

# Herbert Marcuse's Critical Refusals

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"IT CAN STILL BE DONE."

—Herbert Marcuse<sup>1</sup>

In the 1960s, Herbert Marcuse became the most renowned and influential representative of Frankfurt School critical theory. Thanks to Marcuse's popularity as the "father of the New Left," and to the impact of his books *Eros and Civilization* (1955), *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), and *An Essay on Liberation* (1969), Marcuse's work influenced many academic disciplines in the United States and throughout the world, introducing the work of Frankfurt's Institute for Social Research, which eventually became an indispensable part of American and indeed global academia. The writings of Marcuse, Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, Leo Löwenthal, and other members of the Institute for Social Research provided a rich treasure house of ideas to help understand the current figuration of advanced capitalist societies, their forms of oppression and domination, and the emerging opposition of the New Left and a wide array of social movements, including the civil rights movement, the antiwar movement, feminism, the gay liberation movement, the ecology movement, and anticolonial struggles, all of which were influenced by Marcuse's ideas and which he in turn championed.

Marcuse in particular among his Frankfurt School colleagues provided an analysis of advanced industrial society that helped express what a new generation of radicals found oppressive and stultifying, and crucially championed actions and movements of revolt against what Marcuse called "one-dimensional society" and "one-dimensional man." While the Institute was

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1. Herbert Marcuse, "Lecture on Higher Education and Politics, Berkeley, 1975," in *Marcuse's Challenge to Education*, ed. Douglas Kellner, Tyson Lewis, Clayton Pierce, and K. Daniel Cho (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), 43. See also Charles Reitz, *Art, Alienation and the Humanities: A Critical Engagement with Herbert Marcuse* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000), 188–91, 246.

housed in exile at Columbia University during the 1930s and 1940s, through the good graces of its president Nicholas Murray Butler and renowned sociologist Robert S. Lynd, Marcuse wrote several essays developing his version of critical theory—first published in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* but republished in 1968 as *Negations*.<sup>2</sup> So too, his 1941 volume, *Reason and Revolution*, which heralded the need for a transformed revolutionary philosophy where “economic theory would turn into a critical theory,”<sup>3</sup> was written there and introduced Hegel and Marx to contemporary English-language audiences. Marcuse’s subsequent work at Brandeis University and the University of California at San Diego included *Eros and Civilization*,<sup>4</sup> *One-Dimensional Man*,<sup>5</sup> *An Essay on Liberation*,<sup>6</sup> and *Counterrevolution and Revolt*,<sup>7</sup> all of which were published first in the United States and first in English-language versions.

Hence, Marcuse’s books published in the United States represented to the world the Frankfurt School’s critical theory of society, cultural criticism and ideology-critique, and radical negations of contemporary society, culture, and politics. The power of Marcuse’s critical theory of society remains relevant to the contemporary situation and continues to attract new generations of scholars and activists. His political-philosophical vision and cultural critique continue to shed light on current debates concerning the limitations of bourgeois democracy and issues of political and racial inequality, education as social control, ecological crises, and democratic socialism as a radical alternative to the capitalist mode of social organization. Marcuse’s work addresses issues of alienation, war, oppression, environmental crisis, critical inquiry, and radical opposition. Neoliberal corporate globalization has intensified forms of class, race, gender, and sexual inequality, alienation, and cultural polarization today worldwide, evoking the need for a new generation of critical theory. Marcuse’s caustic condemnations of US military aggression, its need for an “enemy,” the irrationality of economic waste, destruction, and affluence, and multiple forms of repression and domination are particularly timely and deserve invigorated attention across our schools and universities as well as in other social, cultural, religious, economic, and political circles.

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2. Herbert Marcuse, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968).
  3. Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (London: Routledge, 2000), 281.
  4. Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955).
  5. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).
  6. Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969).
  7. Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).

## Crises of Capitalism, Social Upheaval, and Critical Refusals

For decades, Herbert Marcuse criticized the limitations and forms of oppression in the global system of corporate capitalism. Limitations of the capitalist system and the need for radical alternatives are now even more obvious in the United States and elsewhere, given the global crises of finance capital, environmental devastation, intensified alienated labor and exploitation, and growing inequalities throughout the world. The political imperatives of financial speculation and predatory lending are arguably even more openly odious and vicious than the “comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom”<sup>8</sup> Marcuse condemned in the 1960s. Marcuse recognized the advent of a new period of intensifying political and economic inequalities and that the system’s logic of profit maximization—not greed or bad leadership—stood at the root. His call for “the revival of the radical rather than the minimal goals of socialism”<sup>9</sup> raised his theory significantly above that of other social philosophers of the time.

What is often analytically referred to today as “neoliberalism” (or neo-conservatism) was, for Marcuse, clearly understood as “counterrevolution”—the advent of predatory capitalism aimed also at the full destruction of the democratic opposition. As Marcuse wrote, in *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, in 1972:

The Western world has reached a new stage of development: now, the defense of the capitalist system requires the organization of counterrevolution at home and abroad. . . . Torture has become a normal instrument of “interrogation” around the world. . . . Even Liberals are not safe if they appear as too liberal.<sup>10</sup>

The return of Marcuse—and the Marxist critical theory that he championed for decades—indicates the continuing relevance of critical theories and radical politics for our time. In Marcuse’s case, his analysis of one-dimensionality from the 1960s helps us to understand recent periods that were characterized by the absence of mass protest in centers of capitalist power, while his work from the late 1960s and 1970s helps us to understand and appreciate the protest movements that have appeared since the 1960s. Marcuse’s analyses of repression and his creative and critical use of Freudian perspectives for the construction of critical social theory remain useful in analyzing the role that unfulfilled desires for happiness play in the possible development of resistance, while his focus on art and the aesthetic dimension helps grasp how cultural radicalism can aid radical movements. And, in our present moment of widespread global protest, Marcuse reminds us that revolt is not revolution and that the obstacles to revolution and

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8. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 1.

9. Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 5.

10. *Ibid.*, 1.