

## HERBERT MARCUSE: PHILOSOPHER OF A LOST RADICALISM\*

JERZY J. WIATR

**I**N MAY 1968 the Paris students took to the streets under the slogan of "the three M's." The "three M's" are Marx, Mao, and Marcuse. The seventy-year old professor, the author of subtle philosophical works and keen journalistic articles, until a short time ago known only to a narrow circle of specialists, suddenly became a symbolic figure, a sort of prophet of the movement. His views are of great importance for understanding the nature of the student movement in capitalist countries; that movement, it is true, has an abundance of young ideologues who have borrowed more or less consciously from Marcuse but try to maintain the appearance of complete originality.

Who is Herbert Marcuse, and what is his philosophy?

Herbert Marcuse was born in Berlin in 1898 and studied in Berlin and Freiburg. He was fascinated by Hegelianism and its influence on later German thought, and gave special attention to Marx's youthful writings. It was during this period that he formed that hostility to the Social Democratic interpretations of Marxism and to revisionism of the Bernstein type that became manifest later on; and at the same time there was formed a certain theoretical attitude, very typical for many authors at about that time, consisting in a contraposition of the ethical aspects of Marx's theory to the scientific analysis of actuality and the laws of its development. If we inquire into the influences affecting Marcuse at this period, we have to look particularly into the connections between his views and those of Henri de Man, and into the influence on Marcuse (and on other German radicals) of György Lukacs' *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (1923). By the end of the 1920s Marcuse was closely linked

\* Translated by Henry F. Mins. Reprinted from and with permission of *Nowe Drogi*, 1968(9), Warsaw, Poland, pp. 137-46.

with what is known as the Frankfurt circle, from which came many well-known Western philosophers and sociologists and which had a very important influence in the formation of Marxology in the West. In addition to Marcuse, the group included, at that time, Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Karl A. Wittfogel, Friedrich Pollock, Erich Fromm, Gerhard Meyer, H. Grossman, and P. Landsberg. Horkheimer had the role of intellectual leader of the Frankfurt circle. Strictly speaking, the Frankfurt circle was not a philosophical school nor a political group, although it had certain features of both. There were certain philosophical and political divergences among the members, although their conception of fundamental questions was much the same. Some members of the Frankfurt circle came to the group by way of Hegelianism; others arrived there by departing from Marxism. The prevailing attitude toward Marxism was not monolithic within the circle. Alongside people who regarded themselves as Marxists there were others who would only go so far as to acknowledge that Marxism had been an important influence in their work. The factors that held the Frankfurt circle together were: in philosophy, dialectics (as a result, sympathy for Hegel and Marx and opposition to the positivistic trend); in politics, anti-fascism, combined with a characteristic mixture of radical-liberal and utopian-socialist views. The Frankfurt circle held aloof from the organized labor movement, although at that period they did not wage war on communism; not only that, but the evaluations of Lenin's contribution to philosophy were, in general, much more favorable among the members of the circle (including Marcuse) than is usually the case with bourgeois Marxologists. On the other hand, they were far from recognizing the importance and function of the Lenin stage in Marxist philosophy, far from realizing the connection between Marxist theory and the practice of the organized working class movement. Accordingly, I feel, the activity of the Frankfurt circle should be regarded rather as a matter of the more or less direct participation of Marxism in other philosophical and sociological trends than as a part of the history of Marxism, as Predrag Vranicki, the well-known Yugoslav historian of Marxism does.<sup>1</sup>

1 Predrag Vranicki, *Historia marksizmu* (Zagreb, 1961), pp. 359-64. It is hard to agree with him when, dealing with the postwar years, he unqualifiedly includes

In 1932 the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* began publication in Leipzig. Marcuse and the other members of the Frankfurt circle were among its most active contributors. In 1933, after the Hitlerites had come to power, the members of the Frankfurt circle emigrated. Marcuse went to Geneva at first, and in 1934 became a member of the Institute of Social Research at Columbia University. He continued his active collaboration with the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, which had moved to Paris; in it he published a number of articles, including: "The Struggle against Liberalism in the Totalitarian Theory of the State" (1934), "On the Affirmative Nature of Culture" (1937), "Philosophy and Critical Theory" (1937), "Contribution to the Criticism of Hedonism" (1938).<sup>2</sup> In them Marcuse attacks fascism, although they already show that in his criticism the ethical elements, the problem of freedom and human values, are divorced from the socio-economic and political mechanisms of the fascist dictatorship as the result of the power of the monopolies, carried to their extreme. Another prominent aspect in his thinking is his absolutization of the question of the individual, which he puts at the center of what is known as philosophical anthropology.

Marcuse continued his interest in Hegel while he was an émigré. As early as 1932 he had published a study of Hegelianism (*Hegels Ontologie und die Grundlegung einer Theorie der Geschichtlichkeit*); in 1941 he continued his interest along these lines in his best-known book, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (published in Poland a quarter-century later). *Reason and Revolution* is not merely an analysis and exposition of Hegel's theory. It is primarily a study of the influence of Hegelianism on European thought and a defense of Hegel against fascism. Marcuse attacks the view that Hegelianism was the intellectual backdrop for Hitlerism. He interprets Hegelianism in the liberal spirit. "The German idealism that culminated in the Hegelian teaching," Marcuse wrote, "asserted that social and political institutions should jibe with a free development of the individual."<sup>3</sup> From this he con-

---

Marcuse among "contemporary Marxists" (p. 548). This is all the more surprising in that Vranicki makes his judgment, *inter alia*, on the basis of Marcuse's *Soviet Marxism*, a book whose anti-Soviet character is obvious.

2 These articles were later collected in a volume entitled *Kultur und Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt am Main, 1965).

3 Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution* (New York, 1941), p. 415.

cludes that "The social and political theory responsible for the development of Fascist Germany was, then related to Hegelianism in a completely negative way."<sup>4</sup> Marcuse strongly emphasizes the connection between Marxism and Hegelianism, and in particular the link between the radical wing of the labor movement and the tradition of Hegelian dialectics. In this connection he gave a positive evaluation of Lenin's contribution, contrasting it to the positivistic conception of the revisionists.<sup>5</sup> By and large, it emerges that *Reason and Revolution* marks the point in Marcuse's intellectual career where he came closest to Marxism. In the postwar years his philosophical development led him in the opposite direction.

The years 1942-1950 marked a close connection on Marcuse's part with the policies of ruling circles in the United States. During those years he worked as a section head in the State Department. He was also connected with the Sovietological center of Columbia University (the Russian Institute) and the similar center at Harvard (the Russian Research Center). The ideological orientation of these institutions leaves no room for doubt as to Marcuse's having gone over to an anti-communist and anti-Soviet position. In 1954 Marcuse became professor of philosophy and politics at Brandeis University.

His philosophical works during the postwar period show a sharp turn toward Freudianism, especially in his book *Eros and Civilization* (1955). Interest in Freudianism and the effort to reconcile it with the principles of Marxism are not characteristic of the philosophical position of Marcuse alone; Erich Fromm goes in the same direction even more emphatically. In Marcuse, however, the theme of Freudianism is combined with the socio-economic conception of capitalism as a "repressive" system. Repression of the sex instinct is a phenomenon, and even the most significant manifestation, of the "repressive culture" that limits and depresses human freedom. There is a clear expression of the contradiction between the Marxist conception of freedom as liberation from the shackles caused by a system based on class exploitation and as man's complete mastery of nature, and Marcuse's conception, in which freedom is visualized as rebellion against any social regulation, any limitation of the in-

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 418.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 401.

dividual by control on the part of society. Marcuse despises, as "Philistine," any acceptance by the individual of limitations imposed by society, and even arrives at the conclusion that "efficiency and repression are similar: increasing labor productivity is the highest ideal of both capitalist and Stalinist Stakhanovism."<sup>6</sup> Anarchistic liberation from social control, including sexual control, becomes a positive ideal. It is not surprising, as Franciszek Ryszka says in his interesting sketch of Marcuse, that Daniel Cohn-Bendit, the French student leader, "became a 'chief' in his milieu from the time that he appeared before François Misoffe, the minister for youth affairs, to demand the repeal of limitations on sex in academic housing."<sup>7</sup> But Ryszka makes the keen observation that rebellion against sexual restriction is not a goal in and of itself for Marcuse; it is one manifestation, particularly provocative in the eyes of public opinion, of the general anarchistic tendency that appears clearly in the movement that looks for expression in Marcuse's philosophy and comes to the surface in that philosopher, beginning with his book *Eros and Civilization*. He goes in the same direction in his *One-Dimensional Man*.<sup>8</sup>

From the point of view of his relation to Marxism and the labor movement, as well as from the point of view of the theoretical anatomy of the movement inspired by Marcuse's philosophy, his book *Soviet Marxism*, already mentioned, is of particular importance. It contains a sharp attack on the entire system of Marxist-Leninist philosophy in the USSR and the socialist countries of Europe, aimed at proving that Marxism has been "derevolutionized," has lost its quondam function as the ideology of social radicalism, and has become the ideology of the status quo. The analysis by which Marcuse arrives at these conclusions discloses the true character of his theoretical conception.

He starts from the premise that Marxism was actually the ideology of the revolutionary working class at the time when that class was a revolutionary force, and asserts that the working class has lost its revolutionary potential. "Soviet Marxism," in contrast to Marx-

6 Herbert Marcuse, *Eros et civilisation* (Paris, 1968), p. 140 (not found in English edition).

7 Franciszek Ryszka, "Herbert Marcuse: Return to Utopia," *Odra*, 1968 (7-8), No. 89-90, p. 4.

8 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston, 1964).

ism, which Marcuse undertakes to present, cannot but be the ideology for stabilizing the post-revolutionary system, the ideology of a period in which the working class has ceased to be a revolutionary force, he says, and the socialist government has ceased to perform the function of a bastion of the revolution. This false and reactionary picture is not new or original. We find in it a repetition of the Trotskyist and neo-Trotskyist theory of the "betrayed revolution," tied up with the allegations that a "new ruling class" formed after the revolution (James Burnham, Milovan Djilas and others); we also find in it an acceptance of the arguments of those bourgeois economists and sociologists who see the growth of prosperity in some capitalist countries, the development of "welfare state" institutions, etc., as marking the end of the laws governing the operation of capitalist formations and the end of the class struggle under capitalism. These conceptions negate the obvious fact that the role of the working class changes in a state where the revolution has been victorious, without the working class ceasing in any way to be revolutionary. Its revolutionary nature is manifested in the construction of the new system, not to speak of the international revolutionary role of the camp of socialist governments as a fortress of freedom and progress, the main defense against imperialist violence.

The only difference is that Marcuse does not go so far as to make an open defense of capitalism. He makes a very sharp criticism of the capitalist system, attacking its anti-democratic aspects, its imperialistic policies, etc. His criticism, however, 1) is concentrated on the question of the freedom and dignity of the individual, considered apart from the class basis, and is directed against capitalism as applying a "repressive system" and not as a definite structure of class rule; 2) negates any hope that the working class and its political movement could be the gravediggers of capitalism; 3) and is directed just as much against the socialist countries, in whose social systems Marcuse finds the same repressive elements of limitation of individual freedom that he attacks in capitalism. The result is that his criticism, superficially very "revolutionary" and "anti-capitalist," turns into an indirect form of defense of the existing order, by means of shifting the scene of combat to a marginal and falsely-chosen region, by means of splitting the ideological forces of the revolution, and by contraposing the radical forces in capitalist society to the socialist countries under the usurped banner of revolution.

Marcuse's conception has still another function, aimed at the internal content of socialist societies. Criticizing them as nonrevolutionary, Marcuse attacks the USSR for its "ethics of labor discipline," its patriotism, "the entire morality of political Puritanism,"<sup>9</sup> in which he sees a result of the period of struggle against capitalist encirclement, under circumstances in which individual desires had to give way to the needs of the system. He believes that peaceful coexistence will create the conditions for reducing these characteristics of the Soviet system by gradually raising material well-being.

This aspect of Marcuse's view is likewise not original; it is borrowed from the conception of Deutscher, Aron, and Rostow, who during the second half of the 1950s advanced the thesis that basic changes in the socialist system were inevitable because of industrialization and increasing well-being. It may be pointed out in passing that despite the difference in political positions there is a basic similarity between this thesis and the Maoist propaganda, which alleges that the growth of well-being in the USSR and the European socialist countries has made them bourgeois. In both cases the determining influence is a petty-bourgeois conception of socialism, social equality, economic progress, etc.

Marcuse sees economic development and peaceful coexistence as factors that could make it possible to reduce the "repressive system" under socialism; we recall that by "repressive system" he does not mean the repressive action of the government in the usual sense of the term but rather, in general, limitation by society of the freedom of the individual, imposition by society of definite standards and rules of behavior. The assumption that the "repressive system," so conceived, could be mitigated under the influence of increasing well-being is a fundamental abandonment of the Marxist doctrine of the state and the dictatorship of the proletariat, and replacement of it by anarchist theories; it is hard to see, incidentally, why prosperity should lead to liquidating the "repressive system" of socialist states when Marcuse asserts, with reference to capitalism, that it acts as a factor intensifying the effectiveness of the "repressive" system. I imagine that in formulating this thesis Marcuse took as his basis the conception, a fashionable one at the time, of evolu-

9 Herbert Marcuse, *Soviet Marxism* [p. 370 of French edition; possible parallel on p. 242 of English edition].

tionary changes in socialism, without further analysis of the logical consequences that follow from the theory. At the same time, however, he emphasizes that "if the Soviet regime could not or would not limit the repressive ethic, it would inevitably become more and more irrational in terms of its own norms."<sup>10</sup>

This would evoke forces opposing the system, it is held. This constitutes an attempt, although not a very well worked-out one, to adapt the anarchist conception of philosophy and politics to the general purpose of combating socialism, and in particular of inspiring and supporting anti-socialist forces in the countries of our camp.

In recent years Marcuse has gone further in his criticism of socialism. In his preface to the French edition of *Soviet Marxism* he says outright that "the decline of the revolutionary potential in the developed industrial societies of the West, caused by the continuing vitality of organized capitalism and by the continuance of totalitarianism in Soviet society (the two tendencies being interrelated), has the effect, as things turn out, of making the communist parties the historical heir of the prewar social democratic parties. However, unlike the position of the social democratic parties before the war, the communist parties until recently had no more advanced movement to the left of them; now that movement has been set up by the Chinese communists."<sup>11</sup> Marcuse goes on to find that the communist movement has departed from class positions, "has taken the historical position of the social democratic parties"; at the same time he presents the Maoists as the continuators of Marxism-Leninism. In this context, these borrowings have an obvious anti-communist purpose. The alliance between Herbert Marcuse and the guerrillas of Peking is too grotesque a phenomenon to be taken without a dose of irony: the subtle philosopher raised in the classical tradition of European intellectualism, the prophet of unbounded individualism and anarchistic freedom, is suddenly on the side of those who tread on every intellectual tradition (except the "little red book" with quotations from Mao Tse-tung). The only explanation for this astonishing alliance is the hatred they share for the Soviet system, for the policies of the USSR and the actions of the world

10 *Op. cit.*, p. 371 of French edition.

11 Herbert Marcuse, *Le marxisme soviétique. Essai d'analyse critique* (Paris, 1963), p. 8.



communist movement, as well as the similarity of the petty-bourgeois roots of the two ideologies.

But Marcuse is too intelligent a thinker to put much stock in the "revolutionary potential" of the isolated Maoist groups in the developed capitalist countries. Accordingly, he searches for other revolutionary forces, and finds them outside the ranks of the working class, outside the world communist movement, outside the world socialist system.

In one of his most recent works he distinguishes four elements going to make up the "syndrome of revolutionary potential." They are: 1) movements of national liberation in the undeveloped countries; 2) a worker's movement based on the "new strategy," i.e. combining elements of traditional Marxism with elements of syndicalism; 3) the backward strata in the "welfare states"; 4) the oppositional intelligentsia.<sup>12</sup> In Marcuse's construct, a special place in this syndrome is assigned to the oppositional intelligentsia. "At this stage," he says, "in which the critical consciousness has been absorbed and coordinated by the affluent society, the liberation of consciousness from the manipulation and indoctrination imposed on it by capitalism becomes a permanent problem and condition. The basic condition for radical change is not the development of class consciousness, but of consciousness as such, free from the distortions imposed on it."<sup>13</sup>

By the same token it is not the working class but the "radical" intelligentsia who have the leading role as revolutionary force within capitalist societies. Outside of those societies, the national liberation movement is a force of the same kind, and oppositional intellectuals should ally themselves with it. Stout defense of the cause of the independence of nations menaced by imperialism, especially action against the American war in Vietnam, is a part of revolutionary activity in this sense. It is well known that the adherents of Marcuse in France and the German Federal Republic make very sharp criticisms of the imperialist policy of the United States. But that aspect of the theory and the practice corresponding to it lose their genuine radical meaning, in that the neo-anarchists artificially re-

12 Herbert Marcuse, "The Obsolescence of Marxism," in *Marx and the Western World* (Notre Dame, Indiana, 1967), p. 416.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 417.

strict and cramp their struggle against imperialist policy in Vietnam, divorcing it from the struggle of the entire front of social forces against imperialism and even linking it with statements directed against the socialist countries and the communist movement.

Marcuse's attitude toward the socialist countries is in keeping with his theory of the loss of revolutionary potential. He asks the provocative question, "Are these stabilized communist societies a real opponent, a neutral observer, or a doctor at the bedside of ailing capitalism (i.e. does the mere existence of communism produce the growth and strength of capitalism?)"<sup>14</sup> The mere asking of such a question, added to the exclusion of the socialist countries from the "revolutionary syndrome" that Marcuse proposes, is adequate evidence that his conception of "radical change" is of the nature of an ideological diversion so far as the actual struggle of the socialist forces in the world is concerned, a struggle that is being waged by the camp of socialist countries and by the working class and its allies.

The philosophical and political work of Herbert Marcuse, which this article has tried to follow in its development, merits attention in every respect. It is a typical manifestation of the ideological processes reflecting the sharpening conflict between socialism and capitalism on the world scale during the second half of the twentieth century. The importance of Marcuse's philosophy is based on various factors:

1. Marcuse, putting on the Marxist mantle and polemizing with both the open adversaries of Marxism and the classical type of revisionist (after the manner of Bernstein), is a manifestation of an ideological tendency that is particularly dangerous for Marxism today because it is relatively less open to criticism. In the Marxist tradition the polemics against revisionism, which used openly right-wing slogans, have a long history, with the result that this form of revisionism is relatively easy to expose in the working-class movement and in the domain of Marxist thinking in general. Marcuse, on the other hand, represents a revisionism operating with ultra-left slogans and thereby appealing to some radical social groups, particularly groups of radical young intellectuals.

2. Orienting himself toward collaboration with the Maoists and lending his authority to their pretensions to the role of authentic

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 416.

heirs to the Marxist-Leninist tradition, Marcuse and his adherents can form the bridge to European intellectuals that the Maoists have been seeking for a long time, and sometimes a bridge to some segments of the European working class. Although Marcuse's philosophy has remained outside the organized worker's movement, it has been able to constitute a means of diversion and splitting within that movement. The political consequences that inevitably result from such a situation lead to a prolonged effort at an alliance between these two forms of pseudo-leftist revisionism.

3. Attacking capitalism, Marcuse becomes the intellectual inspiration of considerable segments of the radical intelligentsia (especially student youth); consequently, his conceptions should not be regarded merely as an abstract manifestation of theoretical thought but likewise as a manifestation of the social consciousness of rebellious intellectuals. Marcuse's theories, for all that can be said about their eclecticism and superficiality, have penetrated certain intellectual circles and become a part of social consciousness. They cannot be ignored. Nor is it enough to engage in polemics against them. We have to go beyond that and find the social conditions that made it possible for Marcuse's philosophy to gain acceptance among anarchizing youth.

To do that would require making a fundamental sociological analysis not only of the student movement in the countries of Western Europe but also of the most general problems of the position of the intellectual in present-day capitalism. The present article does not enter into any such analysis, but it seems to me that Marcuse's philosophy contains an expression of the complex and internally contradictory situation of the intelligentsia in the capitalist world. In that philosophy we have to do with a mixture of elements derived from social radicalism and rebellion against capitalism, with elements that reflect the limited and fragmentary character of intellectuals' opposition to capitalism, and with elements expressing the fear and prejudices that much of the bourgeois intelligentsia feels toward communism. Into this skein of diverse elements there also enters a sector of the imperialist apparatus for psychological warfare, which seizes upon and entrenches itself in every tendency (regardless of phraseology) directed against the present-day workers' movement, the socialist camp, and Marxism-Leninism.

Marcuse's philosophy cannot be understood apart from this tangle of contradictions. It is not a philosophy that is monolithic in its political and ideological position. It displays the internal contradiction of the radical intellectuals who rebel against capitalism but cannot free themselves from the prejudices, hierarchy of values, etc., that capitalism has imbued them with, who are trying to find their way to the working class but fail to understand its role of leadership of the revolutionary forces, and reject the leadership of the working-class parties. At the same time, however, Marcuse's philosophy should not be regarded simply as a reflection of the contradictory consciousness of the radical intelligentsia, but also as a part of the ideological warfare against Marxism-Leninism that anti-socialist forces are waging. Quite apart from the intentions of the philosopher himself, the conceptions that he has formulated are used in the arsenal of ideological weapons stubbornly applied by imperialist propaganda agencies; and in one way or another they find an echo in the ideological conceptions of anti-socialist groupings in the countries of our camp.

At one time Marcuse was a flaming anti-fascist, a radical who was close to Marxism. But the course of his life did not lead him to Marxism-Leninism, to the working-class movement, but in the opposite direction. His radicalism was shunted into the blind alley of anti-communism; it ceased to be an intellectual weapon of the forces that are changing the world and it became an instrument of ideological diversion against communism. We should not be misled by some Marxist terminology and ultra-radical phrases. Marcuse's philosophy is shunting into the blind alley of the new anarchism radical groups of student youth and intellectuals who under other circumstances could have been valuable members of the organized structure of socialist forces. This makes it a dangerous means of ideological diversion, which is all the more dangerous because it operates among people who honestly believe that they are authentic revolutionaries. Criticism of Marcuse's philosophy and struggle against its influence are therefore a struggle to win, or win back, that radical intelligentsia whose going astray that philosophy expresses and at the same time reinforces.

*Warsaw, Poland*