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APPLYING MARCUSE TO MODERN SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

Introduction

Herbert Marcuse has been hailed as the "father" of the New Left for his contributions to progressive social movements in the 1960s. Most notably, Marcuse provided a new framework to analyze how trends within society could both "extend liberty while intensifying domination" (as quoted in Bowring, 2012, 17). Though there is evident pessimism in Marcuse's earlier works, especially *One-Dimensional Man*, his later works offer a glimmer of hope concerning the possibilities of radical qualitative change emerging from within the contradictions of society. In this regard, Marcuse's theory sharply contrasts with his early Frankfurt School colleagues. In particular, Theodor Adorno feared that the instrumentalization and co-optation of critical thinking had developed to such a degree that he limited himself to *theoretical* resistance (Masquelier, 2014).[1] On the contrary, Marcuse recognized the transformative unity of theory and action, arguing that emancipatory projects must realize their mutual dependence in order to succeed (Farr, 2013, p. 406). Interestingly, even though Marcuse emphasized the need for practice, his influence in social movement theory had largely disappeared by the 1970s. Instead, Jürgen Habermas became one of the primary influences of New Social Movement theory. Though the scope of this paper cannot contrast the merits and limitations of both critical theorists, it must be noted that there is a growing interest within academia to move away from Habermas due to concerns over the increasingly institutionalized nature of radical movements and their co-optation.[2] Consequently, this paper will argue that there is a void in current social movement theory that Marcuse can aptly fill.

The first portion of this paper will discuss the constrained and one-dimensional environment in which progressive social movements must operate. Specifically, I will argue that the false needs and comforts produced by capitalism create an elusive "good life," rendering any dissent questionable. In terms of politics and media perceptions, I will further argue that liberal democracies only provide a "subdued pluralism," significantly closing the space in which dissenting voices may break the status quo. However, following Marcuse's logic, these same constraints also open up a new dimension of negation within the system, as demonstrated by some current social movements. The next portion of this paper will thus argue that Marcuse's work provides an important backdrop to understand, as well as a critical lens to analyze, modern social movements. Lastly, limitations to Marcuse's own theory and the possibilities for revolutionary opposition will be addressed.

The "good life"

For Marcuse, the current establishment effectively wields control over individuals by defining and regulating human desires and instincts through the logic of capital. Capitalism need not overtly dominate through typical totalitarian means of repression, but asserts its control by superimposing false needs onto the populace and compelling people to consume the goods that they are provided. Consequently, "social control is anchored in the new need which it has produced" (Marcuse, 1991, p. 9). As a result, people increasingly associate themselves with their material goods (Ibid.). What is most important to the containment of social change is the fact that people internalize these needs as if they were their own, to the extent to which "false consciousness […] becomes the true consciousness" (Ibid., p. 11).

In order to continuously gratify these false satisfactions, people are compelled to line up before dawn to get the best deals on Black Friday, purchase the new iPhone, or lease the new Tesla. However, the satisfaction of these "needs" only contributes to a more alienated existence and "euphoria of unhappiness" (Ibid., p. 5). In other words, people may achieve a quantitative sense of happiness in their material possessions but they are "qualitatively impoverished" (Depuis-Déri, 2013, p. 534). It remains clear that consumption in an affluent society is not necessarily associated with increases in reported happiness and well-being, but is rather more akin to temporary gratification (Bowring, 2012). As a result, "[t]he better and bigger satisfaction is very real, and yet, in Freudian terms it is repressive inasmuch as it diminishes in the individual psyche the sources of the pleasure principle and of freedom" (Marcuse as quoted in Bowring

2012, p. 16). Moreover, the logic of market-oriented, neoliberal policies is based on the "model of utility-oriented calculation" or the "performance principle," subsequently preventing individuals from realizing themselves as both sensuous and cognitive beings capable of a creative and authentic life outside of the logic of capital (Masquelier, 2013, p. 401; Winters, 2013, p. 157). In short, the performance principle generated by capitalism has fully become the reality principle for everyday life.

The false needs administered by society ultimately lead to a false sense of freedom. So long as people are able to attain some of the material comforts of the "good life," then there is no need to expect anything more than what is provided. Through its method of production "society takes care of the need for liberation by satisfying the need which makes servitude palatable and perhaps even unnoticeable" (Marcuse, 1991, p. 24). Liberation becomes doubtful since it would also entail liberation "from that which is tolerable and rewarding and comfortable" (Ibid., p. 7). In this respect, Marcuse is particularly critical of the logic behind the welfare state (at least in capitalist societies),[iii] as it provides comforts while simultaneously reducing "the use-value of freedom" so that "there is no reason to insist on self-determination if the administered life is the comfortable and even the "good" life" (Ibid., p. 49). Therefore, as society is increasingly able to satisfy these needs, the critical functions of thought, autonomy, and the right to political opposition have decreased (Ibid., p. 1).

Even Marx's revolutionary proletariat has been co-opted by the comforts of the current system. As a result, Marcuse rejects the revolutionary potential of the working class, as modern workers now have vested interests in the success of business and are further pacified by work benefits and labour unions (Ibid., pp. 26-30). Consequently, Marcuse maintains that the working class is the "[r]evolutionary class 'in-itself' but not 'for itself,' objectively but not subjectively" (Marcuse, 1969, p. 59). In other words, though the working class may occupy a critical area in production, it does not have the radical subjectivity to be the revolutionary class. Since Marcuse could no longer rely on the working class as the prime actors in an emancipatory project, he instead turned to the outcasts

and minorities of society (Marcuse, 2013, p. 488). However, it should also be noted that Marcuse wrote *One-Dimensional Man* during a time of particular affluence and today the threads holding together the "good life" have arguably begun to unravel. In other words, the "good life" Marcuse outlined in the 1960s is now marked by insecurity, decreasing wages, debt, and political disorganization (Forman, 2013, p. 516). Therefore, there is some cynicism present in our one-dimensional consciousness. Marcuse was not unaware of this obvious contradiction within capitalism.

In *Counterrevolution and Revolt,* Marcuse recognizes that capitalism is increasingly producing false needs that it cannot fulfill (Kellner, 1983, p. 71). Thus, the image of the "good life" continues to be propagated to all as the norm, despite the inability of the vast majority of people to meet this standard of living. If the rising expectations are not met, it can result in revolt, as people lash out against structural unemployment, structural misrecognition, or structural inequality. In dialectical fashion, the contradictions of capitalist society have "opened a new dimension, which is at one and the same time the living space of capitalism and its negation" (Marcuse, 1972, p. 19). It is evident that capitalism cannot fully succeed in its containment strategy, as its inherent contradictions will result in social unrest that crack the walls of one-dimensional thought. Consequently, especially in his later works, Marcuse remained hesitantly optimistic that the structural contradictions of capitalist society would generate "transcending needs" that would seek to fulfill desires beyond the repressive system (Kellner, 1983, p. 71). In this light, Marcuse arguably anticipated the current social unrest in many developed countries, as groups seek political space in negation to the current order.[iv]

Nonetheless, the important point remains that there are no clear and viable alternatives offered outside of the operations of the current system, making any true revolutionary project questionable (Froman, 2013, p. 518). The current reality thus mobilizes against any alternative, and "the status quo defies transcendence" (Marcuse, 1991, p. 17). Therefore, the viability of current social movements continues to be a very pressing question. Furthermore, the containment strategy is not only limited to the one-dimensional

logic of capitalism by itself, but is further enforced by the operational logic of modern liberal politics.

One-Dimensional Politics

For Marcuse, our current way of thinking is fundamentally operational, meaning that all ideals are reduced to a set of operations that can be quantified. Within this paradigm, instrumental politics have emerged. Political action is limited to what can be operationalized within the current system, while anything qualitatively different is dismissed as nonsense. Consequently, utopian thought has been banished, and we are left only with one-dimensional thought that seeks to enforce compliance with the status quo (Marcuse, 1991, p. 13). In this regard, it is evident that Marcuse was able to anticipate and effectively critique the "subdued pluralism" propagated by liberal theorists, most notably John Rawls (Ibid., p. 13). According to Rawls, political liberalism is the only means to establish an overlapping consensus regarding our basic institutional structures in a society that is marked by competing visions of the good life (2005). As a result, it is necessary to establish a public sphere regulated by the principles of fairness and justice that are acceptable to all *"reasonable"* beings (Ibid., p. 134). Any ideas or practices that are incompatible with the basic principles of liberalism and reason are banished to the private sphere.

By insisting on consensus and public reason, liberalism effectively works to "domesticate" and dismiss more radical visions on what constitutes the political life, in order to remove possible dissent (Winters, 2013, p. 164). In the end, many troublesome concepts are taken off the board because they are incompatible with the rational terms of operation instituted by the current system (Marcuse, 1991, p. 13). Moreover, one-dimensional thought is systematically promoted by liberal politics through its "hypnotic definitions and dictions," so that freedom can only be thought of in terms of free institutions and free enterprise, while socialism is immediately perceived as an encroachment of private property (Ibid., p. 14).

Furthermore, under a system wherein only the most powerful have a reliable say, "[t]he reality of pluralism becomes ideological and deceptive. It seems to extend rather than reduce manipulation and coordination, to promote rather than counteract the fateful integration" (Ibid., p. 41). Therefore, though political and civil rights, such as the freedom of speech, freedom of association, the right to vote, and fair elections, are upheld as quintessentially democratic, these rights "in a society of total administration serve to strengthen this administration by testifying to the existence of democratic liberties which in reality, have changed their content and lost their effectiveness" (Marcuse, 1965, p. 84).[v] In other words, though the underlying assumption promoted by society is one of freedom, in reality, free and equal discussion becomes unachievable in a system of unequal powers (Ibid., p. 93). Any changes in society will be accordingly limited to the particular interests of those in control who benefit from maintaining the status quo. Though minority and outcast groups may be free to discuss and deliberate on their own, any dissent will be swallowed up by "the overwhelming majority, which militates against qualitative social change" (Ibid., p. 94). Liberalism thus reduces the avenues whereby diverging opinions can enter the political realm, ultimately neutralizing politics and limiting political discussion to the ideas and words of the establishment (Ibid., p. 96).

As a result, cohesion in this system is not truly based on a plurality of views but is rather based on the opposition to a permanent enemy (Marcuse, 1991, p. 51). In Marcuse's time, the enemy was conveniently found in communist states and today this enemy has largely become terrorism, most obviously Islamic fundamentalism. Anti-Islamic rhetoric has become commonplace in political dialogue to promote national interests, whether it be Donald Trump's anti-immigration campaign, former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper's proposed barbaric cultural practices act, or former American President Bush's "war on terror." Especially since 2001, the war on terror rhetoric, promoted by many western states, has been used as a means to establish cohesion between public opinion and increased surveillance (Forman, 2013, p. 519). The benefits of the welfare state are thus constantly paired with the increased surveillance of private lives, leading to "a potent mix of institutional reform and brutal repression" (Schlembach, 2015, p. 992). In the Canadian

context, Bill C-51 demonstrates how governments can effectively wield the fear of a common enemy in order to curtail the liberties that they are, in theory, supposed to protect. In reality, Bill C-51 places a major constraint on "advocacy, protest, and dissent activities" that are perceived as "unlawful," meaning that demonstrators, who do not hold an official permit or continue protesting despite court orders, could be shut down as a "terrorism offence" (Amnesty International, 2015). Consequently, dissenting voices and actions are readily collapsed into a single category and denounced as illegitimate or even as terrorism.

The one-dimensional paradigm upheld by formal politics is further reinforced by media and public perceptions. For example, the 2012 student protests in Quebec were largely condemned as "terrorism" by several news reports, as well as local politicians (Depuis Déri, 2013, pp. 537-538). The student protests were in response to tuition hikes proposed by the Quebec government. The student protesters engaged in such retaliatory actions as painting government buildings red, organizing street theater and holding rallies, as well as more forceful demonstrations (Lagalisse, 2012, p. 59). Subsequently, the Quebec government put forth an emergency law. Bill 78, popularly referred to as the "Truncheon Law," criminalized any unauthorized gatherings of more than fifty people (Ibid.). Following the law's inception, serious charges were laid against the protestors for actions such as throwing banner sticks, pushing police barriers, or other unruly behavior. In all, the police made over 3500 arrests, engaging in violent counter-action to subdue the protestors (Ibid.). Of those found guilty, custodial sentences ranged from six to thirty-two months (Power, 2012, p. 58). Consequently, it is clear that the rhetoric of the establishment is able to contain dissent by distinguishing between what is legitimate and illegitimate action. On this point, Marcuse asserts that "the traditional distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence becomes questionable," and if police violence is inherently legitimate and student violence is illegitimate, then it is obvious that "[t]he established vocabulary discriminates a priori against the opposition – it protects the Establishment" (Marcuse, 1969, pp. 76-77). In this light, it is evident that public and media perceptions of protests remain largely one-dimensional, effectively branding defiant action as fundamentally illegitimate.

The social constraints maintained through capitalism and liberalism make subversive social action questionable, specifically in regard to progressive social movements. However, despite the apparent pessimism in *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse was dedicated to pairing critical theory with practice in order to discover new subjectivities and orchestrate dissenting views into political action. Marcuse's work thus provides an important backdrop to understand, as well as a critical lens to analyze, modern social movements. The next section of this paper will outline how Marcuse's theory is relevant to such movements.

Breaking One-Dimensional Thought?

In *An Essay on Liberation*, Marcuse asserts that our current state of voluntary servitude "can be broken only through a political practice which reaches the roots of containment and contentment in the infrastructure of man, a political practice of methodological disengagement from and refusal of the Establishment, aiming at a radical transvaluation of values" (1969, p. 6). The liberation from false needs, therefore, entails the refusal of the whole system. In order to generate substantial change, Marcuse argues that we need a "qualitatively different *totality*," and social liberation does not only involve the economic sphere but the "*totality* of human existence" (1972, p. 3; 74). In order to attain this quality of life, Marcuse holds onto "the possibility of emancipated subjectivity" (Holman, 2013, p. 633). As a result, liberation requires a new political logic or, in Marcuse's words, a "new sensibility," in order to experience the world differently (1969, p. 23). Without this utopian vision, social movements may run the risk of being just as vacuous as the "one-dimensional society" in which they are protesting (Langman, 2013, p. 516).

Marcuse thus rejects traditional forms of protests and lobbying, as such "rational" behavior can quickly turn to "reasonable submissiveness" (Schlembach, 2015, p. 994). On the contrary, Marcuse argues that social movements must break from the traditional

forms of politics so that they are not co-opted as instruments of the state (Holman, 2013, p. 642). Following Marcuse, Pleyers defines the logic of current movements as "the way of subjectivity," organized "[a]gainst the commodification of culture, pleasure and experience" (as quoted in Masquelier, 2013, p. 400). Therefore, it is necessary to create a new reality principle independent of the current performance principle that dominates daily lives (Langman, 2013, p. 520). In this light, it is obvious that social movements are not only aimed against corporate greed, economic inequality, or unjust material distribution, but are a larger outcry against the totality of the current system and the subjectivities it has imposed. In this vein, the next portion of this paper will apply Marcuse to the Occupy Wall Street (OWS) movement and highlight both their correlations and their respective limitations.

OWS Case-Study

OWS demonstrates how progressive social movements oppose the status quo upheld by liberal capitalism. According to Langman, the Occupiers' objectives were aimed at establishing new identities beyond the logic of capital, in order to obtain "seemingly more moral kinds of emotional gratifications to attain the "good life" (Ibid.). Furthermore, OWS recognized the ineffective and contradictory nature of the current parliamentary system, questioning the legitimacy of the representative system (Vey, 2016, p. 64). Consequently, it did not make sense to use conventional means of protest to demand changes. On the contrary, the Occupiers refused to make any demands of parliament, the government, or the state, as such action would only reinforce the very system that they were lashing out against (Ibid.). The Occupiers not only criticized society but also orchestrated a democratically organized, egalitarian community within Zuccotti Park in direct negation to the established hierarchical and undemocratic political order (Langman, 2013, p. 518). In this regard, the Occupiers not only envisioned a utopian alternative but also implemented it, becoming a lived negation of the status quo. Though there were obvious benefits to OWS's commitment to direct action within the everyday life of the camp communities, it was unable to target the structural basis of capitalism in a meaningful way and ultimately had no lasting effect (Vey, 2016, p. 64).

OWS's limited effect may be in part accounted for by its anarchistic tendencies.[vi] Anarchism, unlike Marxism, is not aimed at seizing state power but is more concerned with delegitimizing the state or government in order to win back autonomy (Vey, 2016, p. 65). By failing to engage in the current system, OWS failed to acknowledge the real power of the state. In this regard, Blackledge argues that even if social movements are able to provide an alternative to the status quo, states will always be one step ahead, ready to intervene in order to suppress any substantial change (Ibid., p. 66). On the contrary, Marxists recognize the need to produce a counter-hegemonic force in order to fundamentally change the rules of the game and abolish capitalism so that it can no longer reproduce repressive relations (Ibid.). Therefore, it is clear that movements cannot only be inward looking but must eventually face the power of the state. Forman notes that this issue is also a weakness in Marcuse's own work, as the rejection of formal leadership and organization ultimately makes social movements vulnerable to isolation (2013, pp. 526-527). Though the Occupiers established alter-political methods to avoid co-optation, the lack of organization ultimately made the movement vulnerable to this same threat. For example, political elites incorporated some of the demands of the movement into the electoral agenda to serve their own ends, without any formal recognition or engagement with the movement itself (Ibid., p. 527).

Though Forman correlates this weakness with Marcuse's own work, it should be noted that Marcuse did recognize the need for social movements to proliferate outside of their own sphere of influence. On the topic of the student movements fifty years ago, Marcuse asserted that "[i]f the student opposition remains isolated and does not succeed in breaking out of its own limited sphere, if it does not succeed in mobilizing social strata that really will play a decisive role […]" then it "can only play an accessory role" (as quoted in Marcuse, 2013, p. 489). Arguably, Marcuse would similarly claim that OWS simply did not go far enough in establishing and mobilizing a truly revolutionary force. Furthermore, the movement

may not have had the theoretical backing to understand and exploit the structural basis of capitalism, and was therefore, unable to articulate a coherent narrative to be a real threat (Froman, 2013, p. 526). Nonetheless, the question over what constitutes a revolutionary force remains an unresolved tension within Marcuse's work itself.

Qualitative Change Without a Revolutionary Subject?

As previously discussed, Marcuse was forced to dismiss the working class as the revolutionary vanguard. Instead, he turned to marginalized groups that had not yet been fully integrated within the establishment. Nonetheless, the fact remains that radical student groups, Occupiers, ethnic minorities, or other marginalized groups, "do not occupy a decisive place in the productive process and for this reason cannot be considered revolutionary forces from the viewpoint of Marxian theory – at least not without allies" (Marcuse, as quoted in Marcuse, 2013, p. 485). In other words, though such groups can be considered radical, and their actions may be subversive, they cannot be considered revolutionary subjects on their own. None of the oppositional forces in modern society have the "mass basis" to be the revolutionary group on which Marcuse could rely (Marcuse, 2013, p. 489). As a result, the pressing question remains whether qualitative change is possible without this vanguard force. However, be this as it may, to use Marcuse's own words, even if qualitative change cannot rely on the leadership of a revolutionary class, the presence of radical groups today still offers "a ferment of hope," as "it testifies to the truth of the alternative – the real need, and the real possibility of a free society" (1969, p. 60). Therefore, though current social movements may have yet to realize any truly revolutionary potential, they do attest to the evident cracks within one-dimensional society.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper was to apply Marcuse's critical thought to modern social movements. In this regard, it was argued that Marcuse offers a critical lens to analyze the constrained environment in which social movements must operate. It is evident that the one-dimensional thought propagated by liberal capitalism severely limits the space for dissenting views. Capitalism, in particular, imposes false needs onto society, which are geared to the logic of capital and material consumption. So long as these needs are satisfied, people are left with a false sense of freedom. Consequently, dissent is questionable, as it would require the revocation of the comforts provided for by the "good life." Liberalism further enforces a one-dimensional paradigm of operational politics, so that any thoughts and actions deemed incompatible with the system are subsequently banished from the political sphere. As a result, dissenting voices and actions are readily denounced as illegitimate or even as terrorism.

However, despite his obvious pessimism, Marcuse was still committed to pairing theory with practice in order to generate revolutionary potential. Such potential is notable in several of the social movements that have surfaced within the twenty-first century. Within this scope, it was argued that OWS had several correlations with Marcusian thought, as the Occupiers sought to create new subjectivities in negation to the current order. However, it was further argued that OWS's strategy failed to attack the structural basis of capitalism and consequently had no lasting impact. As a result, Marcuse would arguably acknowledge the Occupiers' efforts but would further recognize that OWS failed to mobilize a revolutionary force. On this front, the composition of a revolutionary force remains a point of tension within Marcuse's work itself. Ultimately, Marcuse was never able to find an oppositional force with the necessary mass basis to serve such ends. Though social movements like OWS have yet to exploit the revolutionary potential present in the contradictions of society, they nonetheless speak to a growing social unrest, which serves to crack the paradigm of one-dimensional thought. Consequently, though the real impact of social movements must be weighed with a suitable amount of reserve, the potential for qualitative change need not be completely hopeless.

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