

# The Concept of Revolutionary Subject in Marcuse's Thought

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*Abstract:* In the last period of Marcuse's life and work, actual historical trends called into question the presumed interest of the working class for their own, but also universal human emancipation. The groups which in the original Marx's theory had almost no importance, like different marginal groups, especially student movement, are able to generate subversive awareness and to enforce revolutionary engagement of working class. Student movement was the first movement that imagined the construction of socialism as a qualitatively different society, away from the fetishism of the productive forces. Marcuse thought that the holders of rebellion against the capitalist system recruited from different social classes, and not only from the "blue collar", i.e. traditionally conceived working class. In that process, the working class will not have an initial role, since its transformation also led to the integration in the existing order. Existing total domination can be demolished only by total opposition and negation, precisely because it affects and endangers the entire community, and not only the working class. In those years, Marcuse's works abound in theoretical and practical enthusiasm.

*Key-Words:* revolutionary subject, working class, marginal groups, student movement, socialism, liberation, human needs, freedom, nature, utopia, art, repression

## 1 Introduction

Marx's doctrine, which is further developed within the Frankfurt School, emphasizes the importance of historical content of philosophical concepts, or dialectic mediation between theory and social experience - social experience should be guided by emancipatory interests of theory, while trends in historical and social reality should have retroactive influence on the theoretical hypotheses and estimates. Besides this, Herbert Marcuse follows Marx's idea that (working) class in the true sense is constituted only when it becomes "for itself", that is, when starts the revolutionary struggle against opposite class.

## 2 The Fading of Working Class as Revolutionary Subject

From this point of view, actual historical trends called into question the presumed interest of the working class for their own, but also universal human emancipation. The problem was that workers, in the last period of Marcuse's life and thought, didn't not show revolutionary tendencies anymore, so his critical analysis confronted with

absence of a recognizable revolutionary subject. Because the workers are revolutionary subject only "by themselves", in their social being, but not "for themselves", in their (class) consciousness, similar to the general situation in which there is "absence of the subjective necessity of a radical transformation whose objective necessity becomes ever more flagrant" [1], the possible revolution itself will be a completely different project than it was for Marx.

"The proletariat remained complacent and even supportive of their own oppression because modern industrial society psychologically suppresses and controls the inner nature of individuals to a much larger extent than Marx could have ever predicted... Each person's genuine needs and interests, or 'true class consciousness', are, explains Marcuse, homogenized when the proletariat enjoy the same television program and visit the same resort places as the bosses...The needs and satisfactions that serve the preservation of the Establishment are acquiesced to by all members of society, thus becoming their false class consciousness, which blind the masses to the possibilities of a better life" [11].

### 3 Marginal Groups and Outsiders as Potentially Revolutionary

The groups which in the original Marx's theory had almost no importance, nor is it necessary to have, for example, the famous marginal groups such as students, oppressed racial and ethnic minorities, women, civil initiatives, etc., will have to be counted [1]. These groups, in spite of his social being and just because of that (as they remain outside the system of material production, which reproduces the relation of domination), are able to generate subversive awareness and to enforce revolutionary engagement of working class. Marcuse called them anticipative groups that can act as catalysts [2]. Therefore, this does not mean that Marcuse, as some of his critics thought, is completely giving up on the revolutionary role of the working class. He keeps saying that workers remain the main subject of revolutionary change, though still only potential, as long as they occupying a central position in the system of material production, and that is still the case, despite all the changes within the capitalist system [4].

Marcuse therefore quite explicitly refers to outsiders, those who remain outside the system, since it requires very one-dimensional and totalitarian nature of the system: "On this ground, the transcending political forces within society are arrested, and qualitative change appears possible only as a change from without" [6]; "Underneath the conservative popular base is the substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployable. They exist outside the democratic process; their life is the most immediate and the most real need for ending intolerable conditions and institutions. Thus their opposition is revolutionary even if their consciousness is not. Their opposition hits the system from without and is therefore not deflected by the system; it is an elementary force which violates the rules of the game and, in doing so, reveals it as a rigged game...The fact that they start refusing to play the game may be the fact which marks the beginning of the end of a period" [6]. It seemed that the actors of social change were found again, and it just needed to wait historically favorable moment for their engagement, when their conscience, and not only their being, become a revolutionary.

### 4 The Importance of Student Movement

Marcuse attaches great importance to the student movement, and it is an affirmative attitude toward

this movement, contrary to Horkheimer and Adorno, what marks the last period of his work. An extraordinary place of the student movement is based on the fact that it made aware of real possibilities which in traditional Marxism were taboo or being repressed. This was the first movement that imagined the construction of socialism as a qualitatively different society, away from the fetishism of the productive forces [2]. "Many had serious, urgent concerns about the U.S. and the world. The mission statement of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), an organization influential during the sixties, expressed their unease: 'We are the people of this generation, bred in at least modest comfort, housed now in universities, looking uncomfortably to the world we inherit'. Discomfort stemmed from the belief that modern economic and technological achievements were betraying their initial utopian promises, that goals of social and economic equality and individual fulfillment were being replaced with those of material consumption and individual accumulation" [11]. Thus Marcuse says: "We all know that truism, but only the student of rebellion has articulated it in theory and practice, has 'incorporated' the idea that the revolution, from the beginning, must build a qualitatively and not only quantitatively different society. The student movement has articulated what, in an abstract way, has been known to all of us, namely, that socialism is first of all a new form of human existence" [3].

### 5 The Necessity of Transformation of Human Needs and Sensibility

Marcuse will constantly emphasize the idea that socialism is a qualitatively different society than the existing one, and not just its quantity beat, in sense of a greater development of the productive forces and the standard of living, by which we still remain within the imperatives imposed by the existing reality principle. Even changing the dominant social relations will not lead itself to a new form of human existence, as long as individuals continue to be under the rule of repressive needs. And these new, free needs are to be effective during the revolutionary transformation itself.

Therefore, "Marcuse claims that the sensibility of man as the basis of social revolution goes back to Fourier and Marx. He argues that many social revolutions fail because they tend to replace one ruling class with another. They fail to transform the sensibility of persons. These movements are thus, immature. While these movements are immature in

terms of productive forces, material and intellectual, Marcuse claims: ‘But one aspect of this immaturity is precisely the suppression, and atrophy, of the roots of liberation in the instinctual structures of the individuals, and consequently, in their sensibility’. Marcuse was always aware of our instinctual needs and the ways in which these needs are repressed and altered by the organization of society. The failed revolutions discussed by Marcuse failed because they attempt change at a very superficial level. They attempted to change society without recognizing the need to change our distorted sensibility” [12].

So qualitatively new society implies a completely new quality of human existence, radically changed structure of needs, precisely because the existing dominance is largely rooted in the instincts and needs of individuals. Namely, “why we need revolution if we do not get a new man?” [2]. And since “one cannot at present be human”, revolution is, in stricter terms, the appearance of man in general, not just a “new man”. Marcuse thus talked about “biological foundation for socialism” [4]. Marcuse again emphasizes “aesthetic-erotic” qualities as holders of emancipation within the human “nature” [1:68]. Unobstructed development of life instinct is not a threat to civilization, as Freud thought, but quite the contrary, it is the last and only chance for its preservation. Man's creation (as in the example of art) and solidarity, as a precondition for the existence and maintenance of the human community, are based on it. The community cannot maintain by constant stimulation of “competitive performances, by perpetuation of “natural war of all against all”, but only through “new relationships that would be the result of a ‘biological’ solidarity in work and purpose, expressive of a true harmony between social and individual needs and goals, between recognized necessity and free development - the exact opposite of the administered and enforced harmony organized in the advanced capitalist (and socialist?) countries” [4:88]. “This means that, although there appears to be harmony between society and individuals’ desires, this is only a ‘false harmony’: in such a society there is ultimately no room to satisfy individuals’ own necessities and desires. What is more, through the ‘repressive desublimation’ exerted upon individuals, any kind of resistance against such domination is absorbed by the system and ends up contributing to the dynamism of capitalism” [13].

## 6 Radical Enlighten as Crucial Task of Political Practice

Marcuse once again develops the thesis that the liberation of nature is inseparable from the liberation of the mind, since the mind and nature are equally deformed in a society that reproduces relations of domination. So, “work on the development of consciousness, if you like, this idealistic deviation, is to be in fact one of the chief tasks of materialism today, of revolutionary materialism” [1:74]. Marcuse in this way is trying to break through the dialectic of domination - because it is based on the absence of social awareness about its irrationality and repression, liberation assumes the development of consciousness of the need for freedom, which was suppressed under inflation of false consciousness of freedom. Therefore, this false consciousness of freedom can unmask only by improving awareness of the falsity of the existing freedom, of the irrationality of its “rationality”. “Radical enlighten” becomes crucial task of political practice. Enlighten takes form of one revolutionary practice that is carried out in all the spheres of social life, which can produce cracks in the existing order. It needs to destroy a mystical form of the existing society, its illusory unity of contradictions, demonstrating their continued existence and intensification. Self-determination of social life thus assumes getting the autonomy of individual and social consciousness, freeing the mind from its alliance with the interests of domination and recognition of its critical activities.

## 7 Changing the Relationship Toward Nature

Marcuse thought that the development of (new) consciousness, which is to encourage the radical social change, would retroactive led to transformation of entire man's individual and social existence, to fundamentally different relationship with nature, and even a change in the structure of science and technology, which existing forms were considered as immutable and inevitable. It would lead to the emancipation of human senses, which are in their existing use essentially crippled; thereby nature would emerge as a subject of freedom and knowledge released from interests of domination and exploitation. Changed relationship with nature allows “new quality” of human freedom, which is now manifested in the “creative receptivity”, not in a “repressive productivity”. On the other hand, knowing would not be directed to mastery and oppression of nature, but to discover its immanent

forms. “If we can do everything with nature and society, if we can do everything with man and things – why can one not make them the subject-object in a pacified world, in a non-aggressive aesthetic environment? The know-how is there. The instruments and the materials are there for the construction of such an environment, social and natural, in which the unsublimated life instincts would redirect the development of human needs and faculties, would redirect technical progress” [7]. Marcuse concludes “this would mean experimenting with possibilities of liberating and pacifying human existence - the idea of a convergence not only of technology and art but also of work and play; the idea of a possible artistic formation of the life world” [7]. The idea of “society as a work of art” [7] thus includes the idea of unity of work and play, necessity and freedom, purpose and self-purpose, which represents a radical alternative to the existing organization of work.

## 8 The “Great Refusal” and Possibility of Revolution

Marcuse again points out that objective possibilities of qualitatively new individual and social existence are developed in the existing reality. Preconditions for the creation of these alternative forms of material and spiritual production are in the scientific and technical progress, despite its servitude to the interests of domination. “The question ‘For how much longer?’ cannot be answered rationally: theory is not prophecy. Nonetheless, it remains true (and the facts point in the general direction) that capitalism produces its own gravediggers...Just as capitalist progress itself creates the objective conditions for its own abolition (structural unemployment, saturation of the market, inflation, intracapitalist conflicts, competition with communism...), so it creates the subjective conditions as well” [9]. This statement suggests that not only objective possibilities of liberation are presenting, but the factor that is also important for a revolutionary overturn, subversive consciousness itself.

At the end of the 60s, revolt against the capitalist system is reaching a culmination - the new social movements that emphasized alternative to existing social practices and dominant values, were created. The frustrating tone from the end of “One-Dimensional Man” gives way to the optimistic belief in radical change in the present, based on a stronger resistance to capitalist domination and destruction. In those years, Marcuse’s works abound

in theoretical and practical enthusiasm, and he, in spite of his age, attend all the important events which promised revolution, and is active in educating the rebel groups. The following quotes show why Marcuse at that time became the most important and the most popular philosophical figures among opposition groups, particularly the student youth: “Yet the refusal itself *is* also reality—very real are the young who have no more patience, who have, with their own bodies and minds, experienced the horrors and the oppressive comforts of the given reality; real are the ghettos and their spokesmen; real are the forces of liberation all over the globe, East and West; First, Second, and Third Worlds” [7]; “Such a system is not immune. It is already defending itself against opposition, even that of intellectuals, in all corners of the world. And even if we see no transformation, we must fight on. We must resist if we still want to live as human beings, to work and be happy. In alliance with the system we can no longer do so” [7]; “Now, however, this threatening homogeneity has been loosening up, and an alternative is beginning to break into the repressive continuum. This alternative is not so much a different road to socialism as an emergence of different goals and values, different aspirations in the men and women who resist and deny the massive exploitative power of corporate capitalism even in its most comfortable and liberal realizations. The Great Refusal takes a variety of forms. In Vietnam, in Cuba, in China, a revolution is being defended and driven forward which struggles to eschew the bureaucratic administration of socialism. The guerrilla forces in Latin America seem to be animated by that same subversive impulse: liberation. At the same time, the apparently impregnable economic fortress of corporate capitalism shows signs of mounting strain: it seems that even the United States cannot indefinitely deliver its goods - guns and butter, napalm and color tv. The ghetto populations may well become the first mass basis of revolt (though not of revolution). The student opposition is spreading in the old socialist as well as capitalist countries. In France, it has for the first time challenged the full force of the regime and recaptured, for a short moment, the libertarian power of the red and the black flags; moreover, it has demonstrated the prospects for an enlarged basis. The temporary suppression of the rebellion will not reverse the trend” [4]; “It is the appearance indeed of new instinctual needs and values. This experience is there. There is a new sensibility against efficient and insane reasonableness. There is the refusal to play the rules of a rigid game, a game which one knows is rigid

from the beginning, and the revolt against the compulsive cleanliness of puritan morality and the aggression bred by this puritan morality as we see it today in Vietnam among other things...I believe I am not being too optimistic - I have not in general the reputation of being too optimistic - when I say that we can already see the signs, not only that *They* are getting frightened and worried but that there are far more concrete, far more tangible manifestations of the essential weakness of the system. Therefore, let us continue with whatever we can - no illusions, but even more, no defeatism" [9].

Marcuse thus speaks of the "end of utopia", the real possibility of emancipation that breaks the status quo, so the liberation is no longer wishful thinking and unrealistic illusion. Students' slogan from Paris "Be realistic: Demand the impossible!" is the best illustration of this thesis. What powers of preservation of status quo called "impossible" (utopia) largely has become a reality, and because of that their repression became stronger, more direct and more comprehensive. Optimism reached its highest point when the addressee to whom is attributed the utopian dimension is completely reversed, when only existing society is called "utopian", or its faith that it can keep the dominant social relations. Only that is what is truly impossible and illusory, utopianism in its pure form.

## 9 "Preventive Counterrevolution"

However, it turned out that the current system is strong enough to counter this growing alternative, and that the revolution is (still) not present. After failing to attempt radical change of existing order, Marcuse concludes "the system is still capable of 'managing' by virtue of its economic and military power, the aggravating conflicts within and outside its dominion" [5]. However, just because of that, the violent nature of the dominant order increases, and it rejects its democratic veil and applies direct and brutal physical force against the Enemy: "The Enemy is inside and outside, and the internal enemy are its own capabilities that this system hushes" [10]; "If the security of the nation now demands military, economic, and 'technical' intervention, where indigenous ruling groups are not doing the job of liquidating popular liberation movements, it is because the system is no longer capable of reproducing itself by virtue of its own economic mechanism. This task is to be performed by state which is faced, in the international arena, with a militant opposition 'from below' that, in turn, sparks the opposition in the metropolis...And the power structure is no longer 'sublimated' in the style of a

liberalistic culture, no longer even hypocritical (thus retaining at least the "formalities", the shell of dignity), but brutal, throwing off all pretensions of truth and justice" [5].

The situation in which repression becomes increasingly desublimated, so getting naked form of force against the opposition political movements in the internal and external plane, along with the lack of revolutionary potential in the present, leads Marcuse to the idea of "preventive counterrevolution". The system, taught by frequent uprisings and threats of revolution, despite their lack of power to change the ruling order, is organized as a counterrevolution - it is aimed at the destruction of the very assumptions of revolution, removing any possibility of its occurrence. Marcuse does not hesitate to speak of the fascist potential of the existing order; for him, fascism is still a real threat, extreme possibility of capitalist development which resurrection cannot be completely excluded. Faced with this escalating repression, the strategy of the left can be only "educational and primarily defensive". The main task of the left is radical enlighten, the formation of revolutionary consciousness which proved that it is not sufficiently developed. Thus, enlighten confronts mindless force of reality, violence that repressive apparatus of a "second nature" carries out against individuals. The revolution is still a matter of the future, and now it is necessary to prepare the conditions for its emergence, to protect its existing possibilities, that forces of counterrevolution want to eradicate. Marcuse therefore points out that, unfortunately, the fight against the fascist tendencies of the current system takes place, since general crisis of capitalism does not mean its necessary breakdown and also the inevitable transition to socialism, but the state of barbarism became a real possibility of the existing.

## 10 The Defense of Utopia

So, "as a dialectical thinker Marcuse was always sensitive to the possibilities for social change while at the same time he was very aware of the impediments to social change. This has made reading Marcuse difficult for some who would like to make a decisive claim about the direction in which our society is headed. Marcuse's analysis of social change does not make it possible for one to make a decisive claim about the direction in which society is headed but it does make one aware of the potential for change and the potential for further repression. With this awareness one is in a better position to develop a strategy for social change.

Hence, Marcuse never gives in to the paralysis of pessimism or the opiate effect of blind optimism” [12].

Despite the absence of the expected revolution, Marcuse remained unfaltering: “I still believe in the power of negativity and that we always come soon enough to the positive” [1]. Marcuse was aware that ruling cliques are constantly working to denounce such ideas. However, advocating the idea of “society as a work of art”, he once again shows his “stubbornness” and persistence: “*The utopian idea of an aesthetic reality must be defended even in the face of ridicule, which it must necessarily evoke today.* For it may well indicate the qualitative difference between freedom and the prevailing order” [7]. Indeed, it seems that only “blindness” for “reality” of the existing, our non-acceptance of its power and refusal to be fascinated by its comfort, allows us to still see the freedom and truly understand the reality.

## 11 Conclusion

In the last period of his thought, Marcuse often said that the holders of rebellion against the capitalist system recruited from different social classes, and not only from the “blue collar”, i.e. traditionally conceived working class. In that process, the working class will not have an initial role, since its transformation also led to the integration in the existing order. Thus Marcuse emphasizes that the working class should not be fetishised, and that it must first change itself in order to become a force acting towards the transition to socialism. Existing total domination can be demolished only by total opposition and negation, precisely because it affects and endangers the entire community, and not only the working class.

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