

*Herbert Marcuse's Messianic Humanism:
Politics of the New Left*

in: *Social Scientist* 7:12 (July 1979), pp. 13-23.

HERBERT MARCUSE, a radical theoretician of the New Left movement, shot into prominence in the 1960's in the wake of student unrest in the US, France and Italy. In Italy, he was hailed as one of the "3 M's" (Marx-Mao-Marcuse). Despite the fact that the student unrest, at least for the present, has subsided, his radicalism continues to be a source of inspiration to the followers of the New Left movement. Marcuse's basic contention is that political domination and economic exploitation pale into insignificance before instinctual repression in advanced industrial societies. How then to ensure liberty in the face of technical rationality? His answer lies not in managing the civilization but in transcending it. In order to grasp the full import of his theoretical construction, it is necessary to discuss the dominant contours of the New Left movement, his historical perspective on the present predicament and interpretation of Freudian psychoanalysis.

As for the New Left movement, it does not have any coherent ideology. It has emerged at the confluence of various streams of thought: Maoism, existentialism, neo-anarchism, Surrealistic thought and neo-Marxism tinged with Freudian psychoanalysis. Despite the fact that the constellation of its ideas presents an inchoate pattern, certain dominant contours can be identified. In

a most succinct way Eduard Batalov points out that they include “the rejection of the working class of the advanced capitalist countries as the main driving force of the modern revolutionary process; a critical approach to Marxist-Leninist parties as ‘integrated’ in the system of state monopoly capitalism and thus ‘bereft’ of their former revolutionary functions; concentration on the Third World as the sphere in which a ‘genuinely socialist society’ is supposedly growing up; criticism of the Marxist-Leninist theory of revolution and attempts to create an ‘up-to-date’ revolutionary action based on a release of unconscious forces and aimed at shaping a new culture and a ‘new man’; refusal to make use of the democratic institutions of bourgeois society as a mechanism of repression and manipulation, and the boosting of utopianism as a principle of revolutionary–critical action.”¹

Perspective on Historical Change

All these features of the New Left movement can be discerned in the theoretical construction of Marcuse. His perspective on them can be fully grasped in the light of his orientation to history which is different from that of Marxism. Marcuse proceeds from the standpoint that capitalism and communism are varieties of a single industrial society, a standpoint similar in many respects to the one spelled out by Raymond Aron in his *The Industrial Society* (1967). Walt W Rostow in his *The Stage of Economic Growth* (1960), also subscribes to the view of the convergence of the capitalist and the communist systems. Marcuse points out that both the systems are marked by some common features: want of individuation that stems from an excessive emphasis on technical efficiency, dehumanization of the individual, containment of dissent and protest, introjection of values, etc. He writes: “The most advanced areas of industrial society exhibit throughout these two features: a trend towards consummation of technical rationality and intensive efforts to contain this trend with the established institutions. Here is the internal contradiction of this civilization: the irrational element of its rationality.”²

Marcuse launches his attack on the corporate capitalism of the US and communism of the USSR on the basis of the theory of convergence (it may be noted that the main target of his attack is the former). In their defence, Russian scholars contend that the technological similarities between the two systems are of a temporary nature at a particular stage of economic growth. Moreover, what the theory of convergence misses is the difference in value systems. “As the socialist countries marching towards com-

munism gradually overtake the more advanced capitalist countries, the temporary technological resemblance between the two groups will disappear, and it is on this that the theory of convergence relies. After all, technology, however mighty it may be, is only an instrument of man's activity, which in different social systems is used to bring nearer different social goals based on mutually exclusive values and ideals."³

Thus, unlike the Marxists, Marcuse has a different perspective of history and looks at the stages of economic growth to apply the theory of convergence to all industrially advanced countries in which technical rationality overshadows everything else. Another feature of Marcuse's theoretical construction that merits attention is his complete break with history which has a sociological implication of his philosophical stand on negative dialectics. In spite of the fact that Hegel's orientation is idealistic and that of Marx materialistic, both share the view that the movement of reality is triadic marked by affirmation (thesis), negation (antithesis) and negation of the negation (synthesis). The synthesis contains some elements of thesis and some of antithesis. Thus there is continuity in history which passes from lower to higher stages. The present encapsulates the past; the future emerges from within the present. Marcuse does not take into account the category of synthesis, the negation of the negation. His philosophical stand is basically geared to polarized categories (antimonies). Its sociological implication is that the existing system should be completely negated. Marcuse writes: "The implication is that these possibilities must be conceived in forms that signify a break rather than a continuity with previous history, its negation rather than its positive continuation, difference rather than progress."⁴

Psychoanalysis and Repression

His negative dialectics is linked up with his concept of the Great Refusal, a complete transcendence of "one-dimensional society" with a view to emancipating "one-dimensional man". Marcuse contends that advanced industrial societies produce "a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behaviour"⁵ and this stands in the way of a radical transformation. A radical break with the present calls for two things: revolution in consciousness and political revolution. What stands in the way of the former is the divergence between objective and subjective needs. That the realization of human freedom is possible is indicated by the abundance of material resources which modern technology can harness to

human requirements. But unfortunately man has been so systematically controlled both at the conscious and unconscious levels that he has become oblivious to the need for liberation. Consequently, while the "objective need is demonstrably there, the subjective need for such a change does not prevail."⁶ What is needed is an educational programme to bring about a cultural change. His approach is a reincarnation of the one advocated by cultural revolutionaries like George Lukac in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) and Wilhelm Reich in *Dialectical Materialism and Psychoanalysis* (1923). "The cultural revolutionaries", Bruce Brown writes, "felt that such a conception, in which liberation was defined solely in terms of emancipation from economic exploitation, neglected the complex multi-dimensionality of human existence and hence of human needs. It failed to take account of the fact that besides economic exploitation and political oppression, the masses under class society were also the victims of specific forms of oppression on the psychological level, from which any true revolution could and must provide liberation."⁷ A neglect of psychological liberation would offer "only a transient emotional catharsis to the masses without any permanent reality of liberation."⁸ While joining the tradition of cultural revolutionaries, Marcuse explains man's industrial repression under corporate capitalism in the light of Freudian psychoanalysis.

Marcuse's contention is two-fold: first, Freudian theory in its very substance is sociological as it recognizes the malleability of instincts in the light of exogenous factors, a point that has been missed by the neo-Freudians; and second, Freud's own theory provides reasons for bringing repression to an end in advanced civilization, a point which Freud himself overlooked. Marcuse accepts the three aspects of the psyche (as set forth by Freud in his later writings): id, ego and superego. He agrees with Freud that the repression of instinct seeking pleasure has resulted in cultural progress. Gradually, the domain of superego expanded. But now a fundamental change has occurred in regard to the ego which has been neutralized by the all-embracing and penetrating influence of the political apparatus. The result is that ego has been robbed of its independent power to structure its instincts, and delivered over to the superego.⁹ The superego is the social agent of repression. There is, at present, an insignificant role for the family, particularly for the father, in the child's early socialization. The mass media controlled by the political apparatus has invaded the inner sphere of man who has, consequently, lost his individual and independent judgement. Because of these changes, there has

emerged the phenomenon of mass democracy in which "the real elements of politics are no longer identifiable individual groups but rather unified or politically integrated totalities."¹⁰ Democracy, despite the toleration of opposition within its framework, has turned out to be a mechanism for repression. Political structures and elections are the levers of repressive tolerance. Thus, Marcuse challenges the liberal-democratic and pluralistic structure highly adumbrated by writers like Robert A Dahl¹¹ and Gabriel A Almond.¹² Marcuse presents a very gloomy picture: "Universal toleration becomes questionable when its rationale no longer prevails, when tolerance is administered to manipulated and indoctrinated individuals who parrot, as their own, the opinion of their masters, for whom heteronomy has become autonomy."¹³

What about the revolutionary consciousness of the working class on which classical Marxist theory had pinned hopes for a radical transformation? According to Marcuse, this class has been domesticated and integrated. Therefore, labour movements have lost their edge in advanced capitalist countries. In his view, its causes are not far to seek: mechanization¹⁴ has reduced the importance of manual labour. Owing to occupational stratification, the number of the white-collar and non-productive workers has increased in relation to the blue-collar workers.¹⁵ As productivity is no longer determined by individual output because of the introduction of automation, the theory of surplus value has ceased to be a measure of exploitation.¹⁶ Perceptible changes in the attitudes of workers have occurred because they show "vested interest"¹⁷ in the establishment. Therefore the working class is no longer a "living contradiction"¹⁸ in the U S.

There are striking parallels between Marcuse's point of view and that of Raymond Aron as expressed in *The Opinion of the Intellectuals* (1957). Aron is critical of deterministic evolution of industrial society and also of the working class as an agent of social revolution. Likewise, the "end of ideology doctrine is implicitly accepted by Marcuse."¹⁹ Like Daniel Bell²⁰ and S M Lipset,²¹ Marcuse has shown that the conflict between capitalists and the working class has come to an end.

The Great Refusal Principle

For bringing about a radical transformation, Marcuse pleads for a cultural revolution. He reinterprets Freud. He disagrees with the latter that the process of repression of instincts is an ineluctable feature of civilization and is irreversible. To Marcuse, it is not civilization as such which fosters domination,

but a specific form of it.²² In order to explain the prospects of a non-repressive civilization, he introduces two concepts: surplus repression and the performance principle. By surplus repression he means the restrictions imposed by social domination which exceeds basic restrictions, i.e., the restrictions just necessary for the perpetuation of the human race. By the performance principle, he means the prevailing historical form of the reality principle, i.e., the competitive economic performance in the capitalist system. He maintains that surplus repression is related to domination (which is exercised by a particular group to safeguard its privileged position and that it should be replaced by a rational exercise of authority "confined to the administration of functions for the advancement of the whole."²³ He hopefully holds that the performance principle can be replaced by a qualitatively different reality principle "transmuting the entire human-psyche as well as socio-historical structure."²⁴

But the basic question is how to establish a new reality principle. He refers to phantasy, a part of the human psychic structure which, according to Freud, remains free from the domination of the reality principle. It remains subordinate to the pleasure principle. It expresses itself in games of children, day-dreaming, works of art and the formulation of utopias. It is the cognitive function of phantasy that is the source of Marcusean aesthetics and nonrepressive civilization. It is the fountainhead of the Great Refusal. Marcuse contends that "behind the aesthetic form lies the repressed harmony of sensuousness and reason—the eternal protest against the organization of life by the logic of domination, the critique of the performance principle."²⁶ With the liberation of human sensibility and sensitivity by the aesthetic ethos, there would occur a qualitative change manifesting itself at different levels of human existence—organic, instinctual, social and political. Such an integral change²⁷ before a social revolution has not been considered by the classical Marxian theory. That "moral radicalism"²⁸ is a prerequisite for political liberation finds no place in it. As the new sensibility would tone down competition and foster cooperation, there would occur "an instinctual foundation for solidarity among human beings."²⁹

Marcuse's thesis smacks of romanticism. He not only transcends the economic constraints but also the reality of power politics as a lever for change. Giving much more importance to the restructuring of instincts and imagination than to power and economics amounts to a refutation of the liberal tradition of politics. Thus he attempts to "undermine the premises upon which rest so many questions of political theory."³⁰

'End of the Utopia' Doctrine

The Marcusean conception of "integral socialism"³¹ is a complete negation of the present advanced industrial society. His socialism is not an outcome of the revolutionary struggle of the working class. It is geared to "a total transvaluation of values, a new anthropology."³² This is really a principle which is urged to declare the "obsolescence"³³ of Marxism. Marcuse here rejects economic determinism. As for the intervention in the historical process, Marcusean approach is close to Maoism which subscribes to the view of the plasticity of reality. In a sense, it is similar to Satre's radical subjectivism which rejects determinism and extols free will. "Today we have", observes Marcuse, "the capacity to turn the world into hell, and we are well on the way to doing so. We also have the capacity to turn it into the opposite of hell. This would mean the end of utopia, that is, the refutation of those ideas and theories that use the concept of utopia to denounce certain socio-historical possibilities."³⁴ Marcuse speaks of the emergence of a higher culture in which work would become art; cooperation would replace aggressiveness; repression will give way to autonomy. Thus moral radicalism is a precondition for transforming society. He warns that if it is taken up after the revolution, attempts at transforming society would be infructuous. He writes: "Repressive men would carry over their repression into the new society."³⁵ He castigates Marxists who envisage an all-round development of man in the communist society preceded by the political dictatorship of the proletariat. He subscribes to the views of cultural revolutionaries that "revolution in perception", a radical change in consciousness, is the "first step in changing social existence." In a word, Marcusean integral socialism signifies a total revolution. It is grounded on the interjection of a new morality. It is, therefore, essentially an educational task. "Marcuse assigns primarily educational objectives and significance to the political activities he supports," observes David Kettler. "These activities are at most creating the barest outline of the political entity whose concerted effort will transform society; they are incubating the spirit which will move the revolutionary force."³⁵ On close inspection, it appears that the opposition to the political apparatus is not homogeneous and is apprehended to engender pessimism rather than concerted effort as expected by Marcuse.

The most intriguing question is: Who will bring about a radical transformation? Marcuse's simple answer is that it will be brought about by those forces, inner and outer, which are not

integrated into the system of corporate capitalism. The contribution of the working class is written off as already discussed. What about the intelligentsia? Marcuse maintains, like Karl Mannheim, that by "itself it is not and cannot be a revolutionary class."³⁷ It has only a "decisive, preparatory function, not more."³⁸ As such it can be a catalyst of historical change. Its role should be to educate the "new working class" consisting of scientists, researchers, technicians, engineers and psychologists into the emancipatory praxis. If the members of this class imbibe the aesthetic ethos and refuse to cooperate with the political apparatus, they can undermine the repressive system. Here a doubt arises whether these people who are regarded by Marcuse as "the pet beneficiaries of the established system" would revolt at all. As there is every possibility of this class being integrated into the system like the old working class, there seems to be little possibility of its taking part in the Great Refusal.

Agents of Radical Transformation

As for the students, Marcuse contends that instinctual need for a life without fear, without brutality and stupidity should be instilled into their minds. He hopes that their politicization can turn out to be an effective force for the subversion of the system. What Marcuse seems to have missed is the fact that the US students' activism was provoked more by the American involvement in the Vietnam war than by any commitment to any radical ideology. It was a passing phase. S M Lipset and E C Ladd, Jr, have analyzed attitudes of the US students in the present century. They have tested Aristotle's views on the moderating effects of growing older and Karl Mannheim's ideas on the effects of the prevailing climate when a generation attains political maturity. Their study was concerned with assessing the long-term effects of students' movement in the late 1960's. They conclude: "If past American experience is any guide, however, it is likely that those students who experienced the radical and activist campus politics of the late 1960's will not continue in the distinctive frame of mind which they now show."³⁹

As for certain sections of the infrastructure of the US society consisting of militant Hippies and the Negroes residing in urban slums, Marcuse views them as subversive forces. His contention is that as these small groups have not been integrated into the system they can be politicized in order to constitute a part of a subversive minority. In this connection, Alasdair MacIntyre rightly points out that Marcuse's list of revolutionary forces is characterized by

an "extreme heterogeneity"⁴⁰ and as such does not present a hopeful picture of a radical change. In fact these persons constituting a minority and expected to liberate a majority lend themselves to the charge of elitism. "To make men objects of liberation by others is to assist in making them passive instruments, is to cast them for the role of inert matter to be moulded into forms chosen by the elite."⁴¹

As the liberation movements in the Third World are not integrated into the system, Marcuse pins his hopes on them for subverting corporate capitalism. "The National Liberation Fronts", he writes, "threaten the life line of imperialism; they are not only a material but also an ideological catalyst of change."⁴² In one respect Marcuse's observation is close to that of Lenin. Lenin in his *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of Capitalism* and *The State and Revolution* lays great stress on liberation movements which can undermine corporate capitalism at its periphery and ultimately pave the way for a revolutionary situation in the capitalist countries. That liberation movements can be "an ideological catalyst of change" appears to be an oversimplification of facts. These movements are neither inspired by a common ideology nor led by a homogeneous group of persons. Even the New Left movement is fragmented: at times it is inspired by intellectuals like Marcuse, Satre, etc., and at times led by leaders of guerilla warfare such as Regis Debray, Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara etc.

Peaceful Coexistence

In order to accelerate the process of revolution, Marcuse criticizes the policy of peaceful coexistence which in his opinion has "contributed to the stabilization of capitalism."⁴³ It may be remarked that the policy of peaceful coexistence has not only contributed to the stabilization of capitalism but also to the consolidation of socialist states. It has gone a long way in relaxing tension between the two superpowers. In view of the hazards of a nuclear war, it is a welcome step. Because of his revolutionary romanticism, Marcuse unwittingly tries to endanger the civilization which he wants to transcend.

An analysis of Marcusean theoretical construction shows that the optimism engendered by the Enlightenment due to its accent on rationality and freedom has gradually turned into gloom and despair. Also, the radical communist and socialist movements of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries have failed to steer the world to the promised land of social equality. For Marcuse, the causes are not far to seek. The advance of scientific knowledge,

to which modernization and industrialization are attributed, has resulted in the growth of scientific rationality, powerful political apparatus and, consequently, the atrophy of individual freedom. In advanced industrial societies which are the species of a single industrial society, manipulation and indoctrination have resulted in the containment of individuation. In the US, characterized by corporate capitalism, attempts at "social engineering" and "social technology" are reminiscent of Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World*. In a word, according to Marcuse, liberal democracy has become extinct and classical Marxism, obsolete. That liberty has been circumscribed cannot be denied. The basic question is how to shield the individual from technical rationality and big organizations. Marcuse does not believe in restructuring institutions. He pleads for transcending the present predicament. Two basic solutions are put forward to bring about a total revolution: educational task and political revolution. The educational task is geared to "transvaluation of values", i.e., a cultural revolution, a revolution in man's consciousness. It seems to be unrealistic. While the malleability of human nature is acceptable both at the phylogenetic and ontogenetic levels in principle, the success in achieving the goal in a near future is doubtful. Human nature changes slowly while the political environment changes rapidly giving rise to pressing problems demanding urgent solutions. As for the political revolution, the agents on which he counts are marked by heterogeneity. Also, they are not wedded to a single ideology which can weld them into a world-shaking force. Further still, Marcuse underestimates the influence of nationalism, the reality of power politics and the uneven economic development of states which may stand in the way of solidarity of the radical forces. Therefore his blueprint for transcending the present civilization is indicative of his messianic humanism.

¹ Eduard Batalov, *The Philosophy of Revolt: Criticism of Left Radical Ideology*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1975, pp 8-9.

² Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, Great Britain, Sphere Books Ltd., 1970, p 30.

³ E Arab-Ogly, *In the Forecaster's Maze*, Moscow, Progress Publishers, 1975, p 101.

⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Utopia*, Boston, Beacon Press, 1970, p. 65.

⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p 30.

⁶ Herbert Marcuse, "Liberation from the Affluent Society" David Cooper (ed.), *The Dialects of Liberation*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd., 1968, p 82.

⁷ Bruce Brown, *Marx, Freud and the Critique of Everyday Life*, New York, Monthly Review Press, 1973, p 19.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p 21.

⁹ Herbert Marcuse, *Five Lectures*, p 17.

- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p 15.
- ¹¹ Robert A Dahl, *Pluralistic Democracy in the United States*, Chicago, Rand McNally, 1967.
- ¹² Gabriel A Almond and G Bingham Powell Jr., *Comparative Politics, A Developmental Approach*, New Delhi, Amerind Publishing Co. Pvt. Ltd., 1972.
- ¹³ Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance", Paul Connerton (ed.), *Critical Sociology*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books Ltd., 1978, p 307.
- ¹⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p 35.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p 38.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p 39.
- ¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p 41.
- ¹⁹ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marcuse*, London, Wm. Collins and Co. Ltd., 1970, p 67.
- ²⁰ Daniel Bell, *The End of Ideology*, Glencoe, Ill., The Free Press, 1960.
- ²¹ S M Lipset, *Political Man*, New York, Arnold-Heincomann, 1973.
- ²² Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, London, Penguin Press, 1969, p 35.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, p 36.
- ²⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *Five Lectures*, p 40.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p 140.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, p 144.
- ²⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, pp 16-17.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*, p 10.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ David Kettler, "Herbert Marcuse : The Critique of Bourgeois Civilization and Its Transcendence", Crespigny and Minogue (eds.), *Contemporary Political Philosopher*, London, Methuen & Co., 1976, p 24.
- ³¹ Herbert Marcuse, "Liberation from the Affluent Society", David Cooper (ed.), *op. cit.*, p 188.
- ³² *Ibid.*
- ³³ Herbert Marcuse, *Five Lectures*, p 62.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ Herbert Marcuse, "Liberation from the Affluent Society" in David Cooper (ed), *op. cit.*, p 186.
- ³⁶ David Kettler "Herbert Marcuse" Crespigny and Minogue (eds.), *op. cit.*, p 40.
- ³⁷ Herbert Marcuse, "Liberation from the Affluent Society", in David Cooper (ed.), *op. cit.*, p 188.
- ³⁸ *Ibid.*
- ³⁹ Seymour M. Lipset and Everett C. Ladd, Jr., "Student Politics and After", *The American Review*, Vol. 18, No. 2, Winter 1974, p 32.
- ⁴⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *op. cit.*, p 88.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p 92
- ⁴² Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, p 81.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, p 84.