



Herbert Marcuse

Grandfather of the New Left

by Tom Bourne

Herbert Marcuse had never expected to hear from the Ku Klux Klan. Yet one day he arrived at his office at the University of California at San Diego (UCSD) to find a letter awaiting him. It read: "Marcuse, you are a very dirty Communist dog. We give you 72 hours to leave the United States. 72 hours more, Marcuse, and we kill you." It was signed by the Klan.

That was a little over 10 years ago, when Marcuse found himself in the cross fire of the student movement of the sixties. The radical right in America saw in Marcuse and in his most famous books—*Eros and Civilization*, *One Dimensional Man*, *Repressive Tolerance*—an incitement to revolutionary action. In San Diego, the Orange County stronghold of groups like the John Birch Society and the American Legion, Marcuse was under constant attack. A steady stream of hate mail came his way, and the Legion even offered to buy up his contract if he would agree to leave the campus of UCSD. He refused.

Marcuse, who just died at the age of 81, recently recalled this period with particular clarity. "When I left Brandeis University for UCSD in 1965, I didn't really realize how conservative the atmosphere was in San Diego. I came here just as much for the San Diego Zoo—the biggest in the world—as for anything else. I love animals. While I was considering the move, some of the UCSD faculty kept writing me letters about how wonderful the zoo was. That clinched the deal," he said.

For the first two years of his stay in San Diego, everything went calmly. The trouble started in the summer of 1967, when, on a trip abroad, he remarked to students in Berlin: "We have to develop the political implications of the moral, intellectual, and sexual rebellion of the youth." The San Diego press saw fire in that statement; they interpreted it to mean that Marcuse was advocating rebellion. Calling his words "bad taste," the *San Diego Union* asked the United States Congress to draft a letter of apology to the West German government.

Meanwhile, Marcuse's reputation as a writer was growing, in popular as well as in scholarly circles. Feature stories about him appeared not only in the liberal/left periodicals of the day, but in the mainstream press: *Time*, *Business Week*, *Fortune*, even the *Saturday Evening Post*. True, most of them treated him contemptuously as an iconoclastic old man who fed the pigeons at the San Diego Zoo with one hand and dispensed radicalism to the student movement with the other. But they also acknowledged him as the "Father of the New Left."

Marcuse brushed such hyperbole aside lightly: "It would have been better to call me not the father, but the grandfather, of the New Left." He contended that the students of the sixties were not waiting for the publication of his writings to act; the timing was simply a coincidence. "It is more modest, and more accurate, to say that I had an influence on the students in this country and in Europe," he maintained. He appealed to the young because he spoke their language. Despite the age differential, he sensed that

TOM BOURNE is a California-based writer.

rock and roll was as important a symbol to the movement as the dove. He proffered not class struggle but liberation from the dreary work ethic.

Unlike some student leaders of the period, Marcuse developed the will to survive and grow. Folk singer and activist Phil Ochs, the troubadour of the movement, hung himself in 1976. Rennie Davis of the Chicago 7 gave up politics entirely to pursue, at last look, a life of selling insurance in Denver. And Marcuse's prize student from the Brandeis years, Angela Davis, teaches at a community college in Oakland in relative quietude. What is left of the movement is, in Marcuse's terms, "encapsulated, isolated, and defensive."

The office where Marcuse had worked for the last 14 years is as Spartan as a dorm room. His name and title of honorary professor are not even on the door. Books overflow three of the walls. Faded clippings of the hippopotamus—Marcuse's favorite mammal—are taped to the wall above his desk. He typically would hammer away at his typewriter, preparing a lecture on dialectics.

Putting down his ever-present cigar for a moment, he would comment on the changes in university students since the 1960s: "There is no doubt that they are less involved today. And there are good reasons for that. First, there is the alleged lack of any issue. Next, there has been increasing reaction and repression on the part of the government since the petering out of the movement. And lastly, there is the employment question. If a student is found exhorting others to action, it will be noted on the records somewhere—and thus he will be removed from the list of candidates for a given job."

The embryonic issue for the students of the sixties, of course, was civil rights. But that movement did not broaden its base until the Vietnam War, with its relentless brutality against the Vietnamese and against the students themselves in places like the 1968 Democratic convention in Chicago. The American New Left, however, never had a solid ideological foundation. European students marched through the streets of Paris and Frankfurt bearing the slogan, "Mao, Marx, and Marcuse," but the end of the war in this country also served to end the movement. There was no longer a unifying issue and all at once, as Marcuse has pointed out, students faced the same economic realities as the rest of the country: Get a job or starve. There weren't enough jobs to go around in academia. So the rebels who walked in the peace marches in San Francisco and in Washington found themselves employed by the same government they had bitterly opposed, or in mainstream American businesses for which their education had not prepared them.

Marcuse was convinced that the contemporary student has learned a lesson from these events: "Today's student is more and more interested in profes-

sional training," he said, a development he found disturbing. "The less they know, the safer they feel. Real education is dangerous. It's too bad that a humanistic education is now neglected, because these students would be less defeatist and less conformist. They would also become the preparators for change." Instead he saw the steady trend toward careerism as a "quite clear adjustment of the university curriculum to the requirements of the existing society. A high unemployment rate means that job training takes precedence over the humanities." Nor was he optimistic about the future: "It will be very difficult to restore the emphasis on the humanities, or even to save what can be saved."

Still, he saw hope for our apolitical society, with its emphasis on self-help, self-fulfillment, and pleasure. The tendency of contemporary man to brood on himself, he claimed, has been misinterpreted: "It is not only an escape. It also reflects a desire to become clear about alternative ways of social and interpersonal relationships. It is both escapist and necessary," the "jumping-off point" for political action.

This brand of individualism always distinguished him from doctrinaire Marxists. Marcuse insisted there will never be an end to the universal struggle of man with his own nature. Socialism cannot liberate Eros from Thanatos, and recurring social confrontations are caused not only by economic strife but by "the play of metasocial forces between individual and individual, male and female, humanity and nature." It was a conservative side of Marcuse: Even freedom and fulfillment are limited.

His unwillingness to adhere to a strict Marxist line disappointed the Progressive Labor Party and other militant organizations. But Marcuse never intended to create specific revolutionary programs that could be easily adapted. Instead, he upheld the importance of pure contemplation and theory. This necessarily involved abstraction, an area in which critics have accused him of overindulging. But he argued in his influential *One Dimensional Man* that "nobody really thinks who does not abstract from that which is given, who does not relate the facts to the factors which have made them, who does not—in his mind—undo the facts. Abstractness is the very life of thought, the token of its authenticity."

And while he realized that the average person has difficulty reading his early works, he did not want to make problems simpler than they really are: "If I am difficult to read, it is because of the difficult nature of the things I am discussing," he said. Ultimately, he shrugged at the entire question. "What can I do about it?" he fired back, implying that his readers must be willing to do some extra digging in the Marcuse mine.

(Continued on page 64)

Science Policy

(Continued from page 47)

- tiny latex beads, first developed for rocket propellants, to which various biological materials, medications, or magnetic particles can be made to adhere. The thinking is that, depending on their accoutrements, the beads can be programmed to distinguish one type of cell from another for diagnostic or research purposes, and perhaps for therapy as well. The beads would be used in connection with, say, cancer drugs so that the drugs would attack only malignant cells, sparing the rest of the body their highly toxic effects.

- space age instrumentation to beef up the analytic powers of the mass spectrometer. Fitting this laboratory workhorse with fiber optics light pipes and miniaturized electronic amplifiers should increase its discernment powers about a thousandfold. This should make it capable of quantifying the ingredients of very small samples of biological materials.

Last, but hardly least, is an aseptic fluid transfer system for blood. In plain English, that's a plastic bag JPL has developed that promises to eliminate the present necessity to throw away much of the blood that a surgeon orders but does not use: a practice justified by the risk of spreading infection, but one that wastes thousands of pints of blood a year.

The bags can be made for a mere two cents apiece. Barring some snag from the complex, ever volatile politics of the blood banking industry, JPL expects a manufacturer to be producing them commercially within a year and paying royalties for the privilege. "That," says Beckenbach, "would make us proud." And, he might have added, it would show that, like the University of Wisconsin, Cal Tech can do well by doing good. ■

Herbert Marcuse

(Continued from page 37)

His fascination with individual struggle went back to his childhood, where his first heroes were imaginative writers like Thomas Mann, André Gide, and James Joyce. The product of a middle-class, well-to-do family that was "entirely unpolitical," he came to philosophy through his love of literature and to politics from his experience as a soldier in the German army in World War I. In 1933, Marcuse left Germany for good. "I didn't share the optimism of the German people that the reign of Hitler would be a short one." Besides, getting an academic job under the Nazis was out of the question since he was Jewish. So, already affiliated with the Institute of Social Research, he emigrated to the United States and stayed with the institute as a researcher and writer. In fact, his aim of teaching at the university level would be thwarted until the mid-1950s, at Brandeis University.

Marcuse's most recent book, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, is once again in opposition to the Marxist orthodoxy. In it he declared that Marxist aesthetics are terribly limited. For the rigid Marxist, the realm of the subjective (inwardness, emotions, and the imagination) has no value other than as an expression of class consciousness. Marcuse argued that such a view places tremendous restraints on art: It is only in the subjectivity of individuals that the roots of awareness of the need for social change are found. Is it not, he asked, through exposure to literature, the arts, and music that people awaken to a higher truth?

Marcuse harbored no dreams for a return to an idyllic, pastoral society. Rather he wanted to make full use of our technological and industrial capacity so that all of the

individual's basic needs can be satisfied with a minimum expenditure of time. Real freedom cannot begin until the necessities of life are taken care of: "The possibility of a non-repressive civilization is predicated not upon the arrest but upon the liberation of progress—so that each man would order his life in accordance with his fully developed knowledge, so that he would ask again what is good and what is evil."

So Marcuse—at heart a moral philosopher—wrote in *Eros and Civilization*. In all of this, did he see a future for campus leftists? "In Marxist terms, there is always an issue," he said—namely, the struggle against the capitalist system. The central problems, as he saw them, are inherent in capitalism: inflation, unemployment, massive Pentagon expenditures—and the growing threat of a war abroad. Students cannot compose a revolutionary force all by themselves, but they can serve as a catalyst to change. So said the grandfather of the New Left. ■

MOVING? PLEASE NOTIFY US 6 WEEKS IN ADVANCE.

name _____

address _____

city, state, zip _____

To Subscribe to
Change
check rate below
and fill in name
and address above.

- 1 year - \$18
 2 years - \$30
 3 years - \$42
 5 years - \$60

Mail To:
Change Magazine
NBW Tower
New Rochelle
N.Y. 10801

ATTACH LABEL HERE for address change or inquiry; or attach page with name and present address, if moving; list new address above. Note: The number of issues left to service in your subscription appears as the last two digits at the top of your mailing label.