

UTOPIANISM AND MANICHEISM: A CRITIQUE OF MARCUSE'S THEORY OF REVOLUTION

BY BHIKHU PAREKH

I

MARCUSE'S moral theory on which his theory of revolution rests is somewhat tentative and inchoate. That human life is worth living he takes to be an "absolute" presupposition, "the *a priori*," of social theory and practice.¹ From it he deduces² man's "self-evident,"³ natural and universal "right"⁴ to a full life. For his definition of what a full life consists in, Marcuse relies with some important qualifications on the familiar final version of Freud's theory of instincts. "The main 'layers' of the mental structure,"⁵ he argues, are id, ego and superego. Id, the "fundamental, oldest and largest layer" represents a blind and unregulated desire for pleasure. The ego, an outgrowth from the id under the impact of the external world, mediates between the id and reality, controlling and coordinating each in the light of the other's demands. The superego represents the individual's internalization of social morality.⁶ Since Marcuse views the superego as necessary only in a society characterized by scarcity and domination, it is for him a historically transient entity whose coercive and authoritarian

¹ Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, Sphere Books, 1968 (first published in 1964), p. 10.

² *Five Lectures*, tr. by Jeremy Shapiro and Shierry Weber, London (Allen Lane, The Penguin Press), p. 105.

³ "Thoughts on the Defense of Babeuf" in *The Defense of Gracchus Babeuf*, ed. and tr. by John Anthony Scott (University of Massachusetts Press, 1967), p. 99.

⁴ *Five Lectures*, *ibid.*

⁵ *Eros & Civilization*, Sphere Books, 1969 (first published in 1955), p. 41.

⁶ *An Essay on Liberation*, London (Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1969), p. 10.

morality could and should ideally be replaced by libidinal "morality," the morality of spontaneous and erotic union with one's fellow men and nature that rejects even self-discipline as a punitive expression of human self-alienation.⁷ The id and the ego, then, are the ultimate constituents of the human mind. Now, the id's primary goal is the satisfaction of desires, the pursuit of pleasure—in a word, happiness. As for the ego, its basic concern is to preserve its integrity and individuality in a world of other egos, and therefore its primary goals are autonomy and self-determination—in a word, freedom. Given the constitution of the human mind, Marcuse maintains, happiness and freedom are the ultimate ingredients of a full life.⁸

The amount of freedom and happiness possible in any given society, Marcuse believes, is limited by its natural and technical resources. The amount of restriction, or "repression" as Marcuse prefers to call it,⁹ which results from the unavoidable limitations imposed by the available technological resources, he calls "basic" repression.¹⁰ Man's relations with nature, however, are never direct but always mediated by the society in which he lives. And it is the structure of this society that ultimately determines how its technological resources will be developed and utilized. When a society is inegalitarian, as all societies in history have been, Marcuse argues, many resources go undeveloped and are used not to maximize the community's opportunities for freedom and happiness, but to gratify the artificial needs of a few. The further restrictions on human freedom and happiness imposed by an inegalitarian social structure, he calls "surplus" repression.¹¹ The

⁷ *Five Lectures, op. cit.*, p. 10.

⁸ ". . . the end of government is not only the greatest possible freedom but also the greatest possible happiness of man," from "Ethics and Revolution" in *Ethics and Society*, ed. by Richard T. De George (The Macmillan Company, 1968), p. 134.

⁹ The term "repression" is used "to designate both conscious and unconscious, external and internal processes of restraint, constraint and suppression," *Eros & Civilization, op. cit.*, p. 26.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 44 and 81.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 81: the distinction between basic and surplus repression "is equivalent to that between the biological and the historical sources of human suffering."

form of rule needed to sustain the system of surplus repression Marcuse calls "domination."

As the quality of life possible in a society is ultimately dependent on its technical resources, a social order, Marcuse argues, can be best evaluated on the basis of how it uses them. We can bracket out the prevailing social structure, calculate the available or potential material and intellectual resources of a society, and work out the maximum amount of freedom and happiness attainable under those conditions. The difference between the amount of freedom and happiness a society can ideally offer, but in fact does not, provides an index of the amount of surplus repression it practices. Marcuse believes that only a judgment based on such a "calculus" of society's resources is truly objective, and since these resources can be determined with considerable precision, such a judgment would rest on rational and demonstrable grounds. As he can thus "prove" his criticisms, a critic is entitled to expect that all rational men will share his judgment.

The critic who wishes to replace one society with another "transcendent" society must then be able to establish two points, Marcuse argues: first, he must show that his transcendent society is not a dream, but is *actually realizable* on the basis of available resources; second, he must show that it would use the resources *more rationally* and achieve a greater amount of freedom and happiness than the existing society. In other words, a critic should not only criticize and expose the irrationality of a given social order, but should also depict an alternate society and "demonstrate" what existing surplus repressions it would eliminate and how. Utopianism, in other words, is inherent in Marcuse's theory of historical judgment.

Marcuse formulates his general criteria of historical judgment in the following schematic fashion.

- 1) The transcendent project must be in accordance with the real possibilities open at the attained level of the material and intellectual culture.
- 2) The transcendent project, in order to falsify the established

totality, must demonstrate its own *higher* rationality in the three-fold sense that

- (a) it offers the prospect of preserving and improving the productive achievements of civilization;
- (b) it defines the established totality in its very structure, basic tendencies, and relations;
- (c) its realization offers a greater chance for the pacification of existence, within the framework of institutions which offer a greater chance for the free development of human needs and faculties.¹²

II

When one judges western capitalist society by these criteria, Marcuse argues, one is forced to conclude that it has lost its historical rationality and deserves to be overthrown. While like all past societies it is based on "domination," its mode of domination is inhuman to an historically unprecedented degree. While the vastly increased productivity of heavily mechanized large-scale industries has more or less eliminated poverty and created affluence, it has also created commercial and industrial giants that carry on "organized" competition for a "captive" market. The emergence of corporate capitalism out of the ashes of entrepreneurial capitalism has produced and is still producing, Marcuse believes,¹³ a number of important changes. In industry geared to unlimited production, crucial decisions are made by technicians and scientists whose job it is to dream up new commodities and sell them by planting artificial desires in their consumers. And even they have little freedom and initiative, propelled as

¹² *One Dimensional Man*, *op. cit.*, p. 175.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 13; Marcuse's analysis of the contemporary capitalist society, on his own admission, contains a "fundamental ambiguity." Sometimes he describes it as "closed" and "totalitarian," and maintains that it is capable of "containing" *all* movements for change. At other times, he says that it has only "some" totalitarian features and that it still has "large areas" that are not yet corrupted by its dominant ethos. His description of contemporary society as "closed," he suggests, should therefore be seen as a speculative construction of what it would become if its totalitarian "tendencies" were not checked in time. In practice, however, Marcuse finds it difficult to sustain these two "contradictory hypotheses" and generally leans towards the first.

they are by the inexorable logic of the self-reproducing productive mechanism. When industry has thus become a self-enclosed, self-regulative system, no one has the ability to break through the vicious circle and make free and conscious decisions about the nature and direction of his enterprise. The result is that the "capitalist bosses and owners" are losing their identity as responsible agents and are functioning as "bureaucrats in a corporate machine." As the "tangible source of exploitation" has thus disappeared "behind the facade of objective rationality,"¹⁴ as "the technological veil" conceals the fundamental fact of capitalist exploitation, domination has become "transfigured into administration,"¹⁵ the purest form of domination imaginable.¹⁶

The relation between capitalism and technology has baffled many a Marxist—and not only Marxists—and Marcuse is no exception. There are times when he says that machines are politically neutral, and only "the presence in them of the masters who determine their number, their life span, their power, their place in life and the need for them"¹⁷ is responsible for the consequences they produce. At other times he takes the opposite view that technology has become an independent and all-powerful force that has superseded classical capitalism by turning capitalists into more "bureaucrats" caught up in "a vicious circle which encloses both the Master and the Servant."¹⁸ Both these extreme views, however, are lapses, as Marcuse generally advances a far more subtle view of the relationship between technology and capitalism.

Technology, he argues, cannot be entirely neutral and, indeed, has a clear "political content";¹⁹ it embodies a specific *Weltan-*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 41.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 199.

¹⁷ *An Essay on Liberation, op. cit.*, p. 12.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 42.

¹⁹ For a detailed discussion of the nature of technology, see *ibid.*, pp. 121f. As far as I know, Allen Graubard has been the only commentator on Marcuse to notice close similarities between Marcuse's and Hannah Arendt's approaches to modern science: see Graubard's "One Dimensional Pessimism: A Critique of Herbert Mar-

schauung and enforces a specific form of political rule—rule by anonymous experts, and turns the masses into passive consumers of technological products. It reduces substantive moral problems to technical problems and eliminates those not amenable to technical solutions.²⁰ While technical experts claim only to be concerned with finding the best means to given ends, their insistence that only the ends capable of measurement and quantification are rational gives them a decisive say in shaping them. Technology, moreover, defines knowledge in operational terms and denies non-operational and non-measurable knowledge the status and dignity of true knowledge. As every aspect of life is seen in terms of control and manipulation, science is reduced to technology, and human relations are organized in bureaucratic-managerial terms. Marcuse concludes, "Not only the application of technology but technology itself is domination (of nature and man)—methodical, scientific, calculated, calculating control. Specific purposes and interests of domination are not foisted upon technology subsequently and from outside; they enter the very construction of the technical apparatus." As "domination perpetuates and extends itself not only through technology but as technology,"²¹ technology is ultimately an "ideological" phenomenon.

While technology has its own independent dialectic, Marcuse argues, it does not exist in a vacuum. It is a project, "a historical-social project"²² in which "is projected what a society and its ruling interests intend to do with men and things." The society's ruling interests determine what degree and type of technological development to allow, and the dialectic of technology is therefore modified by the general character of the wider society. Following

cuse's *Theories*" in *Dissent*, Vol. 15, 1968. Graubard, however, goes wrong in describing Arendt as "profoundly . . . anti-revolutionary" (p. 222).

²⁰ *An Essay on Liberation*, p. 127.

²¹ *One Dimensional Man*, p. 130.

²² Jürgen Habermas, *Toward A Rational Society*, tr. by Jeremy Shapiro (London: Heinemann, 1971), pp. 88f. Habermas is right to argue that Marcuse is mistaken in seeing science and technology—and for that matter, society itself—as projects. I have learned a great deal from Habermas' discussion of technology and science.

Hans Sachs, Marcuse argues that even though the ancient Greeks, for example, possessed the necessary skill and knowledge, they did not develop machine technology because, being a narcissistic people, the libidinal cathexis of their bodies was so strong that it militated against mechanization and automatization.²³ For very different reasons, the religiously based medieval society also imposed a number of restraints on the development of technology.

It is only capitalist society that has, for the first time in human history, released technology from all earlier moral and institutional restraints, and allowed it to become a self-propelling, self-reproducing mechanism. As it is itself based on domination, on manipulating and exploiting man and nature, its general ethos is fully in accord with that of technology. The two have naturally struck off a convenient and powerful alliance.²⁴ Technology can develop fully only in a fully developed capitalist society, and capitalism can develop fully and "deliver goods" only on the basis of a fully developed technology. The alliance, however, is possible only because each is prepared to pay the price the other exacts. Capitalists can benefit from technology only if they are prepared to become bureaucrats, mere cogs in a machine like their employees. And as for technology, it can enjoy its unrestrained freedom only if it is prepared, from time to time, to let its inventions be delayed or left unutilized in order not to dry up the capitalist sources of surplus value.

Every society, Marcuse believes, molds its members according to its general interest as defined and determined by its dominant class, and the modern techno-capitalist society is no exception. A society geared to unlimited production would naturally aim at creating one-dimensional, "cheerful robots" who desire nothing more than what the system is so good at delivering, who have the money to satisfy their desires, who share the same life style, and therefore find the system basically good and rational. However, although it suits the interests of capitalist society to produce such

²³ *Eros & Civilization*, p. 141.

²⁴ *One Dimensional Man*, p. 130.

passive, pliable, uncritical, and materially-oriented men, man is not a creature who can be easily reduced to the status of a "thing" because, first, he has an ego, a capacity for freedom and initiative, an ability to evaluate his environment critically, and second—and more important—he has the id, a structure of primary instincts that restlessly seek gratification and blindly rebel against a repressive environment. Capitalist domination therefore must remain insecure until it destroys and perverts them both—which, according to Marcuse, is exactly what it has done.

Seeing human life as essentially a struggle between the pleasure and the reality principles, Marcuse argues that the child's first encounter with the latter is in the family,²⁵ where his parents, especially his father, restrict his spontaneous pursuit of his pleasure in the name of external reality. In the course of the struggle with his father, the child realizes that the world contains other men to whom he should learn to adjust, and that since material resources are limited, he cannot satisfy all his desires. He thus learns to discipline his desires, while he also comes to see that some of the restraints imposed by the external world are unnecessary, that many more of his desires could be satisfied if only things were ordered differently. He thus develops a critical attitude toward the social order, and an ingenuity to circumvent its demands.

As the family is so vital to the development of the ego, Marcuse argues that it must be protected and insulated from those external influences that destroy parental authority and expose the child prematurely to the pressures of the external world. But it is precisely this condition which capitalist society has rendered impossible. The privacy of the family has been destroyed by the mass media, especially television, which have replaced the father as the sole authoritative representative of the reality principle.²⁶ (Rather oddly, Marcuse also blames schools, sports teams, peer groups, etc., for manipulating the nascent ego of the child.) Even

²⁵ *Five Lectures*, pp. 47f.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

in families where the father still wields authority, he has, according to Marcuse, very little power to enforce it, since the child no longer depends on him or on the family name for selecting a career or getting a job. Lacking a protective and authoritarian atmosphere in which to develop at his own pace, the child grows up "without much struggle," without meeting the resistance necessary to develop his own internal powers of resistance. His ego remains "a pretty weak entity, ill-equipped to become a self with and against others, to offer effective resistance to the powers that now enforce the reality principle."²⁷ Further, as he lacks the ability to detach himself from the surrounding world, he has no identity, no values and ideals other than those conferred and enforced by the wider society. Predictably, he grows up to be a mass-man, desperately afraid of being alone, of falling afoul of his fellows, of thinking his own thoughts and dreaming his own dreams—a man perfectly suited to the interests of capitalist society.

The perversion of the id, Marcuse explains, has been accomplished by disrupting man's unity with nature and introducing profound changes in his sexual life. By mercilessly exploiting nature in the interest of technical progress, capitalist society has deprived it of its capacity to offer pleasure; in Marcusean language, it has de-eroticized nature. Like Marx, Marcuse sees nature as "an extended zone of the human body," and when, therefore, nature is de-eroticized and its intimate relationship with the human body disrupted, man's libidinal cathexis is reduced in scope, and his dependence on his own body is intensified. To illustrate what he has in mind, Marcuse takes the oft-quoted but much-misunderstood examples of lovemaking in a meadow and in a car.²⁸ In the first case, the environment itself invites libidinal cathexis and the human erotic impulse is extended to it; the libido is thus able to transcend the body's erotogenic zones—a process that Marcuse calls "non-repressive sublimation"—and becomes less intense. Lovemaking in a car, on the other

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 50.

²⁸ *One Dimensional Man*, p. 70.

hand, remains localized to the human body, thus intensifying the physical aspect of erotic experience. In other words, eros gets contracted into sexuality.

Capitalist society carries this narrowing process even further. As it is geared to constantly increasing productivity, it sees the human body as no more than a means of labor—a machine. Capitalist interests are not served when workers demand pleasure and joy in their work, and in the products they make with their hands. This means that the sources of pleasure—the seat of libido—shrink still further until pleasure is largely confined to a single area of the body, *viz.*, the genitals. In Marcuse's words, sexuality becomes genitalized.

As sexuality is concentrated and localized, it becomes intensified; and as it becomes intensified, it becomes urgent, imperious, and even uncontrollable. Sexual passion is not intense and urgent "by nature" but becomes so only when forced to localize and feed upon itself, Marcuse suggests. Because capitalist society intensifies sexual passion, it is forced to become permissive in sexual matters, as otherwise the uncontrollable passion will blast its very foundations. This permissiveness, however, is only another means of enslaving its members, Marcuse argues: the permissiveness demanded and given, for example, is the freedom to practice sexual perversities, swap wives, commit adultery, enjoy sex without responsibility for its attendant consequences, and read and write 'tasty' and 'obscene' literature; in all these the so-called sexual freedom centers on the genitals and is not freedom *from* narrow and perverted sexuality itself, or freedom *to* "spread" sexuality over the entire body and environment. Instead of becoming a politically explosive force that might restructure society, such a "liberalized" but not "liberated"²⁹ sexuality only renders the individual a "contented, perfectly harmless" member of capitalist society.

Modern capitalist society, Marcuse concludes, has thus corrupted the total human person and produced "basic changes in

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

the primary mental structure" of its members. In destroying the integrity of the family, it has destroyed the ego, the human capacity for freedom and self-determination, and "robbed it of its independent power to structure its instincts." As all human energy is basically erotic in nature, the energy that sustains the capitalist mode of production is ultimately "won from sexuality," and therefore modern technology is ultimately sustained by the "psychic 'investment fund' " built up out of the merciless exploitation of the id. Having destroyed the id and the ego, capitalist society has made the superego the supreme principle in the human psyche. But the superego is only a cluster of internalized social norms and ideals, which in capitalist society involve a systematic and ruthless destruction of nature, of the life instinct and of all socially sanctioned enemies; thus it serves as a "locus of the socially useful destruction stored up in the psyche."³⁰ The superego is essentially a death-oriented principle, and capitalist society has made *thanatos* rather than *eros* the central spring of human life. In Marcuse's paradoxical language, human life has become a living death.

III

While capitalist society has misused its resources and created an "affluent monster," a "hell" of "cruel" and "immoral comforts,"³¹ instead of evolving a way of life commensurate with its technological rationality, it has also enabled us to imagine another, higher society capable of using these resources to create for the first time in human history a genuinely free and happy life for mankind.

What really distinguishes Marcuse's ideal society, which he calls "libertarian"³² or "integral"³³ socialism, and makes it one

³⁰ *Five Lectures*, pp. 59, 17, 21 and 17, respectively.

³¹ *An Essay on Liberation*, pp. 7 and 6, respectively.

³² "On the New Left" in *The New Left: A Documentary*, ed. by Massimo Teodori (The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1969), p. 469.

³³ "Liberation from the Affluent Society" in *The Dialectics of Liberation*, ed. by David Cooper (Penguin Books, 1968), p. 184.

of the most audacious and imaginative utopias in human history, is the way decentralization of sex is expected to inaugurate a total transformation of the human condition. As we saw earlier, Marcuse takes the view that bourgeois society has de-eroticized both nature and the human body and confined *eros* almost entirely to the genitals. Marcuse's society is based on a reversal of this process. By degeneralizing sexuality and liberating it from the "repressive" specialized function of sexual intercourse, it makes the whole body the "substratum of sexuality," such that sexuality becomes co-extensive with the life of the organism. For only when sexuality becomes polymorphous and diffuse, Marcuse argues, can the entire human body be enjoyed as a source of pleasure. As beauty in all its forms is one and the same, he maintains, love of one beautiful body generates love of all beautiful bodies, which in turn generates the love of beautiful work, beautiful knowledge, beautiful soul. Discussing Plato's *Symposium*, "the clearest celebration of the sexual origin and substance of the spiritual relations," Marcuse remarks, "spiritual 'procreation' is just as much the work of *eros* as is corporeal procreation, and the right and true order of the *polis* is just as much an erotic one as is the right and true order of love."³⁴ As eroticization of the body leads to the sensualization and eroticization of the environment, it generates the desire to create beauty in all areas of life, expressed concretely in the desire to conquer disease and decay, abolish toil and drudgery, create parks and gardens instead of highways and parking lots,³⁵ eliminate noise, "enforced togetherness"³⁶ and pollution, restore nature its beauty,³⁷ construct areas of withdrawal rather than centers of mass fun and organized relaxation, reconstruct cities, reorganize technology, restructure

³⁴ *Eros & Civilization*, p. 170.

³⁵ *An Essay On Liberation*, p. 90.

³⁶ *The Dialectics of Liberation*, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

³⁷ *Ibid.*: "These are not—and I cannot emphasize this strongly enough—snobbish and romantic demands. Biologists today have emphasized that these are organic needs of the human organism, and that their arrest . . . actually mutilates the human organism . . . in a very real and literal sense."

interpersonal relationships, produce beautiful works of art and literature, and develop beautiful theories of science. As civilization and culture are erotic in origin, they will attain heights hitherto undreamt of, once the enormous "culture-building power"³⁸ of *eros* is liberated from techno-capitalist restraints.

In Marcuse's "aesthetic-erotic"³⁹ society, man will experience nature as neither dominating him (primitive society) nor dominated by him (capitalist society), but rather as an "object of contemplation,"⁴⁰ "a garden" in which he plays and displays himself. With this fundamental change in man's formative experience of nature, both he and nature will undergo profound transformation. No longer exploited but lovingly shaped by man, nature would be "liberated from its own brutality and would become free to display its purposeless forms."⁴¹ As he no longer sees life as a struggle, man will become tender, gentle, trusting. Indeed, he will see nature as a continuum of which his body is only one part, and thus his awareness of himself as an enclosed ego, separated from the "outside" world by his own skin, will ultimately disappear, leaving him with a rich, all-inclusive consciousness.

Given this intimate relationship between man and nature, the "very structure of science" would undergo a profound change in the ideal society. Science as it has developed so far has been predicated on a "repressive," "manipulative" attitude to nature, and therefore its basic principles have been "*a priori* structured in such a way that they could serve as conceptual instruments for a universe or self-propelling productive control."⁴² In the ideal society, on the other hand, science would not be manipulative and narrowly rationalistic, but tender and poetic.⁴³ As it would form its hypotheses "in an essentially different experimental context," it would develop "totally" different modes of cognition

³⁸ *Eros & Civilization*, p. 170.

³⁹ *Five Lectures*, p. 68.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

⁴¹ *Eros & Civilization*, p. 154.

⁴² *One Dimensional Man*, p. 130.

⁴³ *An Essay on Liberation*, p. 24.

and "would arrive at essentially different concepts of nature, and establish essentially different facts." ⁴⁴

In the ideal erotic society, then, men will be "totally" different from what they are today; they will "speak a different language, have different gestures, follow different impulses; men who have developed an instinctual barrier against cruelty, brutality, ugliness . . . ; who have the good conscience of being human, tender, sensuous"; ⁴⁵ men who represent a "complete" break "with the familiar, the routine ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, understanding things." These new men, further, would be free from the duality characteristic of the human condition so far. They would be men in whom reason would be sensualized and senses rationalized; ⁴⁶ their instinctual life would be permeated by rationality and their rational life rooted in instincts. As both their bodies and minds would be molded by the same erotic principle, they would transcend the mind-body dualism as well. As their morality would be the morality of the libido, they would transcend the dualism between the "so-called" higher and lower morality, between the self and the other, between man and nature. A society of such men, Marcuse says, will be a completely free and happy one: free because human actions will spring neither from external compulsion nor even from the inner "constraint of need" ⁴⁷ but will be entirely spontaneous, superfluous, unnecessary; happy because existence will be characterized by perpetual pleasure, an unrestrained gratification of truly liberated and humanized libidinal instincts. Following Schiller's view of play as a paradigm of freedom and happiness thus defined, Marcuse describes his ideal society as a "playful" society, a society in which man plays with himself, with his powers, his life, and reality itself.

⁴⁴ *One Dimensional Man*, p. 136.

⁴⁵ *An Essay on Liberation*, pp. 21f.

⁴⁶ *Eros & Civilization*, p. 183.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

IV

The previous sections outlined Marcuse's analysis of western liberal society and his reasons for concluding that it deserves to be overthrown. In the course of my exposition I pointed out some of Marcuse's inconsistencies and ambiguities. It remains now to consider in some detail what appears to be its fundamental weakness—its manicheism.

Rightly rejecting the minimalist bourgeois theory of rationality which is content to legitimize a social order that does no more than create material prosperity and internal stability, Marcuse, as we saw earlier, advocates a maximalist theory of rationality in terms of which no social order is rational that does not exploit its technological potentialities to the fullest possible degree.⁴⁸ Since in Marcuse's view a social order can be criticized only on the basis of what it ideally can be but is not, his critique of the bourgeois society requires him to construct a model of what it ideally could be if its technological resources were fully developed and rationally utilized. Since he believes that for the first time in human history, modern technology has created the possibility of eliminating scarcity altogether, he maintains that it is capable of creating a type of human existence totally different from any ever recorded in human history or dreamt of by human imagination. As a society in which human intelligence, rationality, emotions, body, metabolic processes, language, gestures, attitude to nature and to other men are all radically transformed, it represents the emergence of a totally new species, indeed, of a totally new universe.⁴⁹

While the ideal society is depicted in glorious colors, the existing society is painted pitch black. Such manicheism is not simply a natural human weakness on Marcuse's part but is purposive. Since his utopianism is intended to break down the restrictive

⁴⁸ *Reason and Revolution*, p. 25: "Something is true if it is what it can be, fulfilling all its objective possibilities."

⁴⁹ *The Dialectics of Liberation*, p. 185: ideal society marks a total "transformation of the social and natural universe."

walls of the positivistically enchained and emaciated human imagination, it cannot serve its purpose without depicting the actual and the possible in violently contrasted colors. We saw earlier how Marcuse regards capitalist society as thoroughly inhuman and anti-life; how it has dehumanized men and turned them into manipulable objects; how it has corrupted the human psyche, replaced the id and the ego by the death-oriented super-ego, and turned the human body into a rigidly centralized and tense physiological instrument of production. In passages reminiscent of Marx but lacking his polemical and epigrammatic brilliance, Marcuse shows how capitalist society has turned everything into its opposite. Its liberalism is illiberal, its rationality is irrational, and its democracy is undemocratic; its freedom is slavery, its morality is immoral and its affluence is cruel. As it is so inhuman and evil, it must be rejected totally and absolutely.

Now utopia, unlike myth, is based on some empirical evidence, and its chief weakness is not that it is false but rather that it exaggerates. The ideal society of Marcuse is not entirely implausible, and his denunciation of capitalist society makes some very telling points. But in each case the valid points are exaggerated, and used as a basis for dubious conclusions.

As his ideal society is not our main concern, a few general comments should suffice. There is little doubt that Marcuse's picture of it emphasizes a crucial dimension of human life that has been perverted by capitalist society. This society centers around a conception of man that regards him as essentially private and possessive, divided from the outside world by the outer surface of his skin. Its basic orientation is demarcationist—one of neatly separating man from man, man from nature, one area of inquiry from another, one type of knowledge from another, one mental faculty from another. Marcuse, like Schiller and Marx, rightly rejects this fragmentation of man, knowledge, society, and the human mind; but in doing so, he swings to the opposite extreme and thus raises new difficulties.

Take, for example, the way he unites man and nature. As his

ideal society is predicated on the assumption of plenty and therefore on a technological domination of nature, it is difficult to see how he can also argue that nature here is no longer dominated by man but has become "an object of contemplation." It is also difficult to accept Marcuse's claim that in his ideal society man and nature are united as equal partners, since it is obvious that in emphasizing parks and gardens, he is clearly reducing nature to a mere means for providing a romantic background to man's erotic relationship with his fellow men. Again, no matter how much it is humanized, it is in the very nature of technology to impose certain restraints and regularities on human behavior: thus Marcuse is wrong to reject Marx's view that the realm of necessity can never become a realm of complete freedom. And again, in a society which experiences the universe as an uninterrupted continuum, the ego lacks any basis on which to grasp itself as a separate and unique entity. As ego dissolves in the all-pervasive unity brought about by the id, the autonomy and freedom so cherished by Marcuse disappear too. In rejecting the delicate if somewhat weighted Freudian balance of id, ego and superego, Marcuse has ended up with an even more one-sided sovereignty of the id.

Marcuse seems to look upon the decentralization of sex as the master key to the glorious fusion of man with his species and with nature. Apart from the simple fact that there are no such master keys to the enormously complicated human predicament, the essentialist arguments on which he bases his case are extremely shaky. He asserts, with Plato, that love of one's own body necessarily generates love of other bodies, and that love of corporeal beauty generates love of intellectual and spiritual beauty, on the basis of an extremely tenuous and unargued belief that the beauty residing in different objects and activities is "one and the same." He evidently does not realize that physical beauty is a different *type* of beauty from "intellectual beauty," that the very expression, "intellectual beauty," is at best a metaphor, and that there is no obvious reason why love of flowers or of women should

necessarily generate love of ideas or of knowledge. He makes a similar mistake in believing that sexual love is basically the same as, for example, intellectual love, or that the pleasure of sexual intercourse does not differ qualitatively from the pleasure of writing, contemplating the beauty of nature, or making a good speech in Parliament. Once it is recognized that *eros* is not a simple homogeneous principle, and that therefore there is no "unbroken ascent in erotic fulfillment" of the type Marcuse imagines, the entire basis of his ideal society becomes suspect.

Like his characterization of the ideal society, Marcuse's analysis of capitalist society is brilliant but one-sided. It incorporates many of Marx's powerful sociological insights and yet manages to avoid his naive sociologism. And similarly, while benefitting from Freud's psychological or rather metapsychological theory, it generally manages to avoid his psychologistic and ahistorical approach to the human mind. Marcuse's analysis also generally steers clear of both economic and technological determinism and establishes a subtle and ingenious relationship between capitalist economy and technology. The way he elucidates the internal mechanism of the liberal society and exposes the manner in which it discourages dissent,⁵⁰ corrupts political discourse, and manipulates people is refreshingly original, even if occasionally naive.

However, the main defect of Marcuse's analysis is its exaggeration. He imposes on the liberal society a kind and degree of homogeneity it clearly does not have. He ascribes to the "establishment" a divine omnipotence whose hollowness has been exposed by student movements and the determined nations of the third world. While Marcuse is right to argue that liberal pluralism overemphasizes the differences between various competing groups, he is wrong not to see that different social institutions have different traditions and respond to their society's dominant ethos in different ways. Thus despite all its corruptions, the

⁵⁰ See *Dissent*, Vols. 13 and 14 (1966 and 1967) for a very interesting discussion of Marcuse's critique of liberal tolerance.

university has still remained a center of critical thinking, as Marcuse himself acknowledged recently. The family, too, has in many cases refused to surrender its privacy and authority to anything like the degree that Marcuse imagines. Similarly, while the commercial language and some parts of political and academic language have shown signs of operationalist and positivist rigidity, there is little evidence that this has happened to artistic, literary or moral language, and it is this that really matters when one is concerned with the culture of a community. In other words, while areas of contradiction have shrunk, they have not shrunk to the degree that Marcuse imagines, and therefore the notion of a "closed" society or of a society that is becoming "closed" cannot be accepted without serious qualifications.

As Marcuse imposes on the liberal society an unwarranted degree of homogeneity, his analysis of it generally remains non-dialectical and blinds him to the way it is already changing from within. He does not see, for example, that behavioralists have begun to see the limitations of their approach and have started to ask questions that cannot be answered within the behaviorist framework. He does not see that linguistic philosophers have increasingly found themselves forced to raise general questions about the nature of language itself and even about the form of life from which language ultimately derives its meaning and significance. There is enough evidence to show that advertising—which Marcuse dislikes so much and would like to see banned, in order to "plunge the individual into a traumatic void where he would have the chance to wonder and to think, to know himself and his society"⁵¹—sometimes leads the consumer to *avoid* the product advertised. A recent survey showed that seven out of ten people were "not even aware of having seen the advertising at all."⁵² Similarly, attempts to manipulate the unconscious symbolisms of the individual psyche have often backfired. The Detroit car industry lost millions by acting on the motiva-

⁵¹ *One Dimensional Man*, p. 192.

⁵² Rosser Reeve, *Reality in Advertising* (London, 1961).

tional researchers' advice that cars had to be phallic monsters with huge tailfins.⁵³ People preferred instead to buy small cars. In other words, the ordinary man whom Marcuse dismisses as a "moron" and a corporate-capitalist artifact has far greater powers of resistance and discrimination than he imagines. And changes, no doubt rather small, are already occurring in our society, though Marcuse refuses to take account of them or accord them their due importance.

Marcuse manages to make his picture of capitalist society look plausible by his highly selective use of evidence⁵⁴ and, occasionally, self-contradictory arguments. Thus he takes a particular type of advertisement or propaganda as an example of *the* language of society, a particular type of Anglo-Saxon philosophy as *the* philosophy of advanced industrial society, a particular approach to social research as *the* dominant approach, without noticing that in each case the activity in question is carried on in other quite different ways as well. The way Marcuse criticizes some of his targets is also unsatisfactory, for while some of his criticisms of linguistic philosophy are well taken, his dismissal of Wittgenstein and Austin borders on the scandalous.⁵⁵ To say, for example, that Wittgenstein's conception of philosophy exhibits "academic sadomasochism, self-humiliation and self-denunciation" is simply perverse. In some other cases, the grounds of his criticism are never made clear, and one is left with the feeling that he dismisses his targets only because they are too recalcitrant to be trapped into his philosophical categories. It is not clear, for example, why he should be so scornful of affluence.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

⁵⁴ Maurice Cranston, "Herbert Marcuse," in *The New Left*, ed. by Maurice Cranston (London: Bodley Head, 1970), p. 99.

⁵⁵ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Marcuse* (Fontana, 1970), pp. 80ff. It remains a mystery to me why MacIntyre, who is generally known to be critical of positivism, linguistic philosophy, liberalism and capitalism, should wish to defend them so staunchly against Marcuse's criticisms. His description of the American involvement in Vietnam as "the paradigmatic example of political accident" (p. 71) leaves one simply speechless! Must the Old Left allow itself to be provoked by the New Left into swinging to the Right?

He is right that it does lead to excessive preoccupation with comfort and self-interest. But then, as he himself acknowledges, it also relaxes the tempo of life and generates new and worthwhile needs—for better environment, and for love and affection, for example.

In other cases where the grounds of Marcuse's criticism are reasonably clear, it is never shown why they must be accepted as correct in the first instance. Thus he argues, or rather asserts, that a child grows into a mass man when he has had no opportunity to struggle with his father. Now while this is a plausible point of view, it assumes that struggle alone develops powers of self-determination, that there can never be any human association in which some form of struggle is not involved, that television does have the power Marcuse thinks it has, etc., etc., and these assumptions—to say the least—need to be argued and established, not simply asserted as self-evident truths. In yet other cases, Marcuse's criticisms of capitalist society cancel each other out: he says it is a death-oriented society that has cheapened life, but he also says that by emphasizing affluence and comforts, it has made life an all-important value! Marcuse often criticizes capitalist society on the basis of a theory that is substantially correct, but then goes on to put the theory to some odd uses and fails to notice some of its difficulties. Take, for example, his theory of mediation. Society, he maintains, decays and lacks the driving force of antagonism when its different realms are no longer separate. Thus nature, in his view, must have a distinct sphere and modality of existence—and forests and hills should not be reduced to parks and highways—if it is effectively to mediate and contradict the human tendency towards anthropomorphic monism. And similarly, the past, he says, must remain autonomous and unassimilated if it is to mediate and contradict the human tendency to treat the present as all-important. Although this fascinating theory is central to many of Marcuse's arguments, he does not develop it any further. What is more, he goes on to argue, inconsistently and rather perversely, that

since mediation is so important, art and literature should generally remain esoteric and incomprehensible if they are to retain their radical vitality.⁵⁶ He also does not seem to realize that if the past can be understood only in terms of the present, as he himself acknowledges, in no conceivable sense can it remain unassimilated to the present. If mediation is so crucial to social life, it is also difficult to see why Marcuse should base his ideal society on its explicit and total rejection and make immediacy and fusion its sole inspiring principle.

Not only does Marcuse's manicheism lead him to exaggerate the goodness of the ideal society and the evil of the established society, but it also makes it extremely difficult for him to explain how the ideal society can ever be achieved.⁵⁷ As the established society is believed to have de-antagonized its internal contradictions, as indeed, it is taken to have escaped Hegel's "universal ontological law"⁵⁸ and to have become in a very important sense a post-dialectical society, Marcuse is required to argue that it cannot be depended upon to negate itself dialectically. How then can it be changed? Marcuse argues that it can only be changed by men who have already undergone a total psychic transformation and acquired the new needs characteristic of the new man. But this does not answer the question at all, since it is difficult to see how men can develop new needs if the existing society is as "omnipotent" as Marcuse describes it, and why it should not be able to contain them. As Marcuse himself candidly admits, ". . . I say it to myself often enough . . . how can we imagine these new concepts even arising here and now in living human beings if the entire society is against such an emergence of new needs? This is one of the things that most disquiet me." The new society cannot come into being unless there are new men to launch it; but such men cannot appear until the new society is

⁵⁶ *One Dimensional Man*, p. 65.

⁵⁷ For a detailed discussion of this point, see my "Political Theory of the Student Movement: A Historical and Philosophical Essay" in *Cross Currents*, Winter, 1971.

⁵⁸ *Reason and Revolution*, *op. cit.*, p. 147.

created. "This is the circle in which we are placed, and I do not know how to get out of it," Marcuse sadly remarks.⁵⁹

In his more optimistic moods, Marcuse takes the obvious line that genuine socialist needs arise in men who are not yet inducted into capitalist society and corrupted and emasculated by its repressive psychic mechanism.⁶⁰ The poor, the unprivileged, the outcasts, the suppressed minorities, the striving millions in the third world, and possibly the European but not the American working class,⁶¹ belong to this category of "non-integrated groups"⁶² and are the men most able to launch a socialist revolution. Now although this is a plausible view, it is not a view that Marcuse can consistently take. Its naive Rousseauistic primitivism, particularly its belief that somehow human nature is inherently good and becomes corrupt only in proportion to its degree of civilization, is incompatible with his general belief that man has no nature but only a history,⁶³ so that the needs of social outcasts, far from being authentically human, would seem to be only the relics of the pre-capitalist past. As Marcuse also takes the view that capitalist society has sucked the entire world into the vortex of its productive mechanism and that "there is no longer anything 'outside capitalism'," it is difficult to see how any part of the world, or any section of capitalist society, can escape its value system. And even if the revolutionaries in the third world can somehow escape capitalist corruption, Marcuse's references⁶⁴ to the "problem of language" and the problem of "total cultural difference" would reduce their revolutionary role in western society to almost nil.

In recent years Marcuse has advanced yet another intellectualist,

⁵⁹ *Five Lectures*, pp. 76 and 80, respectively.

⁶⁰ *One Dimensional Man*, p. 200.

⁶¹ *Five Lectures*, p. 85.

⁶² *The Dialectics of Liberation*, p. 187.

⁶³ *Five Lectures*, p. 65: "All human needs, including sexuality, lie beyond the animal world. They are historically determined and historically mutable." See also p. 72: "Human nature is a historically determined nature and develops in history."

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 95.

even volitionalist, account of the origin of radical needs. As the "social determination of consciousness is all but complete today," he argues rather strangely, a "radical change in consciousness is the beginning, the first step, in changing social existence."⁶⁵ "Transform the will itself, so that people no longer want what they now want,"⁶⁶ Marcuse advises, and therefore recommends "a period of enlightenment," "a period of education," both theoretical and political. However, as he has no general theory of the relationship between reason and will, or between knowledge and desire, Marcuse is unable to explain precisely how—if at all—consciousness can generate needs. Indeed, since Marcuse also subscribes to the Marxist view that human consciousness is not some transcendental Aristotelian *Nous* but is integrally interwoven with human desires and passions, it is difficult to see how he can also take the opposite view that consciousness can *create* needs.

Even if Marcuse could offer a coherent account of the emergence of new needs, his theory will have to be rejected as too puristic. He advances it because, contrary to his popular image as a man who would pay any price to overthrow the capitalist society, he is deeply afraid of revolution degenerating into terror, and believes that the safest way of avoiding that danger is to make sure that the revolution is led by those tender, sensitive and radically transformed men who are organically incapable of perverting it. Now, while his anxiety is most welcome, his remedy is not. To imagine men who are incorruptible, who will never use excessive force or seek domination or misuse power, is to imagine men who are gods, and since such men will never be found, a theory that depends on them to get the revolution off the ground is doomed from the start. Despite his eagerness to see new men in every radical corner, Marcuse must know that none of his revolutionary groups comes up to his impossible standard. The poor and the unprivileged fight for the affluence

⁶⁵ *An Essay on Liberation*, p. 53.

⁶⁶ *Five Lectures*, p. 77.

that Marcuse despises and have little interest in the revolutionary ideals he cherishes so much. The same is true of professional classes whose main concern on all available evidence seems to be the creation of a "rational" society ruled by experts. And if students have developed new needs, as Marcuse imagines, it would be difficult to explain their relative quiet in recent years or their acceptance of society's mores and values once they leave the university. This is also true of the third world countries whose inhabitants, far from developing new needs, seem more concerned with attaining the "cruel" affluence of the West. One of the curious examples Marcuse gives in support of his view that the new theory of man "is putting itself in evidence" in the third world, is that in parks in Hanoi, benches are made big enough for only two, "so that another person would not even have the technical possibility of disturbing." This news item, he remarks, "had a tremendous effect on me since I am an absolutely incurable and sentimental romantic."⁶⁷ It is a sad commentary on Marcuse's theory of revolution that it reduces him to the tragi-comic role of a producer frantically scouting around for actors to play the part of heroes in his revolutionary plot.

Even assuming that ideal revolutionaries were available, the question still remains as to how they are to go about their task. When they see the enormous distance between what is and what should be, their senses cannot but be numbed and they cannot help asking if such a chasm can ever be bridged. The gap is so wide, the distance so infinite, that whatever step they take cannot but appear insignificant, puny, pointless. How many bricks does one need to build a road to heaven? Religious thinkers who have faced this soul-wrecking dilemma have generally invoked divine grace to lift them across the valley of tears. But to radical utopians—who have almost always been atheists—such a device is not available. Marcuse is further hamstrung by the fact that unlike all other utopians, he has credited the established society itself with almost divine omnipotence.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 82.

It is, of course, true that Marcuse does make a number of concrete proposals, but they do not generally relate to his final goal of total liberation and are ultimately as inconsequential as emptying the waters of a river with a sponge. One may, for example, fight for the reconstruction of the academic curriculum; but how does it produce those new biological needs that Marcuse wants to achieve? Again, what does one do to restore to the family that atmosphere of authority and privacy the child needs to develop his ego? Give up television? But then what about peer groups? Newspapers? Schools? The daily necessities themselves—each of which, according to Marcuse, carries the manipulative message? Again, lawyers are urged to defend persecuted groups. But then, is not being a lawyer in itself an act of participation in the alienated and repressive legal structure? And does not the very act of defense legitimize the system? Marcuse's rejection of capitalist society is so fierce and absolute and his vision of the ideal society so majestic and overpowering that his concrete proposals, far from offering marching orders, only deepen the sense of gloom and paralyze the impulse to action.

In this mood of profound despair, revolutionaries must either become prophets of doom and thus play into the hands of the society they so despise, or, what is more likely, resort to nihilist acts of terrorism. If the ideals and institutions of the established society are evil, there can be nothing morally wrong in violating and destroying them. Indeed, the more they destroy the greater is their revolutionary virtue. Besides, as all social institutions are equally depraved, revolutionaries need not be selective in what they destroy. And they can hardly be deterred by the denunciations of their contemporaries for the obvious reason that they have rejected the very standards on which such denunciations are based. Although Marcuse himself has never advocated or supported terrorism, he has made himself vulnerable to such anti-nomian interpretations. In dismissing bourgeois legality as illegal, bourgeois legitimacy as illegitimate, bourgeois morality as immoral, bourgeois society as lacking *any* right to exist, and in

subjecting the revolutionary only to the imperatives of his own ideal as he defines it, Marcuse has surely failed to provide any effective moral check on desperate acts of terrorism.

If Marcuse's theory of revolution does not protect society against revolutionary terrorism, neither does it protect the revolutionary against the repressive violence of his society. As a revolutionary has rejected his society's values, there is no common framework of discussion, no common set of values, between him and his society. His acts are inspired by objectives with which his society by definition does not sympathize and which it does not, indeed, cannot, even understand. And therefore, just as he rejects its values and practices as foolish, corrupt and immoral, it rejects him as mad, fanatical, irresponsible and immoral. However noble the values of a revolutionary, a society, after all, has only its own values to judge him by; and if it cannot see anything moral about him, it cannot see why it should put up with him or take a charitable view of his actions. It would feel justified in clamping down on his actions and dealing with them in the harshest possible manner in order to safeguard what it regards, however mistakenly, as its highest values and ideals. As a Marcusean revolutionary cannot show that he is only fighting for a better realization of the values that his society itself subscribes to, he has no grounds whatsoever on which to plead for sympathy, understanding and indulgence. The very logic of his manicheistic position requires that he must not only expect his society to use the utmost violence it can, but also that he cannot even criticize it for doing so. There is something profoundly wrong with a theory that denies the victims of violence even a plea for mercy and moderation!

V

The general implication of these criticisms of Marcuse is that a revolutionary theory anchored in a manicheistic conception of the human condition is doomed from the start. First, manicheism involves an utterly untenable ontological and moral dualism. No

society, however good, can ever be perfect. Any conception of human perfection must include the fullest development of human intelligence, thus admitting the possibility of human disagreement and conflict and therefore of imperfection. Besides, even if material scarcity could be eliminated, scarcity in other forms is bound to remain. As we saw earlier, even in Marcuse's ideal society division of labor remains, and man cannot both have material plenty and treat nature as an object of esthetic contemplation. Despite Marcuse's optimism, human capacities are limited, and can and do conflict. A man dedicated to becoming a good philosopher, for example, cannot also give the attention, energy and time required to becoming a good athlete, a good sportsman, or a good doctor. In other words, the development of one capacity renders impossible the development of some others; this inescapable human predicament creates "scarcity" and imposes a need for choice and restraints. Just as no society can be perfect, no society, however bad, can be absolutely evil either. Society, by definition, is a system of rights and obligations and therefore necessarily embodies some degree of morality. And as every society offers the advantages of familiarity, continuity and some measure of predictability, it is necessarily good, even if only to a very limited degree.

Second, manicheism is epistemologically naive. It implies that it is possible to develop a conception of good society without in any way being influenced by the values of an already established society. But this can make sense only on the assumption that one can somehow empty one's mind of all that one has known and fill it with totally new ideas. Such an archimedean epistemological standpoint is just not available. Human reason is not an instrument that can be sterilized at will and used on new patients, but is a socially and culturally acquired capacity that is shaped and conditioned by the established society and from which it derives its methods of analyzing and testing new ideas and theories. There cannot therefore be a totally, absolutely new moral and political knowledge, and all conceptions of good society are

ultimately based on the values of an already established society.

The third defect of the manicheist conception of human, particularly political, life is that it cannot provide a satisfactory theory of political action. We saw earlier how it removes moral checks on a revolutionary's use of violence. Also, because he has rejected the established society as an absolute evil, he is unable to utilize any of its institutions and values and is forced to carry on the superhuman task of creating a new political universe almost single-handed. This cannot but create either profound despair or mad fury, neither of which makes any dent in his society. To crown it all, he cannot even complain against his persecution!

Since manicheism is a false doctrine, a revolutionary theorist must recognize that his ideal society can at most be a better society than the existing one but never the best imaginable, and that the society he is trying to change is not beyond redemption. He must therefore realize that a revolution cannot mean an absolute break, a total transformation—since that is logically impossible—but only the creation of a social order in which some of the values of the old society will be preserved (for example, civil liberties), some others will be realized much better (for example, love, loyalty, and cooperation), and some others will be discouraged out of existence (for example, greed and material acquisitiveness). This, what one might call the dialectical conception of revolution, has the added advantage that it enables a revolutionary to identify which groups of men stand for, or stand to gain from, which values; it thus offers him a clear knowledge of who his allies and enemies are, and a clear grasp of his long and short term goals and strategies. Since the society he is trying to create will be a development of, an outgrowth from, the old society, a revolutionary does not have to start from scratch but has already available to him a basis in the life of the ongoing society on which he can build further. Since his ideals are not totally different from those of the society he rejects, he shares a common framework of discussion with its members, and can therefore hope to win

over some of them and weaken the hostility of others; and as a custodian of their true values, he can justifiably urge them to adopt a charitable and sympathetic approach to his necessary acts of disorder. To put the point differently, a revolutionary theory that does not take its bearings from the actual hopes, desires, grievances and values of the members of an ongoing historical society and show how its ideals are only articulations of their concrete and real concerns, but instead sets up an abstract, positivist contrast between a transcendent and an established society, has a manicheist impulse lurking in the background and can never be satisfactory.