



## ORIGINAL PAPER

### THE LIMITS OF MARCUSIANISM: FROM “EROS AND CIVILIZATION” TO “ONE DIMENSIONAL MAN”

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#### Abstract

*Herbert Marcuse was the most revered philosopher by the students who took to the streets during the riots of May 1968. Belonging to the Frankfurt School (from the place where the school was born), Marcuse imposed himself with an original mixture of Freud's and Marx's ideas. From this 'Freudo-Marixism', which drew inspiration in particular from Freud's book "The discomfort of civilization", Marcuse drew fundamental and widely shared concepts such as those of "Repressive Tolerance" and "Unhappy Consciousness", and gave birth to at least two fundamental books for the sociology and the philosophy of the time: "Eros and civilization" and "Man in one dimension". The main thesis of these texts is that sexuality is bridled by technocratic society, both in the United States and in post-revolutionary Russia, and that man is being dominated by a technical rationality that blocks and homologates him, instead of setting him free. The limit of Marcusianism is not having been able to show how man can, beyond a somewhat unrealistic protest, free himself from the grip of technology and reach a stage of greater self-awareness. This was the limit of the entire Frankfurt School, also*

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*called Critical Theory, since in fact it formulated a criticism over what exists without being able to see a concrete and practicable way out.*

**Keywords:**

Marcuse, Critic Theory, Eros, Consumerism, Open Society, 1968, Repressive Tolerance, Great Refusal, Illuminism, Psychoanalysis, Marxism, Frankfurt, Popper.

**Introduction**

The importance played by Marcuse in the 1960s, especially for the generation that rebelled against the academic, political and social system of the time is very great. Not always read in full, but more often made suggestive, nibbled, cited sometimes incorrectly by young leaders, Marcuse has risen as a symbol of that season, for better or for worse.

Two of his books "Eros and civilization" and the later "One dimensional man" broke through the students' feelings and guided, more or less positively, their actions and protests. But are there limits to Marcuseanism? Was it a current of thought that has always guided on the right path, or has it also been a harbinger of errors, of slips, changes of route and destinations never reached and eventually forgotten?

Herbert Marcuse was born in Berlin on July 19, 1898 to a Jewish family from Pomerania (at the time entirely part of imperial Germany). In 1929 he began work on his qualification under Martin Heidegger in Freiburg, but since it was not possible for him to complete his work, at the end of 1932 he joined the Institute for Social Research (*Institut für Sozialforschung*) in Frankfurt. Before Adolf Hitler rose to power, Marcuse fled to Geneva in 1933, and then to the United States in 1934, where he obtained citizenship in 1940. He accepted a new position in 1942 in Washington at the Office of Strategic Services (OSS, precursor of the CIA) during World War II, until 1951, analyzing information about Germany. In 1965 Marcuse became a professor of political science at the University of San Diego in California.

With the beginning of the Student Movement Marcuse became one of its main interpreters, calling himself Marxist, socialist and Hegelian. His criticisms towards

capitalism echoed together with the grievances and instances of the movement itself.

### **The criticism towards real socialism and industrial civilization**

In the work "Soviet Marxism" (Marcuse, 1968), Marcuse observes how the change in production relations was followed by a revolutionary loss of consciousness also in the Soviet Union. Marcuse, according to the Freudian scheme, analyzes the process by which modern civilization has diverted sexual impulses into different impulses: work, art, institutions, and whether this is intrinsic to the nature of each society, or it is a temporary phenomenon as the result of an irrational organization of the forms of coexistence among men. Freud has interpreted as a general characteristic a transitory structure that configures a dominion implemented through forms of violence at first and, subsequently, with the total administration of society (Freud, 2010).

Neuroses, according to another famous psychoanalyst, Erich Fromm, are forms of adaptation to the existing social structure. The German philosopher considers this vision "revisionist" because it accepts the fact uncritically, and does not grasp the subversive potential of the liberation of 'Eros' and of repressed instincts. Society creates artificial needs by preventing the liberation of individuals through the fulfillment of vital urges; and it is precisely for this reason, according to Marcuse, that societies that call themselves democratic end up being intrinsically totalitarian, that is, they make any form of opposition impossible.

Marcuse's utopia, expressed in 'Eros and civilization' (Marcuse, 1964), is that one day Eros will be free and that the energies can eventually flow into all aspects of human life, not only in work, which at that point would become a pleasant recreational activity. These considerations are based not only on the influences of "utopian socialism", but also on the considerations of Marx, according to which industrial development will provide man with goods such as to create a world free from alienation, where each individual can develop his own individuality.

"The one-dimensional man" (original title: One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society) was written in 1964 (Marcuse, 1967). Here the author proposes a wide-ranging critique of both the contemporary capitalism and

the communist society in the Soviet Union. He claims that "advanced industrial society" has created false needs, which have integrated individuals into the existing system of production and consumption through mass media, advertising, industrial management and contemporary ways of thinking. This reveals a "one-dimensional" universe of thought and behavior, in which the attitude and ability for critical thinking and behavior of opposition move away. Against this prevailing attitude, Marcuse promotes the "Great Refusal" as the only adequate opposition to all-encompassing methods of control. Much of the book is a defense of the "negative thinking" as a disruptive force against the prevailing positivism. Marcuse also analyzes the integration of the industrial working class into the capitalist society and the new forms of capitalist stabilization, thus questioning the Marxian postulates of the revolutionary proletariat and the inevitability of the capitalist crisis. Marcuse argues that while the system we live in can claim to be democratic, it is actually totalitarian. A form of technological rationality has imposed itself on every aspect of culture and public life and has become hegemonic. Modern industrial companies have also created a "wealthy society", which with increasing comfort has masked the nature of exploitation of the system and has therefore strengthened the means of domination and control. In modern consumeristic societies, Marcuse argues that a small number of individuals have the power to dictate our perceptions of freedom by providing us with the opportunity to acquire our happiness. In this state of "non-freedom", consumers act irrationally by working harder than necessary to meet actual basic needs. An individual loses his humanity and becomes an instrument in the industrial machine and a gear in the consumer machine. Furthermore, advertising supports consumerism, which disintegrates social behavior, spreading and informing the masses that happiness can be purchased, a psychologically harmful idea. Despite his pessimism, "One Dimensional Man" influenced many in the New Left as it expressed their growing dissatisfaction with capitalist and Soviet communist societies. Philosopher Stephen Hicks claims that the book's popularity marked "a strong turn towards irrationality and violence among leftist youth".

«A comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic non-freedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a sign of technical progress» Thus Herbert Marcuse begins his perhaps most important work, 'One Dimensional Man'. Here Marcuse is more pessimistic than in 'Eros and Civilization', less willing to surrender to a social order

that appears totalitarian, which permeates every aspect of the individual's life and, above all, which has also incorporated traditionally "anti-system" forces like the working class. In this model the life of the individual is reduced to the atavistic need to produce and consume, without any possibility of resistance. Marcuse denounces the fundamentally repressive character of the advanced industrial society that actually flattens man to the condition of an elated and obtuse consumer whose freedom is only the possibility to choose from a variety of different products.

### **Repressive Tolerance**

Marcuse argues that tolerance is nothing more than a masking of repression, a means of perpetuating the domination of the oppressors over the oppressed. In other words, man is given the opportunity to choose, but the tools to do it in a truly independent way are not provided. The advanced technological society reduces everything to itself, every "other" dimension is subjugated by capitalist power and consumption, conquered by the "democratic" domination of industrial civilization; a society that influences true human needs, replacing them with other artificial ones. This is the disapproval that Marcuse formulates of technology: it would already contain in its own nature an ideology of domination. This "democratic non-freedom" permeates everything, nothing escapes, not even the traditionally anti-system strata such as the working class, which has fully integrated into the system itself. And do dimensions still exist outside the system, "below the conservative popular base"? Marcuse replies in the affirmative: they must be sought in the marginalized, the outcasts, the persecuted, the unemployed that is those who have not yet been swallowed up by the repressive society. The German philosopher, not surprisingly, closes his work with a quote from Walter Benjamin: "Nur um der Hoffnungslosen willen ist uns die Hoffnung gegeben" «it is only thanks to desperate people that we are given hope» (Benjamin, 1962)

"Imagination in power" will become one of the watchwords of the students of the sixty-eight. Marcuse believes these students a vehicle through which liberation can be achieved, together with the Third World guerrillas, the marginalized minorities, all the critical issues towards the system, all the non-integrated subjects, also justifying violence because driven by a real and healthy intolerance. Despite this, he realizes

how these categories are deeply impotent in the face of technological civilization if they do not join forces with the layers of internal opposition to it (for example the trade unions). Herbert Marcuse was one of the most influential thinkers of the twentieth century, it is well known the fascination he exerted on students in revolt in the late sixties. His thought, intrinsically anti-authoritarian, reflected the desire for radical change that animated the protest of young people throughout the western world; his refusal of any form of repression, his clear no to technological civilization (in both liberal-capitalist and communist-Soviet forms), made him the philosopher of the "great refusal" towards any form of repression (Marcuse, 1965). Only in part he can be defined a Marxist thinker. In fact during the twentieth century, with the failure of Marx's predictions (Marx, 2018), with the disappearance of the class confrontation in the West, he sensed that the struggle was not over, but it had only moved to the third world, oppressed by western imperialism, on which even the marginalized classes of the "first world" exercised a sort of oppression, while contenting themselves with the crumbs of the capitalist banquet. For the activists of the movement in 1968 the concept of "liberation of Eros" was also very important. It meant not only sexual liberation, but liberation of man's creative energies from the conditioning of repressive society, for the creation of a more open society, made of free and supportive men. Eros also understood as "beautiful", in opposition to the concept of domination of the technological society; he used the expression "society as a work of art", that is, a more authentic, truly free society, dominated by fantasy and art as the fundamental dimension of all forms of coexistence. In 1979 Marcuse died of the consequences of a brain hemorrhage during a visit to Germany in Starnberg.

The intent of these reflections is supported, opening new interpretative paths in "Dialectics of the Enlightenment" (Adorno, Horkheimer, 1966), edited by Horkheimer and Adorno. They will try and oppose the repressive forms that are present in the nascent Anglo-Saxon cultural industry. One of the best known exponents of the second generation of critical theory (Frankfurt School) is the German philosopher Jürgen Habermas (Habermas, 1981).

The so-called political area of the alt-right opposed the so-called cultural Marxism

which the critical theory and the radical feminism would introduce into western society. A bitter critic of the main theses of Orthodox Marxism was Karl Popper. With his theory of the Open Society, he was an opponent of the New Left and, in particular, of Herbert Marcuse.

For Marcuse, advanced capitalist society, although the richest and most technologically advanced in history, and therefore, in his opinion, the most likely to lead to a "total liberation" of man, is also the most repressive form of coexistence ever arose; it follows that the only way to produce substantial changes is the revolutionary one that radically alters its structure. However, Marcuse has far from clear ideas on how to implement such a process. For his part, Popper says that our western societies, despite the many limitations they possess, are probably the most advanced stage ever reached by humanity on the road to emancipation. Although not an "ideal society", a concept to which Popper himself grants little credit, they contain less injustice than any other type of society so far realized: "the legal systems of our western democratic societies are therefore very imperfect and need corrections, but they are the best that have existed to date. Of all political ideas, the desire to make men perfect and happy is perhaps the most dangerous. The attempt to realize heaven on earth has always produced hell. In short, any distortions can be eliminated through reform processes and without resorting to radical solutions. (Popper, 2004) "As you can immediately understand, the reference point of the two interlocutors is the industrially strong and technologically advanced western society, whose organs of representative democracy, elected from below through free popular consultations, are able to guarantee normal rotation of different Parties in the exercise of power. It is important to understand which motivations led Marcuse to express radically negative judgments and, above all, it is necessary to try to find out what his alternative proposals are, since a good criticism, in addition to destroying, must also be able to build.

The task appears immediately almost desperate, since Marcuse seems to express not so much of the political proposals as of sentimental and emotional options. The ideal society must be without exploitation, without waste and without oppression.

It is quite clear that Marcuse does not realize that he is cheating on very delicate problems: you cannot offer total alternatives when you do not have clear ideas on how

to achieve them.

Herbert Marcuse was the most politicized member of the Frankfurt group. The automation of production processes and the diffusion of new technologies provided, in his view, the opportunity to set free from the need, to live an existence based on the idea of pleasure, no longer on that of performance and exploitation. The revolutionary subject was no longer the working class, since the members of the group had noticed - and this is their indisputable merit - that in the advanced countries a process of growth in the service sector was underway and it was leading to a progressive assimilation between the proletariat and the middle class.

The new revolutionary subjects were then to be identified, on the one hand, in the students and intellectuals who in the industrialized nations were aware of the merely formal character of parliamentary democracy and, on the other, in the marginalized subjects and in the peoples of the Third and Fourth World, true custodians of the revolutionary purity lost by the western proletariat.

Hence the exaltation of the Cultural Revolution, while Popular China was considered as the country that came closest to the contours of the society of the future. According to Marcuse, this society had to be characterized by the release of sexual drives, by the overcoming of work, ensured by the introduction of machines, and by the prevalence of fantasy and imagination over rationality and a critical sense of the reality.

To such bold speculations Popper opposes a reasoned defense of liberal democracy. Contrary to his interlocutor, Popper has always set his own discourse, suggesting that open society is a goal to which we must strive with all our strength, while realizing the impossibility of achieving it in an absolute way. It is therefore a goal capable of restoring man's trust and hope with the proposal to make society more and more suited to its needs. In this sense, not even the basic notion of "democracy" can be absolutized: "democracy in itself is nothing particularly good, every form of good comes from another part, not from democracy. This is only a means of avoiding tyranny. Obviously it is true that democracy means that all men are equal before the law, that no one can be considered a criminal until it has been proven that he is and so on. These basic principles are part of the rule of law. (Popper, 2004)"

Popper has never combined the criticism of totalitarianism with an immobilistic defense of the existing order. Indeed, in his works, critical remarks often occur against the imbalances and inequalities that Western societies present. But he also believes to identify in liberal democracy sufficient means to overcome these imbalances and inequalities through appropriate reforms; the political society hoped for by Popper is also open to the fact that it is a dynamic society, available to critical contributions (but not to merely destructive ones) from wherever they come, and also careful to preserve for citizens the political and civil liberties that they distinguish it from other models of social organization.

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