against one-dimensionality. Lasch argues that in an earlier stage of capitalist development the family, especially the bourgeois family, served as a refuge from an increasingly rationalized and bureaucratized world dominated by the logic of the marketplace. Distance from the "heartless world" of capitalist rationalization and competition, the family nurtured personal relationships and liberal values that were not identified with or col-

lapsed into those of capitalist society. Most importantly, this traditional family, firmly in control of its socialization functions and embedded in tradition and parental authority, raised children in a way that contributed to their future autonomy as social individuals. The reasons for this are complex, but essentially have to do with the psychoanalytic mechanisms of identification and conflict, internalization and rebellion, that operate when parents are the major source of both love and discipline.

Lasch proceeds to delineate the social process by which these relatively autonomous socialization functions are appropriated by society itself, through the agents of the helping professions, education, and mass culture, so as to socialize the reproduction process in line with or compatible to the socialization of production. That is, the maturation and success of monopoly capitalism necessitated the mobilization and administration of all domains of social and psychic existence which had been under the control of the individual during entrepreneurial capitalism. Not merely labor power, but family life, leisure, and inner consciousness were to be mobilized in the interests of capital; a process interpreted and justified by most as realizing greater individual freedom and societal progress. Family functions, like labor, were thus reified—appropriated by external professions and agencies under the cover of producing more healthy, emotionally fit individuals.

The new and progressive rhetoric of individual freedom and emotional fitness mystified the damage wrought on the family by the emerging forms of social reproduction. The unique parent-child relationship found in the early bourgeois family created autonomous, self-directed individuals capable of experiencing a contradiction between personal values and required social functions, between the emotional warmth of the family and the cold impersonality of the market. In this context, one-dimensionality was not yet possible, in part because the presence of an autonomous identity followed the experience, if not the perception, of tensions between one's subjectivity and society's objectivity.

One result of the damaging of subjectivity, Lasch argues, is the rise of the narcissistic personality. The narcissist is the psychic product of a family besieged by administrative rationality and thus incapable of performing socialization functions. The narcissist emerges as the damaged subject, lacking a private psychological space which once sustained a refusal of the "heartless world." No longer capable of either

satisfying interpersonal relationships or of exercising the second dimension of abstract, critical thought, the narcissist seeks refuge in the reflected subjectivity of his/her own damaged self, seeking to live a life of unmediated immediacy (sensory experience, the antisymbolic transcendentalism of Eastern religions, and the psychic drivel of the human-potential movement).

Because he critiqued feminism as part of those social forces which robbed the family of its socialization functions, some members in the project interpreted Lasch as advocating a return to the patriarchal family and the suffocating confinement of women associated with this family form. Others disagreed and felt he was concerned with a much different issue: the emergence of narcissism as the dominant personality type of late capitalism and the inability of this type to act autonomously in accordance with any set of normative standards. Narcissism is thus theorized as a new form of domination; the ideals of freedom and justice are now displaced from the one-dimensional society and equated with the amorphousness and anomie of the impulsive and sensory self. Society, with its logic of capitalist exchange and technical rationality, remains undisturbed and unchallenged. The parent, like the worker, has lost those skills necessary for control over, and relatedness to, the products of human activity. This problematic suggests not the restoration of patriarchal authority and the subjection of women but the restoration of parental authority over the social reproduction process. And this is possible only to the extent that capitalism and its logic of technical rationality (embodied in the bureaucratic administration of the helping profession and the state) is dissolved. It must be remembered, therefore, that the modern formless family and its narcissistic children are themselves the products of a broader and destructive social process.

Jacoby's *Social Amnesia* concluded our collective effort and was strategically located at the end of the reading so as to tie up all the loose ends and diverse ideas that had been broached in the first three books. Jacoby's book is a critical response to the mindless celebration of personal freedom and liberation associated with the new narcissism. These trends, especially the human-potential movement and some aspects of feminism, are appropriately labeled by Jacoby as "conformist psychology." Jacoby argues, echoing Marcuse and Lasch, that much in this situation is due to our socialized inability to either remember the past or to think in terms of critical concepts. The rampant

subjectivity of the new narcissism is the celebration of a conceptless, anomic existence, a celebration of the impulses of the present unmediated by the traditions of the past, or hopes for the future.

Paralleling the process of consumer goods obsolescence of monopoly capitalism, earlier traditions of social thought, especially Marxism, Freudianism, and Critical Theory, are rejected out of hand as being obsolete and useless in the contemporary world. Directing his attack against modern conformist psychology, Jacoby argues for the remembrance of the critical insights of Freud. Although Freud's name is still heard, all we are left with today is a watered-down, cleaned-up version of his theories. His provocative critical concepts, such as the irreconcilable tension between nature and culture, have been replaced with the conformist ideology of humanistic psychology, especially as pedaled by Fromm, Jung, and Adler, but including many others conventionally seen as self-liberatory.

Jacoby analyzes, beginning with Adler, the post- and neo-Freudians who have altered or forgotten Freud's original theory. In the hands of the neo-Freudians theory has taken a backseat to therapy—something Freud took pains to avoid. Instead of using Freudian theory as the transcending factor guiding personal change, today's humanist psychologists use therapy to help people conform to the given reality. Personal adjustment to the objectively given requirements of society, rather than the transformation of society to better conform to the inner needs of the person, is the dominant ideology of the conformist psychologists. It is an ideology masked in the rhetoric of humanism and self-emancipation. Once again, the critical concepts necessary for self-reflexivity and transcendence are reified in the form of a technically rational process, that of therapy. As theory is collapsed into therapy, individuals lose the capacity to engage their second dimension of self-reflexive language.

Jacoby presents us with a dilemma of great importance and ironic pessimism: In this society theory and therapy are diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive. That is, therapy offers "unfree happiness" whereas theory provides "unhappy freedom." This pessimism is a source of optimism once it is recognized that it is the nature of this society which precludes their reconciliation. Jacoby's critical theory thus lifts us out of our unmediated subjectivity and orients our gaze beyond the confines of the present system. Optimism comes from the

recognition that our pessimism is socially constructed and thus changeable.

Jacoby's antimony of unfree happiness and unhappy freedom helped to clarify the meaning of our project. Critical theory specifies the unfree and superficially happy character of social existence in a capitalist and technically rational society. The historical character of society is thus joined theoretically to the psychological character of personal existence. An understanding of this allowed us the option of freedom and the unhappy anxiety that necessarily accompanies freedom in an unfree society. The knowledge that such a choice exists constitutes an act of authentic emancipation grounded in an objective theory of subjectivity.

Our review has stressed the content of texts. An integral part of the appropriation of theoretical meaning from texts was the organizational mode of this appreciation. The concept and practice of theoretical community, drawn from Gouldner's¹ work (1973: 82-127), provided the model on which we reflected on our own efforts. We hoped to move from an initial situation of intellectual and role inequality and the subjectivist and relativist ideas of the individual participants to a theoretical community within which the discourse is objectified in a way consistent with the intellectual norms of reason, dialectic, and critique. The ideal was a community of rational speakers committed to the impersonal code of dialectical discourse. Such a method would allow distancing from each participant's own subjectivity in a manner comparable to the metatheoretical idea of an objective theory of subjectivity. In short, we sought to join both the theory and the practice associated with critical theory. The process itself was agonizing and painful for many, and the results are uneven and difficult to determine. Yet it is clear that many went through some profound changes in their understanding of their own relationship to society; in fact, it is better said that the knowledge and collective effort changed that relationship and made it more problematic. If anything, a sense of tension and conflict between self and society, once obliterated by the onset of one-dimensionality and narcissism, has been restored for a small group of people. In this sense then the organized system of domination is that much weaker.

NOTE

1. Gouldner (1973) develops the notion of theoretical community in "Politics of the Mind," *For Sociology*. It is a piece we read and reflected on after having gone through the four books.

REFERENCE

GOULDNER, A. (1973) "The politics of the mind," in *For Sociology*. New York: Basic Books.