

Marcuse and the Frankfurt School: Understanding the Function of Critique and His Critique of Society

Allison Cruyff V F. Ladero

*Graduate School, University of Santo Tomas and
History and Social Sciences Department,
Jose Rizal University*

Abstract

This paper focuses on Herbert Marcuse's notion of critique or negative thinking in relation to evoking possibilities for social change. This discussion is necessary since critique is indicative of Marcuse's commitment to the possibility of radically transforming society. As Marcuse argues, time and again, the possibilities for social change and liberation remain open amidst the growing power and control of the capitalist system. It is here that I argue that Marcuse's critique of advanced industrial society remains integral and relevant in understanding the contradictions seen today in several parts of contemporary society, which can be a starting point for evoking possibilities for social change today. But that secondly, I argue, echoing Marcuse, that critique has to be recovered as a necessary preliminary step for possibilities for social change to be evoked. Indeed, there must be a discussion on the existing intolerable conditions to expose the contradictions that signal the need for an alternative in the first place.

Keywords: capitalism, critical theory, negative thinking, one-dimensionality, social change

Introduction

This paper centers on Herbert Marcuse's notion of critique or negative thinking in relation to evoking possibilities for social change. This discussion is necessary since critique is indicative of Marcuse's commitment to the possibility of radically transforming society. Throughout Marcuse's writings, he has actively vilified the capitalist system and its repressive tendencies that go unnoticed in society. For him, the subtle control and repression of the individual consciousness accounts for the one-dimensionality of man, so much so that any pursuit for social change or an alternative society is easily blocked and suppressed. As a corollary, the capitalist structure succeeds in maintaining an administered society made up of individuals bereft of their critical impulse. This corrodes the need for social change as more and more individuals are subsumed by the capitalist system to the point of conforming to its values, behavior, ideals, and logic. However, as Marcuse argues, time and again, the possibilities for social change and liberation remain open amidst the growing power and control of the capitalist system. It is here that I argue that Marcuse's critique of advanced industrial society remains integral and relevant in understanding the contradictions seen today in several parts of contemporary society, which can be a starting point for evoking possibilities for social change

today. But that secondly, I argue, echoing Marcuse, that critique has to be recovered as a necessary preliminary step for possibilities for social change to be evoked. Indeed, there must be a discussion on the existing intolerable conditions in order to expose the contradictions that signal the need for an alternative in the first place. As a caveat, this paper does not claim to offer a grand solution to the pressing problems at present. It simply seeks to shed light on the contemporary relevance of Marcuse's critique of capitalism and the possibilities for social change within such society by drawing on the function of critique.

In showing Marcuse's notion of critique concerning the attempt to evoke possibilities for social change, I discuss three key points. Firstly, I begin by briefly outlining Marcuse's involvement in the Frankfurt School Institute for Social Research within the programmatic notion of their then director, Max Horkheimer. With this, the paper is able to contextualize the normative claims of Critical Theory, which Marcuse himself adhered to. This will also enable us to understand Marcuse's pronounced use of dialectical reason against the dominance of positivism in advanced industrial society, which Critical Theory was critical of. Further, this section will help contextualize Marcuse's experience in the United States and involvement with the New Left, which renders a useful account of his distinct approach to critical theory. Secondly, I proceed to Marcuse's critique of late capitalism. Here, I present Marcuse's critical analysis of the totalitarian tendency of advanced industrial societies as technological rationality takes over the society and leaves the individual conforming to the system. Emphasized is the idea that as technical progress grows and intensifies, the individual's critical impulse also concurrently declines, a relationship that for Marcuse is not recognized by the masses as they have become self-indulgent with the system's commodities. As an upshot, the individual loses sight of any alternative and the pursuit for true liberation and happiness, which only strengthens the system of domination and repression. For these to be recognized by the individual, his critical potential has to be retrieved. Finally, I present a synoptic outline of Marcuse's notion of critique or negative thinking. It will briefly present Hegel's concept of the dialectic, which Marcuse was heavily influenced by, to at least establish the thrust of negative thinking. I will then relate this concept to evoking possibilities for social change, which Marcuse himself committed to. For sure, this discussion can only cover so much, but it attempts to express nonetheless the salient points that can elucidate the point of this paper.

Interestingly, Herbert Marcuse, while not as popular anymore as Adorno, Habermas, Deleuze, Zizek, and others in intellectual and philosophy circles today, was once recognized as the most important philosopher of the 60s as a result of his public support to the various areas of the New Left – student protests, the anti-war movement, etc. His fame was simply transitory, and “his work is now out of fashion and virtually unread by students, activists, and academics, save for the narrow circle of those who work and teach in the tradition of the Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School.”¹ It is interesting to note, however, that his critical analysis of advanced industrial society continues to ring true today in the contemporary world. However, before discussing the framework of his critique of advanced industrial society, it should be noted that as a social theorist, he was tremendously influenced by the Frankfurt School Style Critical Theory. Thus, it is fundamental to consider, first, his involvement in the Frankfurt School to at least briefly contextualize his critical outlook toward advanced industrial society. So, in the next

¹ Stanley Aronowitz, “The Unknown Herbert Marcuse,” *Social Text*, no. 58 (1999): 133.

section, we turn to a discussion on Marcuse's involvement in it, especially under Max Horkheimer's programmatic notion of critical theory.

Marcuse and the Frankfurt School Style Critical Theory

Before Marcuse rose to prominence as a philosopher, social theorist, activist, and "Father of the New Left" in the 60s and 70s, he was already a member of a group of intellectuals based in Frankfurt, Germany called the Institute for Social Research. The institute is influential in producing what is now known as the Frankfurt School Style Critical Theory, which includes prominent intellectuals, such as Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse himself, Jurgen Habermas, Axel Honneth, among others. Apparently, it has a long history, but in the interest of contextualizing Marcuse's involvement in it, we will simply focus on its basic framework from the 1930s onwards under the directorship of Max Horkheimer. More specifically, in my modest attempt, I will outline Max Horkheimer's programmatic notion of Critical Theory and link that to a general yet adequate understanding of Marcuse's project. This will help set the tone for the thesis's reconstruction of Marcuse's activist model of critical theory.

Considered as the "Father of the Frankfurt School," Max Horkheimer's directorship in the Institute for Social Research began in 1930 and is considered to be the Institute's "period of greatest productivity, all the more when seen in the context of the emigration and cultural disorientation that soon followed."² His approach as director was quite different from his predecessors. Broadly speaking, whereas his predecessors were more attuned to scientific or empirical Marxism, Horkheimer sought to make it more interdisciplinary by integrating various disciplines, such as economics, sociology, history, psychology, philosophy, etc.³ This would then create a theory that is eclectic and open to the social sciences as well as to the various philosophical traditions apart from Marxism.

Now, the term "critical theory" was first used by Max Horkheimer in his 1937 essay titled "Traditional and Critical Theory."⁴ In it, he distinguishes traditional from critical theory in its approach in viewing and studying society. He says that traditional theory is closely related to the natural and social sciences, which render more value to closed systems and traditions.⁵ Put simply, they have the propensity to be rigid and universal to the extent of being exclusionary to other modes of thought. Mathematical systems, for instance, is at the core of traditional theory. It speaks the language of metrics, calculations, universalization. Further, with regard to philosophical traditions, it tends to consider them as fixed, infallible, and inviolable. This seems to be the trend, for instance, with scientific Marxism, Catersianism, Scholasticism, and others.

It was Horkheimer's impression that this way of thinking or attitude toward research be reevaluated. He thought that such an approach in thinking about society and traditions should be perceived with limitations and open to legitimate criticisms. Apparently, one of his primary concerns with Traditional Theory is its lack of attention to other important dimensions in knowledge formation. He felt that it was necessary to give primacy this time to a more eclectic

² Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (University of California Press, 1973), 25.

³ Paolo Bolanos, "What Is Critical Theory? Max Horkheimer and the Makings of the Frankfurt School Tradition," *Mabini Review* 2, no. 1 (2013): 4.

⁴ Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, trans. Matthew J. O'Connell (New York: Continuum, 1989).

⁵ *Ibid.*, 190.

approach that does not neglect, for instance, the historical and social bases of knowledge development. As Martin Jay puts it, “Critical Theory was expressed through a series of critiques of other thinkers and philosophical traditions.”⁶ It is important to note then that critical theory centers on “the integration of philosophy and social critique” as it proceeds to critically appraise the current conditions as well as the existing philosophical traditions.⁷ To be sure, it places high regard toward the material base of life, which philosophical traditions tend to berate, or that the natural sciences deliberately avoid engaging in with a critical outlook.

As we can see, Max Horkheimer and his colleagues turned to a critical social theory that considered the actual material conditions of society from a plethora of vantage points with the help of the disciplines mentioned above. Perhaps, it is no coincidence that this became the focus of the Frankfurt School considering the zeitgeist of such period. As mentioned, Horkheimer became the director in the 1930s, also the time when the National Socialist Party of Germany was gaining power and influence. Thus, we can glean that the historical moment was crucial in the formation of their critical analyses of society. With the prevalent atrocities and violence of the time, they witnessed the decline of society where totalitarian tendencies ravaged the life of many individuals and altered their way of life. With such firsthand experience and with the lack of a general critical stance toward such a reality, they focused on the dimensions that were outside the scope of traditional theory.

To ground this, it is helpful to look into the normative claims or assumptions of Critical Theory that Max Horkheimer himself laid out. To briefly sketch it, I refer to Bolanos’s essay titled “What is Critical Theory? Max Horkheimer and the Makings of the Frankfurt School Tradition” as he explains and shows a clear and schematic outline of such normative assumptions. In it, he mentions three normative claims that Horkheimer frames in “Traditional and Critical Theory”: “1) the anthropological turn, 2) man’s emancipation from slavery and the abolition of social injustice and 3) the critical perception or description of tensions that exist immanently within societal systems, resulting in a shift from a class-based critique to a kind of social critique that goes beyond any social class.”⁸

Without going into too much detail, let us consider them one by one. Firstly, the anthropological turn suggests encompassing various factors such as social, psychological, cultural, political, and the like as “grounds for critical analyses.”⁹ To reiterate, as opposed to the approach of traditional theory, for example, that looks past these dimensions in lieu of mathematical and scientific aspects of understanding the society, critical theory gives a considerable emphasis on those aspects that condition the material life of man and his society. Meanwhile, the second assumption pertains to the social function of philosophy. Unlike the abstract thinking common in metaphysical thought and classical philosophy in general, critical theory considers the material conditions in society that engender and sustain, for example, slavery, oppression, and the like. It attempts to critique such conditions in the spirit of freedom, justice, inter alia. This well establishes the idea that philosophy has a social function, that it is capable of engaging with real and concrete conditions. Finally, the third assumption denotes that the liberation introduced in the latter assumption is not only confined within the conventional

⁶ Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination*, 41.

⁷ Bolanos, “What Is Critical Theory? Max Horkheimer and the Makings of the Frankfurt School Tradition,” 5.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 6

⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

Marxist view of the proletariat as the sole oppressed group. Rather, it suggests that oppression happens everywhere and to anyone regardless of class. It can happen to homosexuals, women, religious individuals, people of color, and other minorities, which implies that liberation, justice, and other ideals related to such are not exclusive to the proletariat.

Guided by such normative assumptions, the critical theorists under Horkheimer produced a number of significant works that are now considered classics. Among these are Horkheimer's "Traditional and Critical Theory," Adorno's *Negative Dialectics*,¹⁰ the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*¹¹ which they both co-authored, and Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man*.¹² These works embody the characteristic features of their critique of society, which predominantly involve a critique of ideology. But such focus would soon be replaced as later generations of the Frankfurt School propound other critical inquiries about society, such as the pragmatics of communicative action in Habermas and Axel Honneth's theory of recognition – a discussion we will have to save for some other time.

Now, having established a brief account of Horkheimer's programmatic notion of Critical Theory, let us turn to Marcuse as a critical theorist. To begin with, he was among the brilliant intellectual architects of Critical Theory along with Horkheimer, Adorno, Pollock, Lowenthal, Fromm, and Neuman. Collectively, they are considered the first generation critical theorists. Marcuse was added to the institute in 1933 and was immediately assigned to the office in Geneva. According to Douglas Kellner, Marcuse "became deeply involved in their interdisciplinary projects which included working out a model for critical social theory, developing a theory of the new stage of state and monopoly capitalism, articulating the relationships between philosophy, social theory, and cultural criticism, and providing a systematic analysis and critique of German fascism."¹³

Unfortunately, with Hitler's rise in power, the Institute had to move to New York City in 1935, where they joined Columbia University. This led Marcuse, Horkheimer, Adorno, Lowenthal, Pollock, and others to emigrate to the US. Soon after, as the threat of Nazism declined, Horkheimer, Adorno, and others returned to West Germany to re-establish the institute while Marcuse remained in the US. It was in the US that Marcuse would publish several works and become very productive as a scholar and professor. Like his colleagues, he engaged in a dialectical understanding of Marxism. He produced various works that explain Marxist principles tied with the current conditions of his time. His book *Reason and Revolution*¹⁴, for instance, traces the Hegelian roots of Marx and shows the dialectical nature of society. Interestingly, the book then went on to be regarded as the first systematic and organized work on Hegel and Marx in the English language.

At this point, it is important to note that while Marcuse shared so much of his colleagues' critique and critical analysis of society, he took a slight pivot with his project as a Critical Theorist. To be sure, his model of critical theory, albeit in consonance with most of Adorno and

¹⁰ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973).

¹¹ Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noeri, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

¹² Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

¹³ Douglas Kellner, "Herbert Marcuse," *Illuminations: The Critical Theory Project*, <https://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/Illumina%20Folder/kell12.htm>, accessed February 6, 2021.

¹⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, 2nd edition with supplementary chapter (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955), 123.

Horkheimer's analyses, incorporated other facets in society that were integral in his writings. In fact, in *One-Dimensional Man*'s Introduction to the Second Edition, Douglas Kellner writes that two tendencies emerged specifically in the 1940s within Critical Theory: "(1) the philosophical-cultural analysis of the trends of Western civilization being developed by Horkheimer and Adorno in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and (2) the more practical-political development of Critical Theory as a theory of social change proposed by Marcuse and Neuman."¹⁵ As we can see, Marcuse showed more interest in the hope of attaining a better society than what the status quo offers. As such, it was apparent that he was both critical and hopeful as a critical theorist in contrast to his other colleagues.

Without going in-depth into the intellectual history of Marcuse's works, it is apparent that his project has always been anchored on the liberation of man from injustice and domination and the greater schema of social change. While he was pessimistic in his analyses much like his colleagues, he nevertheless believed in the possibility of radically transforming society for the better. His critique of advanced industrial society and its tendency to be totalitarian, for example, was coupled with some insights on possible alternatives. His famous works articulated the possibility of a non-repressive society as seen, for instance, in *Eros and Civilization*,¹⁶ a great work that became famous because of the unconventional pairing of Marx's and Freud's ideas. He infused their theories and explored the ways in which a possible alternative could be considered. By synthesizing aspects of both thinkers' ideas, he articulates the possibility of achieving a better future. But it was his magnum opus, *One-Dimensional Man*, that would solidify his strong predilection toward the need for social change as a critical theorist in a strange manner, that is, he present two contradictory theses. On the one side, he argued very critically against the perils of technological advancement by highlighting its subtle yet strong manipulation in society. Indeed, he was pessimistic in his analysis. Reading the book, one could easily extrapolate that he was cynical of the possibility of change based on the way he described the invincible force of repression and domination. Oddly yet cogently, however, he also believed in the possibility for social change amidst the controls and one-dimensionality which he describes in the book.

Surprisingly, his publication of *One-Dimensional Man* in the 60s led to his fame in the US.¹⁷ He became a well-celebrated public intellectual for not only was he writing about the contradictions in society, but he was also supportive of the social movements that he witnessed at the time. The book was published at the height of activism around the world, especially in the United States and in Europe. It seemed that he was energized by the freedom movements and decided to engage with them. He spoke in rallies, delivered public lectures, associated with many activist groups, such as the student movement and the New Left in general. Moreover, he was also influenced by prominent activists, such as Angela Davis, who used to be his student. All these eventually led to the media calling him the "Father of the New Left," which he did not

¹⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, xxii.

¹⁶ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966). O'Casey, Jeffrey. Philosophy at the Margins: Exploring the Philosophy of Work of the Elderly People in some Remote Areas of Negros Oriental. *Social Ethics Society Journal of Applied Philosophy* Vol. 1 No. 1 (October 2015): 1-22.

¹⁷ Surprisingly because his works, as with the other critical theorists' works, are not as friendly as most easy-to-read books. The strong philosophic tone and language found in his writings, albeit not as esoteric as Horkheimer's or Adorno's, for example, are not as inviting and convenient as one would imagine. One might even speculate on whether or not his readers fully understood his texts. Nonetheless, it appears that the core idea of his works, especially *One-Dimensional Man*, genuinely resonated with radical activists and intellectuals.

indulge in. But at this point, it was clear that Marcuse was inclined to consider activism and the potential of oppressed groups to effect change by attempting to fight the established system in concrete terms.

This approach to critical theory that Marcuse displayed, later on, became a point of disagreement between him, Horkheimer, and Adorno. In the interest of time and space, we will have to forgo the discussion on this for some other time. For now, it should be made clear that Marcuse's social theory and philosophical thought were in consonance and influenced by Horkheimer's programmatic notion of critical theory. Such contextualization tells us that he was from a tradition of critical social theorists who emphasize the value of looking into the material and concrete conditions of society. They did not simply conform to the usual approach of traditional theory in understanding and producing knowledge about the world and the individual. His critique of society, for example, demonstrated the contradictions in an "advanced industrial society," which the masses failed to recognize. Indeed, like his colleagues, he showed a strong critical stance against the pretense of liberal democracies. And as mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, while Marcuse may have been unread by many nowadays, his critique of society remains very useful in understanding the contemporary context. As such, it is important to revisit his critique of advanced industrial society. So, in the next part, we will look at his critique of the irrationality of "rational society."

The Irrationality of Rational Society

Marcuse, along with the other key figures of the first-generation Frankfurt School Critical Theory, wrote extensively on the growing contradiction of advanced industrial society. As we can see, his oeuvre, being chiefly concerned with the emancipation of man from subjugation, foregrounds the irrational character of the society that has been widely accepted. To be sure, he was critical of the contradictory disposition of what is celebrated as technical progress and development. He noticed that the advancements that have made life easier and more comfortable to a certain degree also simultaneously engendered a population and society that are suffering. This, to him, makes no absolute sense if we are to believe that humanity's rationality has gone as far as to improve society which fosters happiness and freedom. Moreover, there is something irrational in a society that claims to be rational when domination and repression are endemic. To understand this, let us take a look at the nuances of his critique.

In advanced industrial societies, a new kind of rationality is established. It underscores a mode of thought that what is rational is whatever that pertains to production, efficiency, profit motive, progress, metrics, and other quantitative improvements. This is the logic of "rational society." As society strives to grow and develop more, it also puts in more effort and value on increasing material quantities and consumption. To be sure, it is considered rational because it can benefit the population in many ways. If we look at the sciences, for example, we can see that medicines for severe illnesses and diseases have been developed that allow individuals to live longer. We have also seen what the very power science and technology can do with the development of weapons of mass destruction that no one has ever seen before. Moreover, a level of automation in various areas, such as communication, transportation, labor, and the like, has been put in place as well. These and more make the so-called advanced industrial society "rational". Indeed, they have changed how society is organized.

While these all sound promising and rational, Marcuse argues that this rationality exhibits totalitarian tendencies. It sounds controversial to say this and Marcuse did get in trouble for using the word “totalitarian” in describing the rationality of the society. But it is important to delineate this kind of totalitarianism from the common notions, such as those that point to the Nazi regime or the Soviet Union. Marcuse claims that totalitarianism is not only confined to the traditional notion of “terroristic political coordination”; it also applies to “non-terroristic economic-technical coordination which operates through the manipulation of needs by vested interests. Moreover, he says: “Not only a specific form of government or party rule makes for totalitarianism, but also a specific system of production and distribution which may well be compatible with a “pluralism” of parties, newspapers, “countervailing powers,” etc.”¹⁸ As markets grow and reach more people, the indoctrination it carries becomes unrecognizable as they become a way of life that the individual enjoys.¹⁹ But very stealthily, it dominates and controls the individual.

In essence, Marcuse criticizes capitalist and liberal democracies that pretend to be free and rational. In the opening chapter of *One-Dimensional Man*, he introduces the idea of the “new forms of social control”. In it, he discusses a kind of control that is quite distinct and subtle in contrast to the traditional controls and manipulation of the past. He says, “A comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a token of technical progress.”²⁰ He claims that this kind of social control is technological in the sense that its ability to expand production, distribution, efficiency to large sums of people is operated by technological advancements, which subtly reorganizes individuals and the society at large. Indeed, with technology, a plethora of goods and services have been delivered at an unprecedented level, which transformed the scarce society into an abundant one. It now became a society that “delivers the goods.”²¹ It appears that life has never been better as the standard of living became more favorable to the masses. Furthermore, it provided more opportunities for the market to expand and reach more individuals as it grew larger through time. Indeed, it is a society that is affluent and abundant in material goods and a society that promotes consumption. But as we will see in the following discussion, all these are rooted in what Marcuse calls technological rationality, which breathes “new forms of social control.”

In “Some Social Implications of Modern Technology,” Marcuse characterizes technological rationality as that which replaces the individual rationality with a mode of thought that “establishes standards of judgments and fosters attitudes which makes men ready to accept and even introcept the dictate of the apparatus.”²² It gives more value and power to machines and what they can do over the individual.²³ According to Marcuse, technological rationality manifests itself in the coming together of the various aspects of society – cultural, political, social, economic – as one “omnipresent system” that absorbs the dimension of alternatives.²⁴ It shapes and imposes values, attitudes, interests, and way of thought on the individual as the individual

¹⁸ Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 15.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 14.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 82.

²² Herbert Marcuse, “Some Social Implications of Modern Technology,” in *Technology, War and Fascism: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, Volume 1*, ed. Douglas Kellner (Routledge, 2004), 44.

²³ Jeffry Ocaj “Technology, Technological Domination, and the Great Refusal: Marcuse’s Critique of the Advanced Industrial Society,” *Kritike: An Online Journal of Philosophy* 4 (November 21, 2010): 58.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 58

becomes reliant on the power of the technical apparatus. In this case, technology, which Marcuse defines as a social process that creates our values and views of what is right and wrong, becomes an instrument for domination.²⁵ This is especially true in capitalism, which appropriates technology for social control, which leads to the decline of the individual.²⁶ Again, as individuals are assimilated into this rationality, they lose sight of their very own rationality and instead conform to the norms and standards set by the technical apparatus. Consequently, it appears as though nothing is wrong with the technical progress and developments being celebrated by capitalist societies. Hence, as an instrument of domination, it has been used for the subordination of the individual.

One of the ways in which individuals under this new form of social control are manipulated is by capitalism's production of "false needs". According to Marcuse, "false needs" are those that social interests "superimpose" upon the individual in "his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice".²⁷ The production and consumption of such needs help the interests of society in general.²⁸ It is important to note that the production of goods and services at high levels has provided a wide array of consumer goods that the individual can choose from. For example, we all feel the need to have a mobile phone. It is something that allows us to communicate faster and easier with others. It helps us in many ways, especially when we have to contact someone instantly. But in its development as a "false need," the intent is no longer just to own a mobile phone for that purpose but to follow the discourse of the system. Once *Apple* releases a new model of iPhone, for example, we are quick to respond to it and are susceptible to changing models as newer ones come in. As a result, the individual becomes tied to this way of thought so that his primary concern is to satisfy that "need" in whatever ways possible. Blinded by such pleasure, "false needs" succeed in repressing the individual in a way that he no longer recognizes any alternative to the system. He becomes too busy enjoying the fancy and shiny products of the market. He is too distracted by the fun spectacle of the entertainment industry, sports, technology, consumer goods, and the like generated by the commercials and advertisements that entice everyone's attention.²⁹ Unbeknownst to him is the idea that beneath the spectacle, they all carry with them prescribed

²⁵ Marcuse argues that technology is "value-neutral" from the beginning. This denotes that it can be used for either good or bad depending on the intent of the one manipulating it. This is interesting because, in contrast, for instance, to his former teacher, Heidegger, and his Frankfurt School colleagues, Adorno and Horkheimer, who do not suggest for the double-sidedness of technology, Marcuse thinks technology can be used either for domination or liberation. For more discussion on this, see Andrew Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 98.; Marcelo Vieta, "Marcuse's 'Transcendent Project' at 50: Post-Technological Rationality for Our Times," *Radical Philosophy Review* 19, no. 1, 2016.; Marcelo Vieta, "Inklings of the Great Refusal: Echoes of Marcuse's Post Technological Rationality Today," In A. Lamas, T. Wolfson, & P. Funke (Eds.), *The Great Refusal: Herbert Marcuse and Contemporary Social Movements* (Pp. 258-282). Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017.

²⁶ Ocay, "Technology, Technological Domination, and the Great Refusal," 57. See also Jeffrey Ocay, "Heidegger, Hegel, Marx: Marcuse and the Theory of Historicity." *Kritike: An Online Journal of Philosophy* 4, no. 1 (2008): 46–64, Jeffrey Ocay "Shifting Pattern and Sophistication of the American Colonial Domination in the Philippines: From Colonialism to Technological Domination," *Silliman Journal* Vol. 55 No. 1 (January-June 2014):117-152, and Jeffrey Ocay, "

²⁷ Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 7.

²⁸ Ocay, "Technology, Technological Domination, and the Great Refusal," 60.

²⁹ Richard C. Box, "Marcuse Was Right: One-Dimensional Society in the Twenty-First Century," *Administrative Theory & Praxis* 33, no. 2 (2011): 173.

values, attitudes, and the like that capture the consumers per se.³⁰ The individual ends up identifying himself in their commodities as he fetishizes them.

With it is a totalitarian tendency that promotes consumerism and overproduction of goods that leave individuals conforming to the standards and values of the system created for its own interests. As we can see, forces of productivity and production stimulate new needs for the masses that seek satisfaction on the market. In return, the masses respond because they benefit from it, that is, their “human needs” are satisfied. Individuals then end up wanting to satisfy their happy consciousness³¹ Since everything is provided, individual thought becomes part of the social system.³²

This kind of logic for Marcuse is problematic. This makes society irrational. He contends that just because society has become technologically progressive and materially abundant does not automatically mean it is just and rational. Yes, it is able to provide for its people, but it also cultivates repression and domination alongside it. He writes:

And yet this society is irrational as a whole. Its productivity is destructive of human needs and faculties, its peace maintained by the constant threat of war, its growth dependent on the repression of the real possibilities for pacifying the struggle for existence – individual, national, and international. This repression, so different from that which characterized the preceding, less developed stages of our society, operates today not from a position of natural and technical immaturity but rather from a position of strength. The capabilities (intellectual and material) of contemporary society are immeasurably greater than ever before – which means that the scope of society’s domination over the individual is immeasurably greater than ever before.³³

This point is crucial in understanding the contradiction in society. Marcuse articulates that these advanced industrial societies that glorify the value of productivity, technological progress, profit, etc., are the same societies that also create unnecessary warfare, environmental destruction, inhumane and unjust public policies, and the like. In cases of wars, for example, Marcuse vilifies the military aggression that has pervaded society as more and more advanced weapons are produced to serve the interest of the military-industrial complex. He says:

As the productive establishments rely on the military for self-preservation and growth, so the military relies on the corporations ‘not only for their weapons, but also for knowledge of what kind of weapons they need, how much they will cost, and how long it will take to get them’.³⁴

³⁰ Surendra Munshi, “Marcuse Philosophy about the Working Class in Advanced Capitalism,” *Social Scientist*, 5, no. 9 (1977): 25. See also Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 27-28

³¹ In chapter 4 of *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse writes: “The Happy Consciousness--the belief that the real is rational and that the system delivers the goods--reflects the new conformism which is a facet of technological rationality translated into social behavior (Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 82).

³² Box, “Contradiction, Utopia, and Public Administration,” 248. See also Jeffrey Ocas, “Hegel Reframed: Marcuse on the Dialectic of Social Transformation,” *Philosophia: International Journal of Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (2015): 15, and Jeffrey Ocas, “Eroticizing Marx, Revolutionizing Freud: Marcuse’s Psychoanalytic Turn.” *Kritike: An Online Journal of Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2009): 14.

³³ Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, x.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 37.

Moreover, as productivity grows and intensifies, the environment also gets exploited and suffers substantially. It builds a society that accepts the production and consumption of goods at the expense of the degradation of nature and its resources. Maximizing profit becomes more valuable to a greater degree than the preservation of nature. In terms of comprehensive and universal health care, individuals are left with increasing hospital debt as legislators and other politicians negotiate and are funded in their campaign finance by pharmaceutical companies as well as by private health insurance companies. As an upshot, no comprehensive healthcare coverage is given to the citizens at the end of the day. All these suggest that alongside the satisfaction of one's needs is the co-existence of wars, inequality, poverty, racial and gender discrimination, unemployment, among other things.

What we can draw from this is that for Marcuse, society is irrational under the guise of rationality. It is irrational in that it highlights only technical progress and more freedom to choose but hides the cost of such and successfully does so because individual thought has become indoctrinated by the system. Society becomes irrational in this case because despite the progress the system offers, it continues to repress the masses. For sure, a trade-off is made in this scenario. Marcuse says that as individuals enjoy the "freedom" and advancements in a technological society, he surrenders and submits to the system, and more importantly, sustains the system. In fact, its productivity is contingent on the repression and domination of the individual.

Again, these conditions appear to be not so grave because the system leads the individual to believe that he is free and happy. It appears that goods and services bring comfort and satisfaction to the masses, which negate the awareness of its irrationality. Clearly and understandably, one would not militate against the system that delivers for its members material security, sources of livelihood, assurance, protection from any external threats, and a whole universe of values and technical apparatus that allow him to live decently and properly.³⁵ So, the system of production persists in its productivity despite the adverse consequences. According to Richard Van Heertum,

Instead of looking for ways to transcend this reality, we instead seek only to consume more, to work harder and to strive for more material satisfaction, assuming this is the route to happiness. But in the failure this effort continues to sustain, we become further and further alienated from ourselves and our desiring systems and become victims of a vicious circle of internal dissatisfaction and confusion that could easily result in cynicism and disengagement.³⁶

This makes the individual for Marcuse unfree. As mentioned over and over again, he is rather dominated and repressed. The satisfaction is simply a token for liberation, but there is no real liberation. The liberty to choose among different brands in the market, for example, only points to self-indulgence and not freedom since the choice is still informed by the system. As we can see, the domination of the new social controls hides behind the token of rationality, liberty, and affluence, which beguiles the individual into thinking that everything is fine.³⁷ He is made to

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Richard Van Heertum, "Marcuse, Bloch and Freire: Reinvigorating a Pedagogy of Hope," *Policy Futures in Education* 4, no. 1 (March 1, 2006): 48.

³⁷ Ibid., 20. See also O'Casey, Jeffrey. The Freudian Marxist: Herbert Marcuse on the Psychology of Domination, Resistance, and Emancipation. *Silliman Journal* Vol. 53 No.1 (Jan-June 2012): 156-179.

comply with the standardized ways of society. And he has accepted and internalized the values of the system and becomes one-dimensional in his thought.

So, bereft of any consciousness or awareness on the state of things because of the gratification that one gets from “false needs,” the individual’s capacity to think on his own is reduced, resulting in the inability to “recognize the disease of the whole and grasp the chances of curing the disease”.³⁸ It neutralizes any opposition. In fact, any opposition to this system is viewed as irrational. The technological controls have become naturalized that they “appear to be the very embodiment of Reason”.³⁹ With the cultivation of this kind of rationality and social control, Marcuse argues that the critical potential of the individual declines. Again, he loses sight of liberation because he is made to believe that he is free. Perhaps, relative to the unfreedom of traditional societies, he is. But the reality is that he remains in chains without visible chains. Thus, any concept of a substantive and qualitative change vanishes, and the acceptance of the status quo becomes the norm. Indeed, any effort to resist falls prey to the system.

Ultimately, what Marcuse exposes is the status quo’s irrational character of what many consider a rational society. He investigates the contradiction of advanced industrial societies and liberal democracies as they pretend to offer a happy and free society. As the individual gets used to this rationality, it becomes a way of life. Clearly, the seduction of abundance and high living standards is too strong to resist. Thus, its domination and repression succeed in curtailing any vision of a different reality. Now, if man were to liberate himself from the fetters of the system, he had to develop a kind of thinking that refuses to conform to the system. This is where negative thinking or critique becomes extremely significant. So, in the next section, we turn to Marcuse’s concept of critique.

From One-Dimensional to Two-Dimensional Thought: Marcuse on the Function of Critique

As alluded to in the previous discussion, the blind acceptance and conformity of individuals to the given state of things in advanced industrial society produces an individual that is bereft of any imagination of alternatives.⁴⁰ The ability to think from a critical standpoint to delineate, for instance, “what ought to be” from “what is” is reduced or even contained, which threatens any radical opposition that is geared toward radical social change.⁴¹ This is a problem because Marcuse argues that critique has an emancipatory potential, which can overcome one-dimensional thought. This denotes that one-dimensional thought be superseded by two-dimensional thought. This entails that the individual rationality be brought back to the fore against the dominant technological rationality. This implies that the critical dimension of the individual be retrieved and combat the forces of conformity and containment, which characterize one-dimensional thought. Through this, critique is can expose the anomalies, injustice, domination, and repression prevalent in the society that has been sustained by the system through

³⁸ Ibid., 7.

³⁹ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁰ Peter Funke, Andrew Lamas, and Todd Wolfson, “Bouazizi’s Refusal and Ours: Critical Reflections on the Great Refusal and Contemporary Social Movements,” in *The Great Refusal: Herbert Marcuse and Contemporary Social Movements* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017), 12. See also Jeffry Oca, “The Peasant Movement and Great Refusal in the Philippines: Situating Critical Theory at the Margins,” *Kritike: An Online Journal of Philosophy* 12 (April 1, 2019): 43–67.

⁴¹ Ibid.

its manipulation of the masses under the guise of progress. Moreover, as we will see, critique can evoke possibilities for social change.

To understand the value of critique in relation to possibilities for social change, it is important to outline first the fundamental feature of dialectical thought. By doing this, we will see that, imbued by the logic of dialectical thought, a critique can contribute to evoking possibilities for social change. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, an integral element of critical theory is the principle of contradiction. If we look at it, Marcuse was heavily influenced by Hegel, like the rest of his Frankfurt School colleagues. In fact, while Critical Theory is said to be Marxist in many of its analyses, a considerable piece of it has something to do with the Hegelian roots of Marx. Much like Adorno and Horkheimer, Marcuse also employed Hegel's concept of dialectics.

It is important to note that while Marcuse wrote extensively on Hegel's concepts, the one that had a major influence on his critical analysis of society and radical social transformation is the concept of dialectic. This concept suggests that every being is contradictory in itself. Following Hegel, Marcuse expresses that the "dialectic is the formal structure of reality, that is to say, it is the Essence and truth of all things".⁴² This denotes that the existing social order and the given facts also have a contradiction in themselves that merit critical evaluation. Thus, the dialectic, Marcuse asserts, has a negative character. In *Reason and Revolution*, he says:

Hegel repeats over and over that dialectics has this 'negative' character. The negative 'constitutes the quality of dialectical Reason, and the first step 'towards the true concept of Reason' is a 'negative step; the negative 'constitutes the genuine dialectical procedure.' In all these uses 'negative' has a twofold reference: it indicates, first, the negation of the fixed and static categories of common sense and, secondly, the negative and therefore untrue character of the world designated by these categories. As we have already seen, negativity is manifest in the very process of reality, so that nothing that exists is true in its given form. Every single thing has to evolve new conditions and forms if it is to fulfill its potentialities.⁴³

Marcuse notes that for Hegel, society is not fixed and final; it is rather capable of transforming in its true potential. In the *Science of Logic*, Marcuse looks into Hegel's concept of "negation of the negation," which he says is central not only in Hegel but also in Marx.⁴⁴ In the case of a society, for example, this denotes the negation of the contradiction that already exists in the given society to produce a new social order. In other words, the negation of negation is the process of negating what currently exists in order to move to a higher stage, a development of its "true potentialities".⁴⁵

⁴² Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*, 2nd ed. (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1955), 147. See also Jeffrey O'Casey, "Hegel Reframed: Marcuse on the Dialectic of Social Transformation," *Philosophia: International Journal of Philosophy* 16, no. 1 (2015): 103.

⁴³ Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, 123.

⁴⁴ Kevin Anderson, "On Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory: A Critical Appreciation of Herbert Marcuse's *Reason and Revolution*, Fifty Years Later," *Sociological Theory* 11, no. 3 (1993): 246, <https://doi.org/10.2307/201970>. See also Richard Bernstein, "Negativity: Theme and Variations," in *Marcuse: Critical Theory and the Promise of Utopia*, edited by Robert Pippin, Andrew Feenberg, and Charles Webel (South Hadley, MA: Bergin and Garvey, 1988).

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 246.

Implicit then in the discussion above is the idea that there is a dialectical relation between the “possible and the actual”.⁴⁶ So, as a Marxist, Marcuse uses this Hegelian concept in saying that “a new [social] system is really possible if the conditions for it are present in the old”.⁴⁷ Speaking of Marx, Marcuse writes:

The historical character of the Marxian dialectic embraces the prevailing negativity as well as its negation. The given state of affairs is negative and can be rendered positive only by liberating the possibilities immanent in it. This last, the negation of the negation, is accomplished by establishing a new order of things. The negativity and its negation are two different phases of the same historical process, straddled by man's historical action.⁴⁸

Having established that, it is necessary to draw the connection between the dialectic and what Marcuse calls “negative thinking” at this point. Following the logic of the dialectic as seen in Hegel and Marx, a critical attitude toward society is created. In turn, this critical attitude develops “negative thinking”. This kind of thinking “negates existing forms of thoughts in realities from the perspective of higher possibilities”.⁴⁹ From the standpoint of negative thinking, Marcuse goes in contrast with the more dominant and widely practiced positivist thinking, which prioritizes the understanding and explaining of existing realities. Rather than negating, positivist thinking affirms the objects and facts in society. Measurement, observation, and experimentation, as in the sciences and mathematics, for example, are integral in arriving at the truth. Further, the dominance of the sciences has conditioned the masses to accept anything that comes from it without any critical attitude. But as already discussed, nothing is exempt from criticism in dialectical thought, even the well-glorified sciences. So, negative thinking, guided by dialectical thought, measures up or puts to test the achievements of advanced societies so that its internal contradictions are identified and exposed. Clearly then, against the backdrop of positivist thinking, negative thinking breaks away from the traditional ethos of merely accepting ideas and conditions at face value.⁵⁰

In general, Marcuse’s use of negative thinking pertains to two-dimensional thinking. In contrast to one-dimensional thinking, which embodies positivist thinking, it recognizes the contradictions within society. Moreover, it demands an overcoming of such contradictions through a refusal and pursuit for social change. Hence, it deviates from one-dimensional thought that accepts the current order of things within which contradictions are concealed. Elaborating and clarifying Marcuse’s use of “negative thinking,” Andrew Feenberg writes:

To see things as they are is not only to see them in terms of established facts, but rather, to see them in terms of their unactualized potential. Hence, dialectical thinking is negative thinking as it must negate the established social facts so that their emancipatory potential may be realized. However, the problem in advanced industrial society is that the “facts” are prioritized over their possibilities. Social domination is maintained by a systemic and systematic erasure of negative (dialectical) thinking. This theme runs through nearly all of

⁴⁶ Ibid., 248.

⁴⁷ Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, 152.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 315.

⁴⁹ Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, xv.

⁵⁰ Ibid, xiv-xv.

Marcuse's works. Progressive social change is prohibited by the acceptance of the present order of things, acceptance of the "facts."⁵¹

From the standpoint of negative thinking, critique then becomes possible. Having established briefly and generally the concept of dialectic and the development of negative thinking, we can see that Marcuse's critique of society follows Marx and Hegel's logic in arguing that while the given society is considered by many to be progressive and rational, it has contradictions within it that ought to be negated for it to lead to actualizing its potentialities or possibilities as a society. His criticism of late capitalist society then is informed by the dialectical thought of the unrealized possibilities and radical resistance toward liberation from the given state of things. This very well establishes the idea of critique for Marcuse. We can see that it is guided by dialectical reason's mode of thought.

However, as discussed in the previous section, the lack of critique and critical attitude, in general, of such contradicting realities in society leads to the intensification and triumph of advanced industrial societies in controlling the individual and society at large. Indeed, the power of negative thinking and critique is "alien to the whole established universe of discourse and action".⁵² Again, Marcuse observed that negative thinking and critique were in danger of being completely obliterated by the established society. It appears that the achievements of technological society have replaced and disparaged their function and importance. The promises and innovations of society have made individuals content and satisfied with the kind of life it has produced for them. So long as one has a TV set and multiple gadgets from the market, he is better off.⁵³ As we can see, people have been hooked up to the system of capitalism and technological rationality. Furthermore, as described in the discussion on technological rationality, it seems that society has created an omnipresent system that governs and changes the individual's thoughts, actions, values, needs, and the like to the point of merely accepting the given order. Liberal democracies, for instance, are excellent in showing a society under the pretense of being "democratic". It upholds what is called "fair elections," for example, but the politicians running for office are all tied to the billionaire class and the establishment. As soon as the election is over, they rake in unlimited cash in the government, which should have been distributed for social programs, which leads to massive inequality and injustice. On the other hand, the media pretend to be neutral and objective but are owned by some of the biggest corporations that only care about ratings and profit so that genuine news reporting is no longer

⁵¹ Arnold Farr, "The Task of Dialectical Thinking in the Age of One-Dimensionality," *Human Studies* 31, no. 2 (June 2008): 162, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10746-008-9087-8>.

⁵² Anderson, "On Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory," 254. See also Oca, Jeffrey. *The History of Domination and Resistance in the Philippines: From the pre-Hispanic through the Spanish and American Period*. *LUMINA: Interdisciplinary Research Journal of Holy Name University*, Vol. 21 No. 1 (March 2010): 35-61.

⁵³ At present, for example, it is easy to brush off any terrible and unconscionable events around the world or in your locality when you have social media and Netflix at your disposal. One can feel the guilt and powerlessness of reading about and watching children from Palestine die as collateral damage in the on-going Israel-Palestine conflict, but then turn to Netflix the next 5 minutes and forget about the social pathologies prevalent across the world. Or how hearing about reports of countless drug addicts being killed in the Philippines every day numbs an individual given that there are privileges offered by the market that reduces the gravity of such social pathologies. This one-dimensional mode of thought maintained by the capitalist system absorbs any radical opposition or resistance as self-indulgence replaces liberation.

the thrust of the institution.⁵⁴ The ideals of happiness, freedom, peace, and the like then become mere catchphrases in liberal democracies – empty of any content in reality because of how the society has been organized.

Marcuse is able to recognize these contradictions in society because he believes and comes from the perspective of higher possibilities. He thinks that the society he sees has the potential to change for the better and reduce, if not completely eliminate, the existing domination and repression. It goes to show that critique for Marcuse plays a tremendous role in relation to possibilities for social change. This is precisely why he posits one-dimensional thought, as a byproduct of technological rationality, to be a serious roadblock against social change.

As we can see, it is with a critical attitude that one can go against the predominant rationality in society. Interestingly, critique has always been at the forefront of any commitment to radical social change since the very beginning. “From the Cynics, Plato, and Rousseau to Hegel, Marx, and Freud, there has been a long tradition of starting to call for social change with the critique of the current order of things.”⁵⁵ For some obvious reasons, one cannot speak effectively of any alternative in the absence of a legitimate critique of what is wrong with the current social conditions. Before any talk of social change, there has to be an understanding first of the contradictions in society. In fact, one has to recognize that there is a contradiction, to begin with. It is simply pointless to convince individuals in a society that a radical transformation of society is necessary if the exposition of its anomalies is not shown to begin with. This calls for a reevaluation of critique as negative, for not only does it critique something for its own sake, but it is rather geared toward the transformation of society at large. Ultimately then, by virtue of its very principle, critique is positive insofar as it orients itself toward a potential future that is yet contained by the current state of things.⁵⁶

As stated earlier, Marcuse’s critique of society is from the standpoint of dialectical thought, which considers contradictions within society from the perspective of higher possibilities. Critique then must not only expose the anomalies and the contradictions in society, but it must also pave the way for the imagination of an alternative society. Hence, we can see that critique opens images of emancipation. As such, utopian visions emerge, which can guide individuals even further in having an alternative to what is actual or *what is*. Such was Marcuse’s approach in criticizing advanced industrial societies. He believed in the power of the imagination in replacing *what is* with *what ought to be*. Indeed, he was known by many as a utopian thinker who did not only offer a critique of society but also boldly and unashamedly argued for the possibility of radically transforming society through images of emancipation and a better life. This raises more points for us to consider and talk about in a separate discussion. It invites us to do some serious thinking on the role of utopian visions alongside critique in evoking possibilities for social change. However, at this point, perhaps we can use this space to ponder on the

⁵⁴ Also, mainstream media outlets owned by large corporations pretend to be value-neutral by bringing in experts, for example, with contrasting opinions to discuss issues, but appears to be only performative. It is not so much geared toward having a genuine conversation about issues but simply to show tolerance of diverse viewpoints for its sake. Chomsky and Herman would even go on to say: “...the beauty of the system, however, is that such dissent and inconvenient information are kept within bounds and at the margins, so that while their presence shows that the system is not monolithic, they are not large enough to interfere unduly with the domination of the official agenda.” (Edward S. Herman and Noam Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988), xii).

⁵⁵ Van Heertum, “Marcuse, Bloch and Freire,” 45.

⁵⁶ Vieta, “Inklings of the Great Refusal,” 17.

relevance of his critique of capitalism and the function of critique in considering the possibilities for social change.

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