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*Marcuse Philosophy about the Working Class in
Advanced Capitalism*

in: *Social Scientist* 5:9(April 1977), pp. 21-32.

WRITING from Warsaw, Jerzy J Wiatr, though very critical of Herbert Marcuse, admits that his philosophical and political works merit the closest attention in every respect. One of the factors on which the importance of Marcuse's philosophy is based, Wiatr claims, is that it is not merely an abstract manifestation of theoretical thought but also an expression of the social consciousness of considerable segments of the radical intelligentsia, especially of student youth.¹ It must be added that Marcuse's influence is not uniformly accepted even among radical students in Europe: some are, in fact, positively critical of his theory which is believed to be at best merely 'critical', and, at worst, to say the least, misleading. Yet his importance as an articulator of many commonly held ideas, and as a catalytic agent in strengthening them, cannot be denied.

This article is devoted to understanding Marcuse's position on the working class situation in the "advanced areas of industrial civilization." To anticipate partially the following discussion, it is argued that Marcuse's analysis carries not one but *two* distinct arguments. These arguments, it is seen, are not presented by Marcuse himself as two distinct lines of reasoning. Instead, they are woven in such a manner that they conceal the basic limitation of his approach. This

discussion will move from working out their expositions towards a critical examination of the formulations. In developing a critique, some of the criticisms made earlier by others will also be borne in mind.

DECISIVE TRANSFORMATION?

Marcuse maintains that the "labouring classes in the advanced areas of industrial civilization are undergoing a decisive transformation." He enumerates four factors as the main elements of this transformation.

First, "Mechanization is increasingly reducing the quantity and intensity of physical energy expended in labour".² To be sure, old misery remains, even more acutely because of increased speed-up and the like but, in his own words,

this form of drudgery is expressive of *arrested, partial* automation, of the coexistence of automated, semi-automated, and non-automated sections within the same plant, but even under these conditions, "for muscular fatigue technology has substituted tension and/or mental effort". For the more advanced automated plants, the transformation of physical energy into technical and mental skills is emphasized.³

He continues:

The proletarian of the previous stages of capitalism was indeed the beast of burden, by the labour of his body procuring the necessities and luxuries of life while living in filth and poverty. Thus he was the living denial of his society. In contrast, the organized worker in the advanced areas of the technological society lives this denial less conspicuously and, like the other human objects of the social division of labour, he is being incorporated into the technological community of the administered population.⁴

Secondly, "the assimilation trend shows forth in the occupational stratification. In the key industrial establishments, the 'blue-collar' work force declines in relation to the 'white-collar' element; the number of non-production workers increases. This quantitative change refers back to a change in the character of the basic instruments of production'.⁵

The suggested technological change has serious implications:

To the extent to which the machine becomes itself a system of mechanical tools and relations and thus extends far beyond the individual work process, it asserts its larger domination by reducing the 'professional autonomy' of the labourer and integrating him with other professions which suffer and direct the technical ensemble. To be sure, the former 'professional' autonomy of the labourer was rather his professional enslavement. But this specific mode of enslavement was at the same time the source of his specific, professional power of negation—the power to stop a process which threatened him with annihilation as a human being. Now the labourer is losing the professional autonomy which made him a member of a class set

off from the other occupational groups because it embodied the refutation of the established society.⁶

The technological change seems to cancel the Marxian notion of the 'organic composition of capital' and with it 'the theory of the creation of surplus value': "Now automation seems to alter qualitatively the relation between dead and living labour; it tends toward the point where productivity is determined 'by the machines, and not by individual output'. Moreover, the very measurement of individual output becomes impossible."⁷

Thirdly,

These changes in the character of work and the instruments of production change the attitude and the consciousness of the labourer, which becomes manifest in the widely discussed 'social and cultural integration' of the labouring class with capitalist society. Is this a change in consciousness only? The affirmative answer, frequently given by Marxists, seems strangely inconsistent. Is such a fundamental change in consciousness understandable without assuming a corresponding change in the "societal existence"? Granted even a high degree of ideological independence, the links which tie this change to the transformation of the productive process militate against such an interpretation. Assimilation in needs and aspirations, in the standard of living, in leisure activities, in politics derives from an integration *in the plant* itself, in the material process of production...In the present situation, the negative features of automation are predominant...However, there are other trends. The same technological organization which makes for a mechanical community at work also generates a larger interdependence which integrates the worker with the plant.⁸

Fourthly,

the new technological work world thus enforces a weakening of the negative position of the working class: the latter no longer appears to be the living contradiction to the established society. This trend is strengthened by the effect of the technological organization of production on the other side of the fence: on management and direction. Domination is transfigured into administration.⁹

SOCIAL CRITICISM

Allowing for differences of emphasis, focus, approach and value-judgement, the similarities between the argument of Marcuse, as thus summarized and the reactionary thesis of *embourgeoisement* are indeed striking.¹⁰ The 'fact' of social and cultural integration of the industrial worker into advanced capitalist societies is accepted by both sides. Further, the absorption of the 'blue-collar' work force into the 'white-collar' employees is recognized by both of them. Both question the role of the working class, to formulate the proposition in Marcuse's terms, as

the 'living contradiction to the established society.' The emphasis on advancement in technology as the moving factor in changing the situation is clearly noticed in both arguments.

At a lower level of abstraction, both sides advance the following arguments: In the context of the present situation, (1) technology replaces technical and mental skills for muscular energy; (2) poverty of the worker is reduced; (3) domination is being transfigured into administration; and (4) advanced technology — the more advanced, the more effective — integrates the industrial worker into the plant, and thereby into the larger society.

Even though the similarities are striking, one must guard against the temptation of overlooking the differences. Marcuse clearly advances his argument within a radically different perspective of the human being, society, the role of social theory, and of the responsibility of the social thinker. This perspective pervades his thinking at a more general level. It is important to understand it. For, it is both unfair to Marcuse and unhelpful to our understanding of him to ignore the broader context within which the ideas outlined above are formulated and presented. To this *broader perspective* we turn our attention now. Marcuse's starting point is the basic irrationality of the advanced industrial society. What appears to be the very embodiment of Reason is, in fact, 'irrational as a whole'. This society appears rational in its greater capacity of becoming richer, bigger and better equipped to exploit technology; its irrationality lies in its inner necessity of making technology subservient to the established system. This is *the* internal contradiction of this civilization; the irrational element *within* its rationality. In Marcuse's words, "The industrial society which makes technology and science its own is organized for the ever-more-effective domination of man and nature for the ever-more-effective utilization of its resources. It becomes irrational when the success of these efforts opens new dimensions of human realization."¹¹

Total Repression

Hence, in this society, there is the simultaneous and continuous presence of repression and production. In fact, Marcuse observes, "Its productivity is destructive of the free development of human needs and faculties, its peace maintained by the constant threat of war, its growth dependent on the repression of the real possibilities for pacifying the struggle for existence—individual, national and international".¹²

This society, which has shown efficiency in production, has produced highly efficient means of repression. This repression, so different from that which characterized the preceding, less developed stages of our society, notes Marcuse, operates today not from a position of natural and technical immaturity but rather from a position of strength. The capabilities (intellectual and material) of contemporary society are immeasurably greater than ever before — which means that the scope of

society's domination over the individual is immeasurably greater than ever before.¹²

This repression is total. It is total because the society, by virtue of the way it has organized its technological base, tends to be totalitarian. For, not only does a specific form of government or party rule make for totalitarianism but also a specific system of production and distribution. This specific system characterizes the advanced industrial society. Here, the technical apparatus of production and distribution (with an increasing sector of automation) functions, not as the sum-total of mere instruments which can be isolated from their social and political effects, but rather as a system which determines *a priori* the product of the apparatus as well as the operations of servicing and extending it. In this society, the productive apparatus tends to become totalitarian to the extent to which it determines not only the socially needed occupations, skills, and attitudes, but also individual needs and aspirations.¹⁴

This, then, is the distinct character of the repression. It succeeds in suffocating the 'true' needs of man and in replacing them by 'false' needs, 'false' in the sense of being beyond the vital necessities and in being superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests keen on his repression. 'False' in the sense of being the 'needs' which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery and injustice. The distinct effectiveness of this repression lies in the transplantation of the external and oppressive needs into individual needs with so much success that their real character is thoroughly shrouded — the individual is made to live in 'the abandonment of repressive satisfaction'.

Trends of Social Mobilization

These controls are more successful because, as noted earlier, the capabilities of contemporary society are immeasurably greater than ever before. The success of these controls, effected through utilization of the scientific conquest of nature for the scientific use of man, lies in "conquering the centrifugal social forces with Technology rather than Terror, on the dual basis of an overwhelming efficiency and an increasing standard of living".¹⁵ Social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced:

The productive apparatus and the goods and services which it produces 'sell' or impose the social system as a whole. The means of mass transportation and communication, the commodities of lodging, food and clothing, the irresistible output of the entertainment and information industry carry with them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumer more or less pleasantly to the producers and, through the latter, to the whole.¹⁶

Ideology is thus inherent in the process of production itself. Its

“supreme promise is an ever-more-comfortable life for an ever-growing number of people who, in a strict sense, cannot imagine a qualitatively different universe of discourse and action, for the capacity to contain and manipulate subversive imagination and effort is an integral part of the given society”.¹⁷

For the ‘society of total mobilization’, the main trends are familiar: concentration of the national economy on the needs of the big corporations, with the government as a stimulating, supporting and sometimes even as a controlling force; hitching of this economy to a worldwide system of military alliances, monetary arrangements, technical assistance and development schemes; gradual assimilation of blue-collar and white-collar population, of leadership types in business and labour, of leisure activities and aspirations in different social classes; fostering of a pre-established harmony between scholarship and the national purpose; invasion of the private household by the togetherness of public opinion; opening of the bedroom to the media of mass communication.¹⁸

Impact on Individual

Its consequences are familiar too. For the individual, even that very ‘inner’ dimension of the mind in which man could become and remain ‘himself’ is invaded and whittled down by the technological reality. The social controls are ‘introjected’ to the point where even individual protest is affected at its roots. The intellectual and emotional refusal to ‘go along’ appears neurotic and impotent. The result is an ‘immediate identification’ with the society. “This identification is no illusion but reality”. Yet, it does not deny, but rather, affirms alienation. For, this reality constitutes a more progressive stage of alienation.

The latter has become entirely objective; the subject which is alienated is swallowed up by its alienated existence. There is only one dimension, and it is everywhere and in all forms. The achievements of progress defy ideological indictment as well as justification; before their tribunal the ‘false consciousness’ of their rationality becomes the true consciousness.¹⁹

As the beneficial products of technological exploits become available to more individuals in more social classes, “the indoctrination they carry ceases to be publicity; it becomes a way of life.” It militates against qualitative change. “Thus emerges a pattern of *one-dimensional thought and behaviour* in which ideas, aspirations and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced in terms of this universe. They are redefined by the rationality of the given system and of its quantitative extension.”²⁰

The reign of such one-dimensional reality does not mean that materialism rules, and that the spiritual, metaphysical and Bohemian

occupations are petering out. On the contrary, "such modes of protest and transcendence are no longer contradictory to the status quo and no longer negative. They are rather the ceremonial part of practical behaviourism, its *harmless negation*, and are quickly digested by the status quo as part of its healthy diet".²¹

The result must be faced:

Contemporary society seems to be capable of containing social change — qualitative change which would establish essentially different institutions, a new direction of the productive process, new modes of human existence. This containment of social change is perhaps the most singular achievement of advanced industrial society; the general acceptance of the National Purpose, bipartisan policy, the decline of pluralism, the collusion of Business and Labour within the strong State testify to the integration of opposites which is the result as well as the prerequisite of this achievement.²²

The processes, outlined above, do not leave the industrial worker unaffected. The 'machine process in the technological universe' chains him to 'mechanized enslavement'. The technology does not remove his enslavement but only conceals it. "For in reality" argues Marcuse,

neither the utilization of administrative rather than physical controls (hunger, personal dependence, force), nor the change in the character of heavy work, nor the assimilation of occupational classes, nor the equalization in the sphere of consumption compensate for the fact that the decisions over life and death, over personal and national security are made at places over which the individuals have no control. The slaves of developed industrial civilization are sublimated slaves, but they are slaves, for slavery is determined 'neither by obedience nor by hardness of labour but by the status of being a mere instrument, and the reduction of man to the state of a thing.'²³

MISLED INTO GREY UTOPIA

Marcuse has received severe criticism: he has been called the philosopher of a lost radicalism; his intellectual movement over the years has been described as a progress from 'Marxism to pessimism'. Labels aside, he has been criticized at different levels: methodological, theoretical and empirical.

At the first level, the criticism has been that Marcuse attempts to accomplish the 'logically impossible': "If Marcuse perhaps resembles the younger Lukacs in trying to make Marxism over-independent of the results of empirical enquiry, it may be that Marcuse's errors have also included the smuggling of an arbitrary empirical content into his otherwise Hegelian version of Marxism."²⁴ MacIntyre, who makes this clear, explains that Marcuse combines two attitudes, to be found inconsistently in Hegel's thought, in his own thinking; on the one hand, he draws a sharp contrast between

dialectical thinking and merely empirical thinking...he presents the dialectic as constituted by a set of laws to which all empirical reality must conform and to which we can know in advance that it must conform ... he treats, for example, Hegel's account of finitude and potentiality not as a conceptual analysis, but as the statement of a universal law (*Reason and Revolution*, p 137). Yet, he also centrally maintains that Hegel's analysis of social life has application to actual societies, and that in this application lies its main point. The Hegel who maintained at the end of his life that philosophy entered a realm separate from and higher than that of society or politics is, in Marcuse's view (and correctly, I think), unfaithful to the core of his own thought. But in combining these attitudes Marcuse courts disaster. For what he desires is a theory of social life which, while it applies to actual empirical social life, is warranted not by empirical evidence, but by its conforming to the standards of something else which he calls dialectical thinking. In desiring this he desires the logically impossible.²⁸

Another criticism, at a different level, concerns the question of the effects of technology. In finding parallel consequences in capitalist and socialist societies, Marcuse clearly sides with the concept of 'industrial society', as contrasted with the concept of 'advanced capitalism'. That this is not just a matter of terminology has been made clear in earlier discussions.²⁶ W F Haug has persuasively shown that, in placing the emphasis on forces of production, Marcuse has totally ignored the relations of production within a capitalist society.²⁷

At a more concrete level, it is suggested, to refer once again to Haug, Marcus overestimates the effectiveness and the inner purposiveness of technology for accomplishing integration and economic stabilization whereas diverging tendencies and interests are undervalued to the same degree.²⁸

Sublimated Slaves

It now remains to analyze Marcuse more pointedly, particularly with reference to our limited focus, namely, the situation of the working class within advanced capitalist society. If our earlier exposition of Marcuse is not misleading, it is clear that Marcuse operates simultaneously at *two* levels in his discussion on the 'labouring class'.

On the one hand, his critical perspective shows the irrationality of advanced industrial society: its productivity *is* destructive of the free development of human beings. He is clearly led by this line of reasoning to assert that man suffers in this situation from a more progressive stage of alienation, a stage which has become entirely objective, a stage when the subject which is alienated is swallowed by its alienated existence. We have earlier noted that Marcuse finds the workers sharing this general *human* situation under the present circumstances. He concludes

that they remain slaves, albeit 'sublimated slaves.'

On the other hand, Marcuse finds, following from tremendous technological changes of which full automation is the most advanced form a 'new technological work-world' coming to the forefront in the most highly developed contemporary societies. On the basis of his review of the existing 'sociological' literature, he concludes, to talk only of the workers' world, that a characteristic of this new 'work-world' is that the worker gets *integrated* into the plant itself, and through it, into the larger society.

Whereas the first argument emphasizes the extent of the repressive mechanism of the society, the second emphasizes the subjective integration and objective absorption of the working class into the capitalist society. Both of these arguments are complete in themselves, understandable without a necessary reference to each other. The only link between the two is attempted with the assertion that the effectiveness of the repression lies in suppressing man to such an extent that he is led to live "in the abandonment of repressive satisfaction." Yet, this link proves tenuous in postulating 'total' prevalence of 'false consciousness'. The difficulties involved in referring to this concept are clear to anyone familiar with its overstressing possibilities. Besides, the problem remains that the history of the working-class movement, particularly the recent history of Italy and France, does not show workers suffering from as blinded a consciousness as is assumed by Marcuse. Further, Marcuse's analysis makes no provision for man freeing himself from his situation nor for identifying factors that may change the situation.

Moreover, Marcuse does not specify the conditions under which his thesis on the progressive stage of alienation could be falsified. In situations short of full revolution, he could always argue from the point of 'false consciousness' or *harmless negation*. Yet, we know, revolutions do not occur in vacuums. A series of developments normally lies behind dramatic eruptions. Marcuse's analysis is unable to identify these developments.

Constraints of Method

Marcuse's limitations are the limitations of his method. It is very clear that his critical perspective lacks sound *empirical* basis and his treatment of empirical findings lacks sound *critical* evaluation. In other words, in living in two self-created worlds, those of 'critical' theory and 'facts', distinct and separated, Marcuse ends up giving two lines of analysis which too remain distinct and separated.²⁹

For illustration, his analysis of 'repression' lacks the kind of 'material' basis which one has learned to associate with the writings of Marx and Engels. His criticism is concentrated on the question of the freedom and dignity of the individual, considered apart from his class basis and is directed against capitalism, viewed as a 'repressive system'

without any reference to its relations of production. Indeed, it is not difficult to find in Marcuse's analysis elements of what has been termed his 'conservative romanticism.' Regretfully, this line of reasoning cannot be developed here. It suffices for our purposes to consider the following quotation from Joachim Israel:

This again is related to his image of man, as a mixture of psycho-analytical ideas and humanistic ethics. It leads him, for example, to advance ideas about human self-realization based upon a society which maximizes the possibilities for such a self-realization. In Marcuse's analysis it seems that the development goes in a direction which removes the goal of human self-realization.³⁰

Exclusive Reliance

It is instructive to note the *uncritical* manner in which Marcuse accepts selected sociological findings. He constantly refers, in the section where he talks of the 'decisive transformation of industrial workers' to the 'sociologist-observer' and accepts his authority unquestioningly. Had he looked at the field more closely, he would have certainly found there were many sociologist-observers of the same phenomenon, and further, to say the least, their findings and interpretations did not always agree.

For instance, talking of automation, a key point in his analysis, Marcuse unquestioningly accepts his 'sociologist-observer', namely, Charles R Walker, in his assertion that in the automated plants a transformation in terms of greater emphasis on technical and mental skills is taking place.³¹ Now, reading Everett M Kassalow, research director, Industrial Union Department, CIO-AFL, one finds him arguing differently:

With the hindsight of just five years, there now appears to be good reason to question this second major social myth about automation. Professor James Bright of Harvard, one of the most reflective and generally accepted experts in the automation field, categorically rejects the conclusion that automation leads to an upgrading of skill. He does agree that automation 'results in more complex machinery'. The next logical conclusion, however, namely, that as a consequence of this more complex machinery, 'skill demands on the work force are going up', may be logical but he claims it 'simply is not true'. After studying fifteen highly automatic factories, he found that contrary to popular belief management moved into automation generally to 'overcome the lack of skills' and that 'skill requirement declined' after automation took over. Bright adds that if one stops to think about it, this is logical and in keeping with the main sweep of industrial evolution... A study conducted by a large aircraft manufacturing company to determine the abilities required of operators of electronic computing equipment concluded that there was a need for a 'paradoxical combination or high technical competence and low mental capacity -- the employee should have a BS

degree in engineering and an IQ of 81!²

In quoting extensively from Kassalow, the intention has not been to prove Walker wrong. The findings presented are too fragmentary to allow such an assertion. Kassalow was quoted to emphasize that, in a field where 'facts' suggest conflicting interpretations, an exclusive reliance on one observer, his set of facts and his particular interpretations is not a sound policy. It may be misleading. Unhappily, one finds Marcuse misled in this respect too.

¹ Jerzy J Wiatr, "Herbert Marcuse: Philosopher of a Lost Radicalism", *Science and Society*, vol 54, 1970.

² Herbert Marcuse, *One-dimensional Man*, Boston 1964, p 24. The rest of the references to Marcuse are from this book.

³ Marcuse, op.cit., p 25.

⁴ Marcuse, op.cit., pp 25-6.

⁵ Marcuse, op.cit., p 27.

⁶ Marcuse, op.cit., pp 27-8.

⁷ Marcuse, op.cit., p 28.

⁸ Marcuse, op.cit., pp 29-30.

⁹ Marcuse, op.cit., pp 31-2.

¹⁰ The *embourgeoisement* thesis lacks a comprehensive and clear formulation from any of its formulators. It has to be reconstructed from several writings. In brief, the thesis states that due to changes associated with industrialism, the working class is being increasingly *integrated* into the capitalist system. Three main changes, namely, economic, technological and managerial, and ecological are specified. Economically, it is argued that a certain 'homogenization' of income and consumption is taking place. Advancement in technology, with associated advancement in production and management systems, is supposedly leading not only to greater income and more skilful and varied work-task for some sections of the labour force, but also, to their enhanced self-respect and greater freedom of work-design. Ecological changes, in terms of inflation of urban population as a result of migration from rural areas, along with expansion of urban areas, are believed to be breaking distinct working-class communities, along with their culture, bond and ideology. The works of the following thinkers provide the ground: Theodor Geiger, *Die Klassengesellschaft in Schmelztiegel*, Cologne and Hagen 1949; Reinhard Bendix, *Work and Authority in Industry*, New York 1956; W W Rostow, *The Stages of the Economic Growth: A Non-Communist Manifesto*, Cambridge 1960. More immediately, the following works have been influential: S M Lipset, "The Changing Class Structure of Contemporary European Politics", *Daedalus*, vol 63, no 1, 1964; Clark Kerr and others, *Industrialism and Industrial Man*, London 1962; Kurt Mayer, "Recent Changes in the Class Structure of the United States", *Transactions of the Third World Congress of Sociology*, vol 3, London 1956; "Diminishing Class Differentials in the United States", *Kyklos*⁴ vol 12, October 1959; and "The Changing Shape of the American Class Structure", *Social Research*, vol 30, winter 1963; also, Robert Miller, *The New Classes*, London 1966. For an excellent reconstruction of the thesis and its empirical invalidation from the British situation, see John H Goldthorpe, *et al.*, *The Affluent Worker in the Class Structure*, Cambridge 1969.

¹¹ Marcuse, op.cit., p 17.

¹² Marcuse, op.cit., pp IX-X.

¹³ Marcuse, op.cit., p X.

¹⁴ Marcuse, op.cit., pp XV-XVI.

¹⁵ Marcuse, op.cit., p X.

¹⁶ Marcuse, op.cit., pp 11-2.

- 17 Marcuse, op.cit., p 23.
- 18 Marcuse, op.cit., p 19.
- 19 Marcuse, op.cit., p 11.
- 20 Marcuse, op.cit., p 12.
- 21 Marcuse, op.cit., p 14 (emphasis added.)
- 22 Marcuse, op.cit., p XII.
- 23 Marcuse, op.cit., pp 32-3.
- 24 Alasdair MacIntyre, "Herbert Marcuse: From Marxism to Pessimism", *Survey*, vol 62, 1967, p 39.
- 25 Ibid., p 40.
- 26 Particularly to be noted, T W Adorno (ed.), *Spatkapitalismus oder Industriegesellschaft*, Stuttgart 1969.
- 27 W F Haug, 'Das Ganze und das Andere', in, J Habermas (ed.), *Antworten und Herbert Marcuse*, Frankfurt 1968. Paul Mattick also notes, "It is not production and productivity as such which propel capitalism, but the production of profits as the accumulation of capital." See Paul Mattick, *Critique of Marcuse*, London 1972, p 14.
- 28 Ibid., p 53
- 29 This criticism links up with the philosophical critique of MacIntyre that was presented earlier.
- 30 Joachim Israel, *Alienation: From Marx to Modern Socialism*, Boston 1971, p 176.
- 31 Marcuse, op.cit., p 25.
- 32 Everett M Kassalow, "Labour Relations and Employment Aspects after Ten Years" in Morris Philipson (ed.), *Automation: Implications for the Future*, New York 1962, pp 322-23.