

The Marcuse Factor

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ONE EXPERIENCE as a graduate student at Yale University that left its lasting mark on me came in the spring of 1964, when Herbert Marcuse arrived to teach a course in the history of socialism, in which I quickly enrolled. With his flowing gray hair, aquiline nose, imposingly long figure, and distinguished German accent, Professor Marcuse made an unexpectedly positive impression on me. It may be necessary to explain the reasons. Certainly our political views were not the same. While I belonged to the Yale Party of the Right (despite being a Rockefeller Republican), Marcuse had supported, or so I learned, the Soviet suppression of the Hungarian uprising in 1956. He also lavished praise on Fidel Castro and other Communist despots. He held no brief for Western bourgeois society, not even what was left of it. Most annoyingly, he referred to those who were left-of-center in American politics as “reactionaries” and treated the welfare state as an instrument for desensitizing American consumers to the evils of capitalism.

Despite these quirks, our new professor was bedazzling as a lecturer. He knew an enormous amount about the subjects that interested me: European intellec-

tual history and especially German philosophy. I had grown up knowing German and had dipped into Kant, Hegel, and Schopenhauer years before enrolling in Marcuse’s course. He brought up these and also other thinkers, like Pascal, Maistre, and Proudhon, while quoting long passages in the original languages. As an intellectually curious twenty-three year old auditor, he simply blew me away.

What is more, his background reminded me of my father’s family, German-speaking Jews who had fled from the Nazis and spoke English with a similar inflection. At the time I knew Marcuse, he had not yet become the gray eminence of the New Left. He was still a philosophy professor at Brandeis University, who took a train to New Haven once a week, to hold his class at the Yale Graduate Hall. It was only later, when he had retired from Brandeis and gone to San Diego State as a teacher that he went off the deep end entirely. In his California phase he openly advocated violence and became identified with the black Communist Party activist Angela Davis. Thirty years later when I spoke to the Hegel scholar Stanley Rosen about his one meeting with Marcuse, Rosen remembered exactly the kind of person I knew, a charming Old World academic with a touch of dottiness. Rosen, too, was stunned by what Marcuse did in California and attributed such behavior to the

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lack of a moral center, a problem that Rosen had explored in a critical study of Martin Heidegger.

As a graduate student I had not only not perceived such a problem but also found ways of rationalizing Marcuse's defects, almost turning them into excesses of virtue. His outbursts against capitalist one-dimensionality and the corresponding indulgence of Communist mass murder could be attributable to his *ancien régime* elegance and to his genuine shock over American consumerist habits. For the most part, however, I tried not to think about his wicked opinions, because there was no possibility of reconciling them with my own fierce anti-Communism.

Even less did I care for the fantasy that Marcuse had inserted into *Eros and Civilization* (1955) about a fusion of Marx and Freud that would take place in a future socialist world practicing polymorphic sexuality. Although these themes were already present in his contributions to German journals in the 1930s, Marcuse's erotic fixation was not what drew me to him philosophically or socially. Given my up-tight Central European bourgeois upbringing, I simply could not envisage the forbidden pleasures that Marcuse hoped to make available by slaying the capitalist monster. And though he had published a thick volume on Soviet Communism in 1958, which was sympathetically critical of his subject, it was hard for me to imagine that he or anyone else really believed that Stalin was enabling his Russian subjects to enjoy sensual pleasures. Or that the Soviets were featuring more of such pleasures than "repressed" consumers could pick up in Times Square.

As I later figured out, Marcuse leaned toward the Soviets for the same reason he conceived of Western capitalist countries as sexually repressive. Like other members of the Frankfurt School—most notably Theodor Adorno, with whom he had been associated since the early

1930s—Marcuse claimed to detest bourgeois civilization and supposedly wished to see it destroyed.

Still, his connection to what he professed to despise was ambivalent and—like other members of the Frankfurt School, as noted by Lorenz Jäger in his biography of Adorno—Marcuse was in some ways himself an *haute bourgeoisie* anachronism. This was true from the way he dressed to the gallant (but never lecherous) manner in which he spoke to female students. He oozed traditional German *Bildung*, with his extensive humanistic and linguistic erudition, which seemed to contrast sharply with the careerism and the narrow specialization that prevailed among his American counterparts.

He was also far more tolerant of dissenting opinions from his students than my other professors. When I had criticized Woodrow Wilson and his messianic politics in other classes, the instructors had reacted with extreme displeasure. I felt forced to cut off my remarks lest I injure my professional future by expressing unseasonable views (something I ultimately did anyhow). In Marcuse's class, it was different. Unlike my Cold War liberal professors and my current politically correct colleagues, this graying German radical thrived on debate. When he asked that a student argue against Karl Marx's interpretation of the Paris uprising of May 1848, an event that has been seen as an early expression of French working-class consciousness, I volunteered. My presentation, which I pulled mostly out of Alexis de Tocqueville's recollections, evoked a powerful reaction from my Marxist adversary. But as soon as the give-and-take was over, he profusely thanked me for my "valorous efforts" and, perhaps to underline his magnanimity, gave me the highest grade for the course. I was put in mind of this generous spirit many times afterwards, and am still embarrassed to admit that I learned the example of true liberal intellectual exchange from a de-

clared Marxist-Leninist.

Leftist émigré social historians have been partly right to stress the rejection experienced by the German-Jewish bourgeoisie in the early twentieth century, in an Austro-German society that viewed them generally as outsiders. Although Jews in Germany succeeded in the professions and even in politics at a much higher rate than elsewhere, possibly including the United States, there was nonetheless an anti-Semitic legacy that made German Jews despair about full acceptance into society, even before the Nazis' accession to power.

Some educated, wealthy German Jews turned toward the cultural and aesthetic Right, as exemplified by the rarefied circle around the poet-seer Stefan George (1868-1933). Despite George's reactionary positions, illustrated by his contempt for modernity and his invocation of a "Third Reich" led by spiritual ascetics and artistic purifiers, well over half of his inner circle was Jewish. German literary commentator Geret Luhr has shown in *Ästhetische Kritik der Moderne* that George's Jewish disciples spanned the political spectrum, from culturally conservative Teutonophile Friedrich Gundolf to Zionist Eric Kahler to Marxist Walter Benjamin. What united this group, however, was an experience of estrangement. They did not fit into the commercial world of their parents any better than into a German society that would continue to keep them at arm's length.

One is in fact struck by the frequency with which such souls contemplated and in some cases committed suicide. George incarnated, albeit for different reasons, a similar alienation and happily accepted the flatteries of young Jews, even suggesting in an oft-quoted poem in *Stern des Bundes* that he was mediating artistically between "the swarthy and blond brothers who had sprung from the same womb but do not recognize each other, and therefore wander forever, without being

fulfilled." (The reader is asked to put up with this translation of a difficult but brilliant poet.) Were I alive at the time, I too in all likelihood would have been a *George-Anhänger*.

But another reaction that arose among snubbed German-Jewish bourgeois was an anti-national, anti-bourgeois stance that easily morphed into reckless social radicalism. While the forms taken by this reaction have not been particularly salutary, for many years I hoped to separate the fruits from their bitter source. In my once-held view, those who had tried to expose the corruptness and oppressive condition of pre-socialist Western life were exaggerating middle-class, capitalist malevolence because of the circumstances of their youth and because of their perpetual search for a "fascist" enemy after their experience with the Nazis. Nonetheless, I persisted in thinking that it was possible to extract from this trauma a core of methodological truth. Despite their derailments, Marcuse and his friends did carry with them a usable form of social analysis, a philosophy of history, and an awareness of the ideological dimension of political life: all of which Anglo-American society was ignoring or obdurately refusing to incorporate into self-studies. I had arrived at this view after studying under Marcuse and coming to respect his learning.

I was also outraged that the Yale graduate school would not offer him a chair in the history of socialism and Marxism after his expected retirement from Brandeis. Having voted in the fall (reluctantly) for Goldwater for president, I found it hypocritical to condemn my professors for right-wing bigotry. But when a classmate began to condemn the anti-Marcuseites as "liberal fascists," I decided to adopt that term. I could thereby attack my professors, who were mostly Kennedy-Johnson Democrats, without having to move toward the Left and while continuing to support my teacher, who by then

was heading west.

What might have put him over the edge on the West Coast, I have long believed, were the unwillingness of Brandeis to extend his contract (beyond the retirement age) and the refusal of Yale to establish a position for this distinguished thinker. When Marcuse on a visit to Venice told the mayor that there were too many tasteless people swarming around and that “si ha bisogno qua d’un turismo di qualità,” unlike Alasdair MacIntyre, who reported this incident with extreme irritation, I was amused rather than offended. Just because Marcuse held unsavory opinions about some things, I thought, did not require him to accept the soiling and improper use of architectural treasures.

The last time I came to his defense was in 1979, after he died and after *National Review* had published an abrasive obituary. At that time I submitted to the magazine an impassioned retort, noting Marcuse’s contribution to Hegel studies in *Reason and Revolution*. *NR* never published this endorsement of a famous radical coming from a conservative scholar. My gesture might have created even more cognitive dissonance than the lifelong tendency of Sidney Hook, a fiercely anti-Communist social democrat, to say nice things about Marx. Even then I was to the right of Hook politically, while Marcuse and the Frankfurt School were culturally far more radical than the father of Communism.

My interest in Marcuse in any case led me into reading Adorno and Adorno’s collaborator Max Horkheimer and by the late 1980s into becoming associated with *Telos*, a journal that had been founded to popularize in the United States the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School. Under its editor-in-chief Paul Piccone, *Telos* moved generally rightward starting in the mid-1980s; nonetheless, my colleague Wesley McDonald expressed horror that I took up with these “weird people” who would not likely participate in an ISI seminar.

Despite such objections, I was comfortable in my new company, and as my neoconservative adversaries took over leadership positions on the American Right, I found a justification to shift camps. My new comrades were graying New Leftists who had moved away from specifically leftist Frankfurt School positions. By then they were supplementing their changing belief systems or investigative methodologies by adding ideas from Carl Schmitt and other European critics of liberalism. In issue after issue one learned how the radical god had failed—though not in some dramatic fashion as that story unfolds in the contributions to the book bearing that title. There was, however, one problem I soon learned. Wherever my fellow-editors happened to be looking for ideas, including the humanism of Irving Babbitt, they kept returning to the Frankfurt School.

By the early 1990s I had tired of this cult and of the mechanical hero worship it engendered. There were in fact Frankfurt School texts that I found instructive, particularly *Dialectic of the Enlightenment* and *Negative Dialectics*, both of which analyze social and cultural phenomena in a manner that I as a non-Leftist could appreciate. Adorno’s attacks on bureaucratic structures and on Enlightened rationalism, a theme that runs through *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*, has profoundly conservative implications—provided one can separate such perceptions from the muddled syntax and provided one can read through the intertwined feminist mythology. One should be free, I thought, to take from Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse what seems relevant and to dump the rest.

One should also be encouraged to criticize the defects in their interpretive tradition. Not everything that came out of their activity, I explained, has to be considered good. But those opinions did not prevail in the *Telos* circle. Thus, a work as long and influential as *The Authoritarian*

Personality, which Adorno, Horkheimer, and other Frankfurt School members constructed during and after the Second World War, was declared to be atypical of its creators. According to the received doctrine, its purpose was to generate cash for the exiled authors, who never did anything faintly resembling this study again. The obsession there with “fascist personalities” and the attempt to uncover such types among white Christian heterosexuals in the United States was supposedly a wartime aberration.

But even a cursory reading of Rolf Wiggershaus’s authoritative German study of the Frankfurt School proves the opposite: namely, that one finds similar work done by the usual suspects well before *The Authoritarian Personality*, going back to Frankfurt in the 1930s, and there is evidence of Adorno pursuing the same subjects after his return to Germany in 1950. But it was impossible to bring this up to my collaborators without causing noisy, offended denial.

It was also difficult to present to my usually amiable colleagues in New York the (to me) self-evident truth that much of the radical project of the Frankfurt School was attributable to the Jewishness of its founders. Without their sense of marginalization and the attendant hostilities, they would not likely have been so contemptuous of ordinary, non-adjusted bourgeois. This was particularly true of Adorno, despite his Catholic upbringing and his French mother, whose maiden name he took, and despite the fact that his Jewish father shared none of his hang-ups. A Hungarian Jewish social theorist, Ferenc Feher, who had written for *Telos*, made this point exhaustively in a book I eventually read. Although Feher was clearly on to something and heavily documented his contentions, my friends went on condemning “his ridiculous nonsense.”

When I defended Feher’s interpretation in an essay for the journal, they turned

on me with impatience. Their editorial judgment suggested that I was recycling a position that is intrinsically anti-Semitic. The inconsistency I saw in this opinion was for me as maddening as the selective victimology of the Euro-American multiculturalists. How can one pretend to be looking at the social and existential ground of politics but refuse to apply this method to those who turn it against their adversaries? No matter what they claimed about themselves as “free-floating intellectuals” (*freischwebende Intelligenz*), the members of the Frankfurt School were as influenced by their backgrounds and the baggage it brought as those they excoriated.

It was my deepening friendship with Piccone, who died in 2004, and with his faithful companion Gary Ulmen, the one-time assistant of Karl Wittfogel, that kept me in the *Telos* circle long after my fondness for the Frankfurt School had dried up. Piccone, Ulmen, the political theorist George Schwab, and I became fast friends and co-workers on various projects relating to Carl Schmitt. My interest in Schmitt superseded my predilection for Critical Theory, but since the two remained connected with the same group and publication, I never revealed to Piccone or Ulmen my change of heart. I had no further desire to tackle the job of “salvaging something” from the Frankfurt School so as to pass that something on to a younger generation.

True, *Telos* did sometimes feature themes that questioned the relevance of Critical Theory in a self-liquidating bourgeois society; nonetheless, most of the contributors clung stubbornly to the old faith, even while denying it. When the political uses began to look passé, some took to writing about Adorno’s defense and composition of atonal music, as a revolt against bourgeois conformity. By then I felt even further out of the loop, seeing that I found Adorno’s musical compositions unbearable to listen to.

Would that everyone practiced fascist conformity by listening to Mozart and Vivaldi!

Indeed trying to preserve a living Critical Theory was coming to resemble the play-acting of contemporary European Marxism. Yuppies who plunge into every P.C. fad in France and Germany pretend to be Marxists broadly understood. By carefully cherry picking Marx's collected works, they can depict a master who is forever fashionable, whether as an ecologist, an advocate of open borders, or someone who would have championed homosexual marriage. Among my liberal Christian colleagues all the same attributes are heaped onto Jesus, by reducing the New Testament to two or three overworked or deconstructed verses. An honest disciple would abandon a master whose teachings he can no longer accept, before twisting his words into pretzels.

Much has happened to me and to others since I first entered Herbert Marcuse's class. My teacher died after his less than dignified golden years, and my colleagues from *Telos* have either passed on into the *molestam senectutis* or into what awaits at the end of the aging process. To think of myself now as a disciple of Marcuse or of the broader Frankfurt School movement to which he belonged has become difficult but not impossible. I remain a *Telos*-editor, and following the tragic death of our ebullient chief editor, we were scheduled to meet early in 2005 to discuss the publication's future. (It has already been decided that it will have a tomorrow.) In provocative reviews of my last two books, the analytic philosopher David Gordon has portrayed me as a right-wing exponent of the Frankfurt School. I am what Adorno or Marcuse would have been if they had been bourgeois conservatives, applying their critical method to Leftist targets.

This image amuses me, but overlooks certain elementary distinctions that Gordon understands better than I. You can-

not be a Critical Theorist unless you share the corresponding world view. A social analyst may adapt Adorno or the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci while pursuing diametrically opposed moral and cultural ends. But the effect is not to replicate the same body of thought while transposing it to a different ideological location. To provide a case in point: a conservative may notice the applicability of Critical method for exposing Leftist power structures. But the result of applying it is not what the social theorists who fashioned this method intended it to do.

There is an intention in political theory, unlike say technology, that is inseparable from a particular form of inquiry. No one in his right mind would confuse "right-wing Gramscians," who emphasize the hegemonic ideologies of the Left, with the dominant ideas of the Italian Communist Party, which also idolized Gramsci. Context counts in examining the relation of social and political thinkers to each other. And no matter how respectfully men of the Right, like Samuel Francis or Alain de Benoist, speak about Gramsci as a methodological teacher, there is a difference between an adaptable idea and the political persuasion to which it pertains.

I am making this point to underline my reservations about describing myself as an Adornoite or a Marcuseite simply because I have borrowed from the interwar Left a particular strategy for unmasking contemporary Leftists. Such borrowing is different from membership in the tradition whose ideas one is adapting. Those Federalists who framed the Judicial Act of 1789 were not the precursors of today's judicial activists, even though both may have favored a powerful judiciary controlling state legislatures. One group of judicial activists was trying to hold back mass democracy; the other group, by contrast, wishes to push it in a more radical direction than legislatures are likely to go. Intention is integral to our under-

standing of social and political positions.

What may be argued, however, is that intellectual traditions bind people in spite of their obvious differences. Thus, Pierre Manent, in his anthology of liberal theorists and in his *Histoire Intellectuelle du Libéralisme*, links figures who would not likely have agreed on the best form of government but who nonetheless contributed to a recognizable liberal tradition of thought. While Machiavelli, Rousseau, Hobbes, and Montesquieu would not have all rallied to popular government or the ideal of social equality, according to Manent, they did represent stages in the development of a coherent and identifiably liberal world view. One encounters themes or undercurrents in their work—*e.g.*, the disentanglement of political life from ecclesiastical authority, a constructivist notion of government, human nature identified with the individual will inventing what human beings are, and a separation of state and society—that define a “liberal” post-medieval school of thought.

Without embracing his intellectualist approach entirely, it seems to me that Manent is correct to underscore the possibility of a far-ranging agreement about certain premises among thinkers who would not otherwise have much in common. Thus, he treats side-by-side Montesquieu and Rousseau, because of shared views about the artificiality of government, the association of commercial life with a softening of manners, and general skepticism about Christianity. This same approach might also indicate that right-wing and left-wing Critical Theorists hold common assumptions, *e.g.*, about the determinative character of class and history and about the centrality of power in the promotion of modern ideologies, despite their evident divergences.

Thus, I may still be partly on Marcuse’s side, when it comes to interpreting political behavior. In the war between nature and history, I still generally come down

among those who stress historical contexts and power relations. While Marcuse may not have been the only thinker who espoused this perspective, he played a key role in presenting it to me. That I later rediscovered this perspective in genuinely conservative and even counterrevolutionary writers is not surprising. By then I had developed a strong distaste for Marcuse’s political teachings and exhibitionism and (perhaps) tried to find other exponents for ideas I had picked up initially from this *maître à penser*.

But there may be more to this memory from the distant past, which has often merged in my mind with my encounter with Marcuse. About the time I was taking his class, I began reading certain authors who became critical for my later thinking. Two texts that Marcuse brought up in class often enough to get me to read them were Maistre’s *Soirées* and Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*. The attempts by both authors, one from a Catholic counterrevolutionary background and the other from a conservative liberal position, to understand the impact of history on human nature made a powerful impression on me as a graduate student. Significantly, not until I read these continental authors did I reach for Burke’s *Reflections*, which I still find the most compelling presentation of a historically based conservatism. Burke’s perceptions about the moral value of habituation, the social, hierarchical preconditions for virtue, and his defense of historical continuities seemed all the more impressive because Burke was upholding a then still-traditional society. It was also not a static one but open to piecemeal reform.

At the same time, I found in the Yale Sterling Library the original German edition, written during the rise of Nazism, of Eric Voegelin’s *Political Religions*. There are few books that have imprinted my scholarship more than this text, and since my late twenties, I have steadily applied Voegelin’s insights about the mythical

paradigms mixed into modern ideologies. This influence came, moreover, after I had studied ancient Greek and became deeply absorbed in the craft and the fatalism of Thucydides. In my case there was an ancient as well as a modern template against which I tried to understand historical patterns and political motives. It is altogether possible that my longtime preoccupation with the snares of power, symbolized for Thucydides by *Atē*, the goddess of mischief, came from the *Histories* as much as from Marcuse. Looking back on these sources and inspirations, it is hard to single out any one figure as my preferred thinker.

What Marcuse certainly did provide was intellectual stimulation and a pedagogical model at a time when I needed both. He was a doorway to other, more profound learning, but he could not move beyond his role for reasons explained in

a passage that I gave my students to translate from Plato's *Criton*. "*Epeidē hē nosos enepipte kai diephtheire tēn polin, poi eistha su, poteron pros tous philous oupros ton iatron?*" [If a plague befell and devastated the city to whom would you turn, your friends or the doctor?] Criton's answer is "*Proston iatron ēa—sande entautha kai philoi. Ēdei gar ho iatros ta peri tēs nosou, empeiroteros on—ēhoi alloi.*" [Naturally I would go to the doctor, where I would find my friends. For the doctor would know about illness, being more knowledgeable than the others.] Herbert Marcuse offered *philia* rather than *iatricon*, which may be the reason that our relation could not develop beyond the point it did. He was an older companion, but he could not treat the illness of the soul nor explain the human condition more fully than what he taught me at the age of twenty-three.