

Utopian Thinker: Marcuse on Utopia and the Possibilities for Social Change

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Abstract

In a world that denigrates and wards off the power of imagination in effecting social change, Marcuse stands as one of the most enduring intellectuals whose utopian character remains relevant today. He rejects the finality of the existing society and believes in the possibilities for social change. Interestingly, his strong conviction toward imagining alternatives from the existing society earned him a reputation for being a utopian thinker. Along these lines, this paper will then focus on Marcuse as a utopian thinker by exploring the notion of utopia and its relation to possibilities for social change. I argue, following Marcuse, that one's ability to imagine could further evoke possibilities for social change. Indeed, Marcuse was not only critical of advanced industrial society, but he was also imaginative of what it could still become. Alternatively, one could say that he was critical of the intolerable social conditions precisely because he was imaginative of a better world in the first place.

Keywords: Capitalism, Critical Theory, Imagination, Social Change, Utopia

Introduction

As a member of the Frankfurt School, Marcuse viewed society from the standpoint of the dialectic, which involved questioning the existing conditions from the perspective of higher possibilities. Thus, his critique of advanced industrial society is predicated on the assumption that what exists can still develop its inner potentialities. This means that social change could be possible. But for it to even be conceived in the first place, Marcuse says individuals have to develop negative thinking in order to have the capacity to critique that which exists. Indeed, critique can expose the irrationalities and anomalies of the existing social order and potentially evoke possibilities for social change. However, given how forms of domination have been normalized in advanced industrial societies, it appears that the way things are is fixed, and the only resolve is to simply accept them as they are. Marcuse objects to such rhetoric and insists that such is not the case. Indeed, he rejects the finality of the existing society and believes in the possibilities for social change.

Now, in order to ground his critical analysis of how society should be seen as capable of change, it is important to consider his analyses of why domination and repression happens in the first place. As is well known, Marcuse's engagement with some aspects of Freud's

psychoanalysis provides useful insights on this matter. By delving into it, we are provided with a psychoanalytic dimension on the way in which domination triumphs and individual internalization of the values of the system prevails without much question or opposition from the masses per se.¹ Using this discussion as our point of departure will, later on, inform us of Marcuse's idea on the possibility of striving toward a qualitatively new society.

Again, it is imperative that we recognize that Marcuse was not only critical of advanced industrial society, but he was also imaginative of what it could still become. Alternatively, one could say that he was critical of the intolerable social conditions precisely because he was imaginative of a better world in the first place. He believed that one's ability to imagine could further evoke possibilities for social change. Interestingly, his strong conviction toward imagining alternatives from the existing society earned him a reputation for being a utopian thinker. As such, this paper will focus on Marcuse as a utopian thinker by exploring the notion of utopia and its relation to possibilities for social change. To understand this, the discussion will be divided into four parts. The first part deals with my modest attempt to present a general yet adequate understanding of repression based on Freud's theory, which Marcuse critically engaged with. The second part centers on Marcuse's critical analysis of how the individual internalizes the values of the system and gets dominated using aspects of Freud's theory. The third part looks into the possibility of a different world based on Marcuse's refutation of what has been internalized by the individuals in society, leading to utopian visions. Finally, the last part discusses the value and function of utopian visions in relation to possibilities for social change. So, to begin with the discussion, let us proceed now with an overview of Freud's notion of repression in order to understand the necessity of repression in the first place.

On Repression: A Preliminary Sketch

In explaining the repression of the individual, Marcuse looks at one of Freud's major works titled *Civilization and its Discontents*,² and writes about it in *Eros and Civilization*, one of his most famous and influential works. In it, he outlines a few of Freud's concepts, which he uses in tracing the repression observable in society. Now, according to K. Daniel Cho, the repression of instincts is one of the few Freudian ideas Marcuse engaged in.³ The overarching idea to be considered at the onset is that the repression of instincts is necessary for the longevity and order of society. Apparently, there is an inevitable tension between individuals and society because of the individual's instinctual drives toward pleasure and aggression. So, the basis of civilization, according to Freud, is the repression of the natural instincts of human beings.⁴ As will be shown later, the repression of instincts is necessary in maintaining a level of decency, balance, and order

¹ Kellner, "Marcuse and the Quest for Radical Subjectivity," 5.

² Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1989).

³ Daniel Cho, "Thanatos and Civilization: Lacan, Marcuse, and the Death Drive," *Policy Futures in Education* 4, no. 1 (March 1, 2006): 64, <https://doi.org/10.2304/pfie.2006.4.1.18>.

⁴ Christian Garland, "The Freudian Moment: Reflections on Herbert Marcuse," *Illuminations: The Critical Theory Project*, last modified February 2, 2021, <https://pages.gseis.ucla.edu/faculty/kellner/Illumina%20Folder/garland%5Bmarcuse.htm>.

in society. This is because humans have primary instincts that could potentially cause detriment to man himself and the society at large.

This repression involves the primary instincts of man: “the repression of life-instincts (Eros), ensuing in durable and expanding group relations, and b) the repression of the destructive instincts (Thanatos), leading to the mastery of man and nature, to the individual and social morality.”⁵ Eros or Life-instinct, which is geared toward the preservation and enrichment of life, and Thanatos or Death-instinct, which has the propensity toward the destruction of life, are involved in a constant antagonism, which entails control for the benefit of humanity and the civilization at large. Both instincts fall under the pleasure principle, which seeks immediate gratification. Eros, for instance, seeks immediate gratification of sexual desire, while Thanatos seeks death. To a certain degree, their gratification has to be met, but both also have to be tamed, given that their satisfaction could be detrimental to the individual and the society at large. The satisfaction of Eros, for example, could be harmful if not regulated well. Think, for instance, of simply harassing someone to have sex with you in the hopes of satisfying your sexual urges; that would be problematic. Meanwhile, if one gives in to the demand of the death instinct when he hates someone, for example, it could potentially lead to violence and eventually destruction. Hence, Freud contends that they ought to be regulated and repressed. Such repression entails a regulating principle, which Freud calls the reality principle. The reality principle, for Freud, is instrumental in constraining the desire of the instincts. It regulates the pleasure principle by instituting rules, norms, and proscriptions so that humanity and society attain a level of social order for its preservation.

Implied in the discussion above is an integral interplay between the pleasure principle, which includes Eros and Thanatos, and the reality principle as a regulating principle. In order to ground further their relationship, let us briefly explore the key concepts that are very influential in Freudian psychoanalysis, namely, id, ego, and superego. These concepts are related to the pleasure principle and reality principle. To begin with, the reality principle is the governing principle of ego, while the pleasure principle is the governing principle of id. As alluded to above, the pleasure principle seeks immediate gratification, either following Eros or Thanatos. It does not take into account any resulting consequence of such immediate gratification to the individual or society. Hence, id simply wants to attain its demands and have its satisfaction granted, sexually or destructively.⁶ But again, Freud thinks that such cannot be granted for that could only lead to the disintegration of the individual and society. When individuals are left to their own devices, it poses tremendous risks since human instincts have the propensity to dismiss the other members of society for the sake of satisfying their desires. If civilization were to be formed and maintained, a level of repression of one’s instinctual drive would be necessary. So, ego, in which the reality principle is the governing principle, is necessary in taming the pleasure principle. It does this in the form of social rules, norms, and the like. This is necessary because the id cannot be repressed easily. Again, for society to operate as effectively as possible, it needs some kind of social rules, norms, and structures, among others, that the id should consider.

⁵ Jeffrey V. Ocaj, “Eroticizing Marx, Revolutionizing Freud: Marcuse’s Psychoanalytic Turn,” *Kritike: An Online Journal of Philosophy* 3, no. 1 (2009): 12. See also Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 95.

⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Two Short Accounts of Psycho-Analysis*, Translated and Edited by James Strachey (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 111.

Essentially, we can infer that ego represents reason while id represents passion. Ultimately, their relation is paramount in ensuring that individuals are able to live together properly and that the civilization is held intact.

Now, on top of the ego is the superego, which is a “special agency of the ego”.⁷ It is the moral component of the ego that presses some sort of moralistic rule. This can be traced to the traditional patriarchal family, where the father served as the “socializing agent or superego”.⁸ In the traditional household, for example, the father imposed rules and standards with which the members had to follow; otherwise, a corresponding punishment awaits them. This led to the internalization of such laws, prescriptions, and even to the point of sublimation of libidinal energies. The children then had to obey their father, who stands as their moralistic figure. Later on, this becomes an essential basis on social prohibitions, regulations, and repressions seen in society, such as the institution of the law, media, education, inter alia.

With the general yet hopefully adequate discussion presented above, we can see that repression is a necessary condition in society, according to Freud, for social order to accrue. However, it would be unfair to suggest that Freud was averse to happiness. Indeed, he believes that the happiness of the individual is an important quality to be taken into account as well – although the gratification has to be delayed in order to avoid any unintended consequences. Happiness has to be situated alongside the preservation of society as a whole. For happiness or gratification to manifest in a society that requires order, discipline, and cooperation from everyone, Freud introduces the notion of “sublimation”. This is the process wherein one’s socially unacceptable wishes are “directed to a higher goal which is free from objection”.⁹ In other words, it has something to do with delayed gratification. For example, if one might wish to release his anger over a particular situation, he will be compelled to repress his libidinal energies and redirect it toward something else that, in one way or another, could still offer gratification without causing trouble. He could choose to go to the gym instead, for example, or play video games. The point is that sublimation impels one to repress himself and manifest his libidinal energies in other forms.

At this point, it should already be clear that for Freud, repression is necessary for the full functioning of society. Otherwise, society cannot be organized along the lines of order, balance, and discipline for everyone’s benefit. Indeed, repression was central to Freud for the civilization to preserve itself. We can extrapolate that a level of domination and control is really needed for the full functioning of society. Marcuse agrees with this position and recognizes that a society without repression would necessarily be destructive. However, situated in the context of advanced industrial society, he asserts that Freud’s position on repression entails some rethinking.

⁷ Oca, “Eroticizing Marx, Revolutionizing Freud,” 15. See also Sigmund Freud, *The Question of Lay Analysis: An Introduction to Psychoanalysis*, Translated by Nancy Procter-Gregg, with Foreword by Ernest Jones (London: Imago Publishing Company, 1947), 48.

⁸ Cremin, “Eros and Apocalypse: Herbert Marcuse in the Age of Austerity,” 207.

⁹ Sigmund Freud, *The Origin and Development of Psychoanalysis* (USA: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 24.

Marcuse on Freud in a Nutshell

Inasmuch as Marcuse agrees with Freud's argument that repression is necessary for civilization to be formed and maintained, he argues that the level of repression in an advanced industrial society has the tendency to go beyond the level necessary to hold the society together. Markedly, Freud and Marcuse lived in different times. He claims that the advancements seen in late capitalist societies have led to a kind of repression that is no longer within the ambit of Freud's initial concept of repression. To prove his point, Marcuse makes a distinction between two kinds of repression: basic repression and surplus repression. Society has become more complex than he thinks basic repression, that is, the one Freud explained, is no longer the singular repression that exists. Instead, surplus repression has come to the fore. In contradistinction to basic repression, surplus repression is the repression that goes beyond the level necessary for the organization of society in times of scarcity and is necessitated by social domination.¹⁰ Unlike Freud, Marcuse questions the amount of repression necessary or how much repression is required to maintain the society in the context of scarcity. He thinks that the level of repression needed depends on the level of scarcity a society is in. In poor societies, for example, one can make the argument that the amount of repression needed for its functioning is quite high considering the high-level scarcity it is in. Consequently, individuals "must restrain their desires because the means of satisfaction is generally lacking".¹¹ However, such is not the case in affluent societies where an overproduction of goods is the norm. Late capitalism has become so efficient that scarcity is no longer paramount in considering the level of repression required of its individuals.¹² Nevertheless, Marcuse observes that as society is showered with the abundance of consumer goods, individuals still appear to be under immense repression. Basic necessities are supposedly enough, but the level of repression is still quite high. So, the excess of necessary or basic repression, which emanates from specific institutions of domination maintained in late capitalist societies, makes up the surplus repression.¹³

Indeed, for Marcuse, this surplus repression has the tendency to dominate and repress individuals. To show this, he introduces the concept of performance principle and distinguishes it from Freud's reality principle. Marcuse says that the reality principle is no longer that which demands repression but rather the performance principle. Again, in the context of late capitalist societies, where scarcity is no longer a chief concern because of the advancements of science and technology, basic needs are now available to the masses. The primary concern is more on the organization and distribution of resources. But to be sure, it is in a much better place in terms of not having to give up so much of one's time and enjoy more. However, scarcity which legitimized repression in the first place is now superseded by capitalism's material abundance and overproduction of goods, which subjected individuals to another level of repression that goes beyond the necessary level of repression. The consequence is the individual had to work harder in a time where there is great abundance. Because the individual is bombarded with new unnecessary needs and entertainment, he has to work harder than ever before. While individuals

¹⁰ Holland, "Looking Backwards," 60. See also Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 44; O'Casey, "Eroticizing Marx, Revolutionizing Freud," 19.

¹¹ Andrew Feenberg, "Marcuse: Reason, Imagination, and Utopia," *Radical Philosophy Review* 21, no. 2 (2018): 16.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ O'Casey, "Eroticizing Marx, Revolutionizing Freud," 19.

should have more time now for play, they end up being subjected to the rationality of using technology for efficiency, production, profit, among others. Ultimately, it appears as though this is just a natural course of the given society.

Now, this unnecessary repression by the performance principle is not recognized by the individual because of what Marcuse calls “repressive desublimation”. In the first place, desublimation pertains to “replacing mediated by immediate gratification”.¹⁴ It has something to do with one’s desire being manifested in its true form. This is the obverse of sublimation. In the context of late capitalist societies, desublimation, which is supposed to free one’s libidinal desires, turns out to be repressive. In general, “repressive desublimation” refers to “mass repression whereby consumers come to identify libidinally with the commodities they purchased”.¹⁵ People now have the ability to do what they want with the abundance of goods and things like that. But it is repressive because instead of being free, it actually removes one’s consciousness of being oppressed by the rationality of the system. In it, individuals get hooked into the system of consumption and small gratifications, which sustains his very own domination as they are led to believe that he is already free through the products within his reach. His psyche becomes manipulated as it conforms to the discourse of the economic order. The very manipulation of the system by producing unnecessary needs is problematic. To recall, it was discussed in Chapter Two that new forms of social control are now in place in an advanced industrial society that is under the wing of technological rationality. In it, individuals enjoy the overproduction of consumer goods. Individuals are fed with “false needs” as forces of production create and bombard the masses with new needs for their satisfaction. The individual then has to work for more hours to satisfy his needs based on the materials produced by the system.

The end result of all this is that the individual thinks this is just the way things are. Individuals are led to believe that no alternative to the system is possible. Indeed, the economic system, which pervades the political, cultural, and other aspects of society, has created this subtle surplus repression and domination. But as indicated in the discussion above, Marcuse thinks that the surplus repression in advanced industrial societies is simply manmade. This implies that it is not a fixed reality that cannot be avoided and transformed.

As we can see, in explaining how individuals are dominated and are made complicit in their very own subjugation, Marcuse made use of Freud’s concepts. He saw some limitations in Freud’s analysis, which he did not consider to be wrong, but simply need to be expanded. Marcuse appropriated Freud’s basic concepts and situated them in the context of advanced industrial civilization. He shows that the repression now is different from Freud’s discussion because now repression is already socially constructed by the people in power. This is done in order to maintain the system of domination. But again, these are all manmade and can be refuted and changed. So, it is also in appropriating some of Freud’s concepts that Marcuse argues for the possibility of a non-repressive and free society. He shows Freud’s revolutionary and radical implications that were untapped and uses them to articulate a different social organization.¹⁶ Indeed, his utopian character comes out as he critically appropriates Freud. So, in the discussion to ensue, we will see that Marcuse’s appropriation of Freud is not simply to characterize the new

¹⁴ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 75.

¹⁵ Richard Wolin, *Heidegger’s Children, Hannah Arendt, Karl Lowith, Hans Jonas, and Herbert Marcuse* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 168.

¹⁶ Kellner, “Marcuse and the Quest for Radical Subjectivity,” 8.

society that differs from Freud's time; he will also demonstrate the possibility of another society, one that is non-repressive, free, and happy.

Liberating Eros Toward a Non-Repressive Society

With the discussion that the repression prevalent in advanced industrial society is not the same as the basic repression Freud talked about, Marcuse asserts that a non-repressive society is possible. This means that from the backdrop of the capitalist landscape, a different social organization is possible. Indeed, this is where Marcuse's utopian character comes in. Unlike other critical theorists, Marcuse held on to a vision of a different reality. His critical engagement with Freud invites us to think twice about the existing social order and justify whether the organization of society is fixed and unchangeable. He raises the question of whether individuals deserve to suffer and be content with the existing social conditions as though it is just the way things are. He puts into question the progress we so celebrate in the hopes of projecting a different and better reality.

Now, as implied in the discussion in the previous part, the pleasure principle has been repressed by the performance principle in advanced industrial society and by the reality principle of Freud. Understandably so, the repression of the individual's instinctual drive is necessary in serving and maintaining the civilization. However, the technological rationality of advanced industrial society, which favors progress, profit, production, and consumption, has established the performance principle that leads to instrumental labor, suffering, and further repression. As mentioned, Marcuse argues that the surplus repression and performance principle are socially constructed as advanced industrial society emerged. They are constructed and maintained by the few who have control and power over the masses. They create an economic system and rationality that traps everyone without any means to circumvent. They have built a system where, despite the abundance of material goods and resources, individuals still need to toil and labor for hours and give up most of their time for their very survival as well as for the procurement of unnecessary needs created by the system. Indeed, individuals are compelled by the system to satisfy their needs by patronizing the false needs it creates. What ends up happening then is the individual is made to sacrifice himself for the interest of those who control the discourse.

How then can this repressive society be dealt with? Marcuse posits that instead of being governed by the reality principle, a principle based on the values of the pleasure principle makes for the possibility of a non-repressive society.¹⁷ Indeed, the main thrust of Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* is the possibility of a non-repressive society. In a world where scarcity is no longer an issue and abundance is the norm rather than the exception, Marcuse believes that individuals have the resources and means at their disposal to strive for a qualitatively new society. Rather than being dominated by the performance principle and surplus repression, Marcuse believes that it is now reasonable to liberate eros from its repression for the longest time. The release of eros, as an instinctual energy that seeks gratification, would desire "a pleasurable-aesthetic environment requiring total restructuring of human life and the material conditions of existence".¹⁸

¹⁷ Nina Cemiloğlu, "Herbert Marcuse and Ernst Bloch: Critical Dialogues with Freud on Memory and Art," *ETHOS: Dialogues in Philosophy and Social Sciences* 9, no. 2 (2016): 71.

¹⁸ Kellner, "Marcuse and the Quest for Radical Subjectivity," 8.

The liberation of eros escapes the capitalist logic precisely in its intervention against the well-established capitalist logic of performance principle, which sustains surplus repression. Eros, in this sense, is not simply a release of libidinal energies without restrictions. As articulated earlier, Marcuse adhered with Freud on the necessity of some level of repression to maintain a functioning society. However, the surplus repression maintained by the capitalist mode of thought through the performance principle allows for repression of any alternative mode of thought to productivity, consumption, profit, etc. All these are indicative of the dominance of instrumental reason and technological rationality in capitalist societies. Conversely, the liberation of eros pertains to the privileging of the imaginative reason that has been overshadowed by instrumental reason and technological rationality. In other words, the lack of individual imagination ensues from the very principle that individuals have been tied to the logic of working all day to be productive in order to consume the false needs manufactured by the market, which serves as a token of satisfaction and freedom – but are fundamentally geared only on self-indulgence. Never mind that the very adherence toward this capitalist logic maintains the cycle of repression. Society after all is still at the mercy of those who control the system. Hence, from the dominance of instrumental reason, which spawns instrumental labor and overconsumption, for instance, the pleasure principle now becomes the thrust for a more humane, free, and non-repressive society.¹⁹

Ultimately, what this means is that we do not need to go outside to transform our very social structure. Instead, the existing resources and technology only need to be reoriented toward better relations between humans and nature.²⁰ Hence, the very discourse “under the thrall of positivist liberal ideals of progress, within the control of calculative and dominative logics”²¹ ought to be opposed and changed. Marcuse provides us an idea of an alternative to the given order by showing a kind of rationality that is not tied to the technological rationality of domination and control, but one that is in consonance with the “rationality of art” and “rationality of pacification,”²² which will be expounded in a short while. This he calls post-technological rationality. It is constituted by reason and imagination, which accompanies reason with images of beauty and happiness that contradict the existing rationality and organization. With imagination that is rooted in Eros, it constructs a kind of rationality that is “less aggressive and destructive”.²³ Markedly, Marcuse thinks that the instinctual drive toward happiness and freedom exists in Freud’s theory. He mentions, for instance, daydreams, art, literature, philosophy, and the like that have the potential to outline a different future. This would involve

¹⁹ Zilbersheid, “The Utopia of Herbert Marcuse Part 1,” 405.

²⁰ For a more detailed discussion on technology as geared toward liberation, see Jeffrey O'Casey, “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): 54–78, <https://doi.org/10.3860/krit.v4i1.1835>; Herbert Marcuse, *Technology, War and Fascism: Collected Papers of Herbert Marcuse, Volume 1*, ed. Douglas Kellner (Routledge, 2004); Andrew Feenberg, “Can Technology Incorporate Values? Marcuse’s Answer to the Question of the Age,” presented at the Conference on *The Legacy of Herbert Marcuse* at the University of California, Berkeley, 1998.

²¹ Vieta, “Marcuse’s ‘Transcendent Project’ at 50,” 3

²² *Ibid.*, 1.

²³ Feenberg, “Marcuse: Reason, Imagination, and Utopia,” 20.

less repression and more “libidinal and non-alienated labor, play, free and open sexuality, and production of a society and culture which would further freedom and happiness”.²⁴

Now, for a non-repressive society to become a possibility, the individual has to be transformed. But just like “critique” discussed in Chapter 2, as individuals get absorbed by the system and its rationality, “the utopian impulse” gets relegated as well. This is because controllers of society have implanted this idea that we are already in utopia with all the material abundance and flashy entertainment we get exposed to. Hence, one has to recognize the irrationality of the affirmative culture in capitalist societies. From being controlled by the system that perpetuates the dominance of performance principle and surplus repression, this individual needs to be more attuned toward the pleasure principle in order to evoke images of a less aggressive and less repressive society. The individual capable of understanding the irrational conditions of society and the necessity of true liberation is a different individual who does not repress his “sensuous make up but cultivates it instead”.²⁵ This individual has to be oriented toward a pursuit of a life that centers on pleasure that maintains a balance between humans and the environment.²⁶ Again, it is one that is no longer dominated by the performance principle and finally gives way to the gratification of the senses.²⁷ So, instead of feeling the guilt from the rationality of instrumental reason and of the technological rationality to the point of simply conforming to the given social order, he is now free to imagine a society that is non-repressive, happy, and free.

To be able to imagine alternatives, Marcuse accentuates the role of fantasy and art. In *Eros and Civilization*, he says fantasy “continues to speak of the language of the pleasure principle, of freedom from repression, of inhibited desire and gratification”.²⁸ It must be noted that fantasy sits well beyond the ambit of the reality principle. It operates freely from the reality principle, which evokes dreams and imagination, to begin with. “Fantasy links the unconscious with consciousness, dream with reality, and preserves the ‘tabooed images of freedom.’”²⁹ Moreover, works of art project a whole new reality that celebrates what the current society despises, such as freedom, happiness, and the like.³⁰ Fantasy, of course, is not only isolated in the idea of perceiving a future but also recollecting memories that were forgotten as an upshot of society’s manipulation. Indeed, Marcuse opposes the inviolability and infallibility of the performance principle and instead poses the possibility of another form of society, which is best captured by one’s imagination.

Of course, it is important to bear in mind that Marcuse and the Frankfurt School altogether did not perceive the advanced industrial society to be the worst society to have ever been built. Indeed, they recognized that their society was in a much better place than the pre-

²⁴ Ibid., 20. This vision of a new society would become a chief influence in the liberation movements in the 1960s.

²⁵ O'Casey, “Eroticizing Marx, Revolutionizing Freud,” 20.

²⁶ Ibid. See also Cynthia Willet, “A Dialectic of Eros and Freedom: Beauvoir and Marcuse,” in *Between the Psyche and the Social: Psychoanalytic Social Theory*, Edited by Kelly Oliver and Steve Edwin (New York: Rowan and Littlefield Publishers, 2002), 205.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 120.

²⁹ Tom Moylan, “The Locus of Hope: Utopia versus Ideology (Le Lieu de l’espoir: Utopie vs Idéologie),” *Science Fiction Studies* 9, no. 2 (1982): 161.

³⁰ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), 10–11.

industrial society because of Enlightenment style thinking. The point is not to valorize primitive times and do away with the advancements in society. Rather, it is to recognize the irrational and dominative tendencies in it that ought to be changed if society is to keep on improving, to be self-aware of reason's totalitarian tendencies. Marcuse's invocation of art, fantasy, sexual freedom, and the like is not geared toward a total rejection of reason "but rather the projection of a new form of 'libidinal rationality' no longer bound to the performance principle".³¹ As Andrew Feenberg writes:

Marcuse suggests an enlargement of the concept of reason beyond observing and analyzing the empirical facts. The new concept of reason would have an imaginative aspect that would identify the second dimension, the potentialities inherent in things. 'Eros awakens and liberates potentialities that are real in things animate and inanimate, in organic and inorganic nature—real but in the un-erotic reality suppressed.'³²

Indeed, for Marcuse, the liberation of Eros is a necessary condition in transforming the individual's sensibility. In *An Essay on Liberation*, he says that this "new sensibility" is necessary as it gives more value to life instincts and struggles against ways of life that center on aggression, alienation, and the like.³³ This propels the individual to view society differently. It allows him to cast images that are averse to the existing conditions. But what exactly do these images of a better future tell us about the possibilities for social change? Are they simply utopian images? How do these utopian visions relate to evoking possibilities for social change? A modest attempt to discuss these questions is presented in the part that ensues.

Utopia and Possibilities for Social Change

As we can see, art and fantasy can be instrumental in evoking and perceiving utopian visions. Art, for instance, becomes a powerful tool in the negation of the given order of things as it evokes utopian images. This means that it is able to protest against the dominance of "capitalist relations to production and ideology".³⁴ However, with regard to discussions on social change, the concept of utopia continues to be vilified as pointless and unnecessary. So, in this part of the chapter, we will explore Marcuse's commitment to utopian visions and see its relation to the evocation of possibilities for social change.

Unlike classical Marxism, which did not engage much with the ideals of a free and non-repressive society, Marcuse considered the value of projecting a utopian vision where non-repressive conditions are maintained.³⁵ He provided certain elements in Marxism, such as imagination and creative thinking that he thought would revitalize Marxism and potentially lead

³¹ Feenberg, "Marcuse: Reason, Imagination, and Utopia," 19.

³² Ibid.

³³ Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971), 23.

³⁴ Moylan, "The Locus of Hope," 162.

³⁵ Robert B. Pippin, Andrew Feenberg, and Charles Webel, *Marcuse: Critical Theory & the Promise of Utopia* (London: Bergin & Garvey, 1988), 182.

to evoking and conceiving radical alternatives.³⁶ As is well known, he does this by synthesizing aspects of Marx's and Freud's theories. Hence, his Marxist approach, along with his Frankfurt School colleagues, includes the dimension of the psyche in analyzing the pathological conditions as well as the potentiality for liberation. His works then made a "revolutionary theory as a theory of liberation and sought to resurrect the utopian moment in Marx that had been covered by the tradition of scientific Marxism and ignored by most orthodox Marxists".³⁷ So, seeing the growing contradiction in advanced industrial society and its capability to change, he unabashedly emphasized the value of utopian visions in evoking possibilities for social change as predicated in the existing conditions.

Traditionally, utopia has been conceived and interpreted as a perfect place or a fictional island where everything is perfect. As such, individuals tend to view utopia as an imaginary place that could never exist in reality. Marcuse's utopian character, however, is quite different from this conception of utopia. As Stephen Bronner notes: "Indeed, more than anyone else in America, Marcuse rescued the concept of utopia from its popular definition as a fixed state of happiness that retains so many values of the status quo or a "nowhere" in the sense of Thomas More and Samuel Butler."³⁸ On the contrary, Marcuse views utopia as that which has the potential to be realized based on the existing social conditions. He says, "Utopian possibilities are inherent in the technical and technological forces of advanced capitalism and socialism: the rational utilization of these forces on a global scale would terminate poverty and scarcity within a very foreseeable future."³⁹ This denotes that utopia for Marcuse is not so much about imaging an impossible world, but a better world that is possible if only the existing resources in an affluent society were used more appropriately. So, what is considered "utopia" in Marcuse's thought is not the "no place," but the potential future that can be if only forces of domination and repression do not stand in the way. Hence, utopian visions have value in the historical universe. While many thinkers have been reluctant to embrace utopia, worrying that it might lose the scientific character and validity of their work, Marcuse believes that all the more should individuals start thinking of utopia now. He contends that the means to transform the organization of society are there; they are simply blocked.

For Marcuse, the promise of utopia is important in relation to possibilities for social change. As we can see, Marcuse is not only a critic but also a utopian thinker. He says that change is not possible without any blueprint of an alternative society. One can critique the established social order for as long as he wants, but for possibilities of change to at least unfold, one must be capable of utopian speculation. According to Bhikhu Parekh:

Marcuse argues: first, he must show that his transcendent society is not a dream, but is actually realizable on the basis of available resources; second, he must show that it would use the resources more rationally and achieve a greater amount of freedom and happiness than the existing society. In other words, a critic should not only criticize and expose the irrationality of a given social order, but should also depict an alternate society and "demonstrate" what existing surplus repressions it would

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid., 183.

³⁸ Ibid., 121.

³⁹ Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 9.

eliminate and how. Utopianism, in other words, is inherent in Marcuse's theory of historical judgment.⁴⁰

To be sure, this qualitatively new society that individuals would envision is radically different from the existing society that calling it “utopian” makes sense.⁴¹ According to Zilbershied, utopianism is “a radical vision of a better society that presents a qualitatively different value-system, which, contemplated under the prevailing modes of social thought, seems unrealistic, yet it is nonetheless realizable in principle,` i.e., there is nothing in its essence that renders it a sheer fantasy regarding the possibilities of human nature.”⁴² Marcuse was firm in thinking that a utopian vision has become a necessity if one were to attempt to change the structure of society, especially that technology has the means to carry out such change.⁴³ Better use of the existing resources would mean having a new society that is not subservient to domination, exploitation, and control.

Marcuse was hopeful that what exists is not final. He shares this sentiment with another utopian philosopher, Ernst Bloch. Indeed, any talk on utopia should never forget Ernst Bloch. He stands at the fore, like Marcuse, when it pertains to utopian visions in relation to social change. As is well known, Bloch’s project centered on the possibility of changing the world with humans as chief architect.⁴⁴ He was not as concerned as the rest with “what is or what has been,” but rather on the “latency of being to come at work”.⁴⁵ For Bloch, inasmuch as the present is significant and has an inherent value, he recognizes the “not yet realized” as that which should not be discarded for it is in the ability to imagine a radically new reality or future that one maintains hope.⁴⁶ This denotes that one has to be mindful and present not to fall prey to the anxieties he feels with the existing social conditions. “Bloch has situated utopian imagination in the historical process, not as blueprint of that which is unfulfilled in that process, but as a preconceptual figure of that which is not yet attained.”⁴⁷ According to Bloch, dreams of a better world are a gateway to a possible better future. He claims that the world is not yet finished. The future is also not yet determined. This means that possibilities are at hand. It depends on the individuals which possibilities they will work towards.

The critical thought and creativity inherent in utopian visions are able to challenge the current society as fixed as the establishment would have us believe.⁴⁸ Utopian visions dereify the reified reality. It refuses to accept the rigidity of society and its incapability to transform into something else. And because utopian visions are simply images of a better life, they embody an abstract character which, in most cases, protects it from being reified. So, against the dominance of ideology, which operates for the preservation of the status quo, utopian visions are filled with

⁴⁰ Bhikhu Parekh, “Utopianism and Manicheism: A Critique of Marcuse’s Theory of Revolution,” in *Social Research* 39, no. 4 (Winter 1972): 624.

⁴¹ Zilbersheid, “The Utopia of Herbert Marcuse Part 1,” 405.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 406

⁴³ Henry Blanke, “Domination and Utopia: Marcuse’s Discourse on Nature, Psyche and Culture,” *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 5, no. 3 (September 1, 1994): 100, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10455759409358600>.

⁴⁴ Moylan, “The Locus of Hope,” 159.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope: Volume 1* (MIT Press, 1995), 289.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 161.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 162. See also Howard Segal, “Utopianism As Ideology: A Defense,” unpublished paper presented at First Annual Conference on Utopian Studies, Ann Arbor, MI: 1976.

creative ideas that convey other possibilities.⁴⁹ The affirmative culture, for example, of the capitalist system, is negated by utopia. Historical alternatives or historical possibilities can become a possibility because of the existing society's historical limits that need reconfiguring.⁵⁰

Of course, the concept of utopia is complex. For sure, it can take different forms. Marcuse in *The End of Utopia*,⁵¹ distinguishes, for example, impractical utopias and utopias that lead to social change. Impractical utopias, for instance, can only be imagined but do not seem to have a transformative character. He says that it is “unfeasible because it contradicts certain scientifically established laws, biological laws, physical laws; for example, such projects as the age-old idea of eternal youth or the idea of a return to an alleged golden age”.⁵² In other words, they are beyond history and are simply unrealistic. With progressive utopias, he explains that these are utopias that are geared toward progressive social change. They can serve as a guide for an attempt to strive for a qualitatively new society. Apart from Marcuse, Ernst Bloch also distinguishes two types of utopias: abstract and concrete utopia. Abstract utopia “is wishful thinking, but the wish is not accompanied by a will to change anything”.⁵³ It could be associated, for example, with daydreams that do not have something to do with radical social transformation, such as wishing to become a billionaire. On the other hand, concrete utopia “reaches forward to a real possible future, and involves not merely wishful but will-full thinking: There is never anything soft about conscious-known hope, but a will within it insists: it should be so, it must become so”⁵⁴

Moreover, I must admit that one has to be prudent when talking about utopia. The content of utopia varies depending on one's point of view. Individuals tend to have different visions of the world. Their political orientation can affect their view of social change, for instance. Furthermore, failed utopias of the past have also been absorbed by the dominant ideology in the status quo and lost their being utopian alternatives.⁵⁵ Indeed, one must admit that utopian visions are difficult to distinguish. In the context of this discussion, it would be intellectually dishonest to assume that Marcuse had all the answers with regard to utopian visions. Indeed, one has to recognize that it has the potential to be dangerous. A utopian thought to one can be a dystopian vision to another. The content of their wishes and visions can vary. Thus, one must be critical.

But as far as the main thrust of this discussion is concerned, we can glean from Marcuse's utopian character that utopian vision is central in the hope of radically transforming society. For Marcuse, this utopian speculation of a non-repressive society is only called utopian because the forces of domination have crystalized the existing order to be the best there is. For sure, individuals tend to think that the status quo is just how things will always be. Individuals have accepted the way of life at present and have lost sight of their imaginative impulses. Understandably so, renouncing the relative comfort and pleasure in advanced industrial societies for the risk of an alternative is the safer route toward existing as a member of the community.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 161.

⁵¹ Herbert Marcuse, “The End of Utopia,” in *Five Lectures: Psychoanalysis, Politics, and Utopia*; trans. Jeremy Shapiro and Shierry Weber (Boston: Beacon, 1970).

⁵² Ibid., 2.

⁵³ Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope: Volume 1* (MIT Press, 1995), 145. See also Ruth Levitas, “Educated Hope: Ernst Bloch on Abstract and Concrete Utopia,” *Utopian Studies* 1, no. 2 (1990): 15.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 147.

⁵⁵ Moylan, “The Locus of Hope,” 162.

For Marcuse, the promise of utopia is not so much that change is easy but that it is possible. It might be termed utopian, but it is not impossible. Again, it is utopian in the sense that one has a vision of a different reality from that which exists. As Angela Davis notes, “When truth cannot be realized within the established social order, it always appears to the latter as mere utopia.”⁵⁶ Mannheim also writes, “Every new vision of improving social institutions has seemed Utopian to those who took the established order for granted.”⁵⁷ But while this may be the case, it is the dream of a better world that movements, for instance, are able to keep going with the hope of being able to experience their desires one day.

At this point, we have seen already that utopian visions are necessary in evoking possibilities for social change. Marcuse may not have presented a clear picture or detailed scheme of an alternative society; he perpetually held on to the promise of projecting a better life than that which exists, nonetheless. He believes that such visions can be actualized. But it needs forces of liberation or a radical opposition that will struggle for it. It needs individuals that will embody the Great Refusal to the system of domination and repression and fight for a radical social transformation of the current society through activism. Indeed, this entails an entirely separate discussion in the future.

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⁵⁶ Angela Davis, “Marcuse’s Legacies,” in *Herbert Marcuse: A Critical Reader*, ed. John Abromeit & W. Mark Cobb (Routledge 2004), 5.

⁵⁷ Joseph L. Devitis, “Mannheim and Marcuse: Social Control in Reconstruction and Revolution,” *The Southwestern Journal of Philosophy* 6, no. 2 (1975): 131.

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