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THE SPECTRE OF LIBERATION AND ITS FAILURE TO MATERIALIZE

ON MARCUSE'S CRITIQUE OF UTOPIAN THINKING¹

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1. The Dialectic of Presence and Non-Presence in Marxian Theory

Karl Marx opens his revolutionary pamphlet “The Communist Manifesto” with the following claim, “A spectre is haunting Europe – the spectre of Communism. All the Powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this spectre” (Marx 2000a: 245). The notion of spectre (ghost) suggests a presence that is not yet present. The haunting is a persistent hovering over as if to await the necessary conditions to present itself in material form. This presence that is at the same time a non-presence exists as a mere possibility that is contained in the very present order of things. The presence of this possibility is indeed recognized by those who benefit from the present oppressive order of things. Hence, the desire by the Powers of old Europe to exorcise

¹ This paper is dedicated to the memory of my good friend Maria Érbia. Maria was a bright and shining young critical theorist who was about to make her mark on the world when she was taken from us suddenly last year.

it. However, exorcising this spectre is not so easy since those who seek to exorcise it are those who created it. It is worth quoting Marx at length here.

“The essential condition for the existence, and for the sway of the bourgeois class, is the formation and augmentation of capital; the condition for capital is wage-labor. Wage-labor rests exclusively on competition between the laborers. The advance of industry, whose involuntary promoter is the bourgeoisie, replaces the isolation of the laborers, due to competition, by their revolutionary combination, due to association. The development of Modern Industry, therefore, cuts from under its feet the very foundation on which the bourgeoisie produces and appropriates products. What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own grave-diggers. Its fall and the victory of the proletariat are equally inevitable” (Marx 2000a: 255).

I will not address the last sentence of this passage here. We will see later that for Marcuse Marx’s optimism regarding the fall of the bourgeoisie and the victory of the proletariat was a bit premature. While bourgeois society produces the mechanisms for its own demise it also produces the mechanisms by which it avoids its own demise. In other words, while bourgeois society produces the need for social change, it also produces barriers to social change. The above passage reflects Marx’s preoccupation with the development of the need for social change in the absence of a critique of the barriers to social change. However, *The Communist Manifesto* was written for the purpose of stirring up a revolutionary vision in the working class. The main point here is that in producing itself and the mechanisms by which it operates, bourgeois society also produces its own grave-diggers or its possible demise. As Antonio Negri argues, capitalism necessarily produces two classes that are antagonistic to each other. The ruling or bourgeois class produces its own negation. For Negri this is the

nature of the dialectic in the work of Marx and especially in the *Grundrisse*.

“We thus see, throughout the *Grundrisse*, a *forward movement in the theory*, a more and more constraining movement which permits us to perceive the fundamental moment constituted by the *antagonism between the collective worker and the collective capitalist*, an antagonism which appears in the form of the crisis” (Negri 1991: 4).

By necessity, capitalism produces the class of wage-laborers who sell their labor power to the capitalists. The obsession of the capitalists with profit results in the exploitation of the worker. Hence, the relationship between the worker and the capitalist is antagonistic. The collective worker develops into a revolutionary class that has as its task the negation of the relationship between collective capitalists and the collective worker. In this way, the collective workers become the grave diggers. In producing class antagonisms capitalism produces the possibility of its own demise. This possible demise of capitalism haunts it like a spectre.

The spectre of communism that Marx speaks of is also the spectre of liberation insofar as with the coming revolution the working class will be liberated from a life of toil, exploitation, alienation, and oppression by the capitalists. The working class will control and manage the means of production. I-It relationships will be transformed into I-Thou relationships. Workers will not only have their basic needs met but they will have adequate resources for self-development and self-determination. However, we know that such a dream never came true for the working class. What is to be made of this spectre that haunts Europe?

The spectre of communism is a presence that has not yet materialized. That is, it is a possibility or condition that hovers as a yet to come. This “yet to come” signifies three things in Marxian

theory. First, it is anticipation of the development of revolutionary consciousness in the working class. Second, the development of revolutionary consciousness leads inevitably to revolutionary activity whereby the working class attempts to overcome its condition of alienation and exploitation. Third, this revolutionary activity ushers in a new form of economic and social organization (communism) wherein the working class now controls the means of production. However, none of these conditions ever materialized. The question for later Marxists would be by what social, political, economic, and psychological mechanisms are the three forms of the “yet to come” contained. Further, are there any possibilities for the kind of social and economic change that Marx envisioned?

Although Marx was right to claim that capitalism produces its own gravediggers, we must pause to ask ourselves where are the graves? Are the gravediggers still digging? In the history of western Marxism there are a variety of answers to these questions. Here I will focus on the approach of Herbert Marcuse. Like Hegel before them, Marx and Marcuse were dialectical thinkers. It is not the case that the dialectic was a method that one could apply to the study of phenomena. For Hegel all things were by nature dialectical. Marx and Marcuse would focus purely on the dialectical nature of human social reality. Hence Marx developed a form of historical materialism which is dialectical, not dialectical materialism (which sees dialectic in nature). For Hegel, Marx and Marcuse the term dialectic refers to a series of contradictions by which social phenomena is constituted. Contradiction is that by which history moves.

For Marx, the contradictions by which capitalism is constituted are the very contradictions that would lead to its own

destruction, hence, capitalism produces its own gravediggers. The proletariat, which necessary for capitalism, is at the same time that class which will rise up and overthrow capitalism. However, no such revolution has taken place. In fact, it seems that the class who should be the negation of capitalism has conformed to its demands. Does this mean that there is no longer a spectre of liberation that haunts capitalist societies?

I believe that the work of Herbert Marcuse suggests that capitalist societies are still haunted by the spectre of liberation. This haunting occurs in three realms for Marcuse. These realms are the realm of reason, the realm of desire or the instincts, and the realm of social/political and economic organization. As a philosopher Marcuse has to grapple with the faculty of reason. What is the work of reason in the human subject? In Kantian philosophy a distinction is made between theoretical reason and practical reason. This distinction permeates all German idealism and is carried over into the Marxist tradition. For Kant, it was theoretical reason (scientific reason) that made knowledge of the world possible. However, this form of knowledge is limited insofar as it cannot provide knowledge beyond the finite ways in which human beings encounter the world. This form of reason is not our concern here.

The function of practical reason is more important for us here. While theoretical reason can only provide knowledge of how things are in their finite constitution, practical reason transcends the present order of things and present us with a blueprint of how things ought to be. That is, practical reason is the faculty of morality by which we govern ourselves according to rational principles. Practical reason is also freedom insofar as it is not determined by the way the world is organized. Rather, it attempts to shape the world according to principles. However, while the

notion of practical reason in German idealism appeared to focus on changing the world it never became a revolutionary force. The idealists were still too abstract in their development of the notion of practical reason. In his second book on Hegel, *Reason and Revolution*, Marcuse traces the development of reason from Hegel to its more revolutionary form in Marx. It is true that the French Revolution represented an attempt to bring certain enlightenment ideas about freedom and equality to fruition. However, the project of human liberation was never complete as the new bourgeois society came with its own restraints on individual freedom. The German idealists did see in the French Revolution the manifestation of their ideas. Marcuse writes:

“German idealism has been called the theory of the French Revolution. This does not imply that Kant, Fichte, Schelling, and Hegel furnished a theoretical interpretation of the French Revolution, but that they wrote their philosophy largely as a response to the challenge from France to reorganize the state and society on a rational basis, so that social and political institutions might accord with freedom and interest of the individual”.

He continues:

“The ideas of the French Revolution thus appear in the very core of the idealistic systems, and, to a great extent, determine their conceptual structure. As the German Idealists saw it, the French Revolution not only abolished feudal absolutism, replacing it with the economic and political system of the middle class, but it completed what the German Reformation had begun, emancipating the individual as a self-reliant master of his life. Man’s position in the world, the mode of his labor and enjoyment, was no longer to depend on some external authority, but on his own free rational activity” (Marcuse 1992: 3).

In German idealist philosophy, practical reason presents itself as a demand for self-determination. To be self-determining is

to have the freedom to give shape to one's life without interference from heteronomous forces. Hence, reason presents itself as a kind of mental or intellectual drive toward self-determination. Human life ought to be ordered by principles that every rational person would agree on if thinking rationally and not by external authority. Regarding Hegel's view of reason Marcuse argues that the human being as a thinking creature seeks to organize reality according to the demands of free rational thinking rather than conforming to the existing order of things (Marcuse 1992: 6). Hence, the function of reason is to freely organize the world or social reality in a way that meets the basic needs of the human person. Reason is not bound by the facts of human life, it seeks to transform those facts. Reason, therefore, is not based on how things are but rather on how things ought to be. Reason is the negation of the present reality principle. The following passage by Marcuse sums this up well.

“The mark of this essential freedom is the fact that the thinking subject is not chained to the immediately given forms of being, but is capable of transcending them and changing them in line with his concepts. The freedom of the thinking subject, in turn, involves his moral and practical freedom. For, the truth he envisions is not an object for passive contemplation, but an objective potentiality calling for realization” (Marcuse 1992: 255).

The task of reason is first to produce concepts and then attempt to transform the world according to those concepts.² This is important for our later discussion of Marcuse's view of utopian thinking.

As Marcuse transitions from his critique of Hegel to Marx we get a transition from philosophy to social theory. If the ideas of reason are to come to fruition, then an analysis of the conditions or

² The work of J.G. Fichte is probably the best example of this view.

lack thereof for the manifestation of these ideas must be carried out. The ideas of reason always present themselves within a particular form of social organization. Hence, these ideas can be used for purposes that violate the quest for liberation. For example, if the ideas of reason come under the sway of technical progress then such ideas may lead to the production of merely instrumental rationality.

As Marcuse transitions from Hegel to Marx or from philosophy to social theory In Part Two of *Reason and Revolution* he discusses the negation of philosophy. This builds on Marx's view that the purpose of philosophy is to transcend itself. In *Towards a Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right: Introduction*, Marx claims that one has to transcend philosophy to realize it and one realizes philosophy by transcending it (Marx 2000b: 76). The point is that philosophy produces the concept of freedom but philosophy must be transcended if the concept of freedom is to be realized in actual social life and in social relations. Marcuse follows this line of thought in *Reason and Revolution* and in an earlier essay entitled "Philosophy and Critical Theory." In both texts Marcuse shows how Hegel's philosophical concepts become economic concepts in the work of Marx. If freedom is to be actualized we must transition from philosophical questions to economic, political, and social questions. For it is the way in which economics, the political order, and social relations are organized that either prohibit the material manifestation of freedom or makes it possible. The utopian impulse that permeates philosophy becomes a critique of the material possibilities of its manifestation. Hence, reason turns from its function of producing the concept of freedom to a critique of the necessary conditions for the manifestation of freedom in the material world.

The second realm wherein the spectre of liberation haunts our society is that of the instincts. In what some consider to be his most optimistic and perhaps utopian books Marcuse attempts to disclose the emancipatory potential of Freud's theory of the instincts. In the context of discussing the conflict between Thanatos (the death drive) and Eros (the life instinct) Freud ends his *Civilization and its Discontents* on a rather pessimistic note. It seems that Freud takes these instincts to be hard wired in the human being with no way to determine which instinct will win in their battle for dominance. However, Marcuse argues that these instincts are malleable and are subject to be shaped by the form of social organization in which they exist. Marcuse actually uses Freud against Freud. Freud himself makes Marcuse's interpretation possible. In his 1915 essay "Repression" Freud argues that the repression is never a one-time thing. The repressed instinct always attempts to reassert itself.³ Therefore, repression is an ongoing act. The repressed instinct refuses complete erasure. While Freud expressed uncertainty as to which drive, Eros (the life instinct and the builder of culture) or Thanatos (the death instinct) would win in their eternal battle, Marcuse argues that it is a matter of social organization. That is, the way in which a society is structured and the values of that society strengthens one of the drives and weakens the other. For example, the capitalist obsession with individualism and competition tends to strengthen the death drive.

However, Eros is never put under complete erasure. It continues to assert itself in phantasy, art, imagination, and by other means. Marcuse writes:

"However, phantasy (imagination) retains the structure and the tendencies of the psyche prior to its organization by the reality, prior to its becoming an 'individual' set off against

3 See Freud (1949: 84-97).

other individuals. And by the same token, like the id to which it remains committed, imagination preserves the ‘memory’ of the subhistorical past when the life of the individual was the life of the genus, the image of the immediate unity between the universal and the particular under the rule of the pleasure principle” (Marcuse 1966a: 142-143).

However, in advanced industrial societies the instinctual structure of individuals gets organized by the performance principle of such societies. Hence, the feeling of unity with others or the sense of connection is replaced by competition and conflict between individuals. Nevertheless, “In and against the world of the antagonistic *principium individuationis*, imagination sustains the claim of the whole individual, in union with the genus and with the ‘archaic’ past” (Marcuse 1966a: 143).

The return of the repressed is like a haunting at the biological level. The repressed instincts exist as the potential of another form of life, they contain possibilities for a life that is opposite of the present order of things. To this end, they serve as the possible negation of the present performance principle. Marcuse’s use of Freud’s theory of human instincts leads him to argue that there is a biological basis for liberation and socialism. In *An Essay on Liberation* He writes:

“Prior to all ethical behavior in accordance with specific social standards, prior to all ideological expression, morality is a ‘disposition’ of the organism, perhaps rooted in the erotic drive to counter aggressiveness, to create and preserve ‘even greater unities’, of life. We would then have this side of all ‘values’, an instinctual foundation for the solidarity among human beings —a solidarity which has been effectively repressed in line with the requirements of class society but which now appears as a precondition for liberation” (Marcuse 1969: 10).

Marcuse argues that even the concept of morality is shaped by the social demands of capitalist societies. While morality was

perhaps a drive to counter aggressiveness and strive for a higher unity within human life, a class-based society demands disunity and competition between individuals. Class society opposes a society built on solidarity and mutual recognition. The politics of corporate capitalism and consumer economy has produced in human beings a second nature which puts under erasure the drive toward unity and solidarity (Marcuse 1969: 11). However, the erasure of the drive toward higher unities cannot be completely erased. It continues to haunt the individual as the possible negation of the second nature created by a class society. Herein lies Marcuse's hope for possible social change.

So far we have located and discussed two distinct areas or human functions wherein we might find the spectre of liberation. They are reason and the instincts. However, in a repressive and oppressive society these two human functions can be put against each other. Marcuse addresses this conflict in *Eros and Civilization*. It is interesting that for the first four chapters of the book Marcuse discusses and revises Freud's theory of the instincts to reveal their emancipatory function. However, chapter five, "A Philosophical Interlude" represents a break in the text. In this chapter Marcuse backs up a bit to articulate the importance of Freud. Here Marcuse challenges what we might call a mis-development of reason. In the western philosophical tradition, reason (Logos) has been transformed into a logic of domination. This idea is similar to what Horkheimer and Adorno called instrumental reason. Here, reason (Logos) is isolated from Eros and used to subdue Eros. Marcuse does not seek to establish the dominance of Eros over Logos but rather to restore Eros to its rightful place alongside of Logos.

"The struggle begins with the perpetual internal conquest of the 'lower' faculties of the individual: his sensuous and appetitive faculties. Their subjugation is, at least since Plato,

regarded as a constitutive element of human reason, which is thus in its very function repressive. The struggle culminates in the conquest of external nature, which must be perpetually attacked, curbed, and exploited in order to yield to human needs. The ego experiences being as ‘provocation, as ‘project’; it experiences each existential condition as a restraint that has to be overcome, transformed into another one” (Marcuse 1966a: 110).

“Reason is to insure, through the ever more effective transformation and exploitation of nature, the fulfillment of human potentialities. But in the process the end seems to recede before the means: the time devoted to alienated labor absorbs the time for individual needs—and defines the needs themselves. The Logos shows forth as the logic of domination” (ibid.: 111).

It is unfortunate that the Western philosophical tradition has developed in such a way that reason (the source of the idea of freedom) has been used for that sake of repression. While some repression is needed just so human beings can co-exist (Marcuse calls this basic repression) capitalist societies develop in such a way that individuals are repressed beyond the level need for human co-existence. Marcuse calls this extra degree of repression surplus repression. Hence, reason or Logos is used to force individuals to conform to the present performance principle. As we saw earlier, reason or Logos now operates within the context of a consumer economy and as such it creates in the individual a second nature that ties the individual libidinally and aggressively to the commodity form (Marcuse 1969: 11).

The purpose of this philosophical interlude is to use Freud as a corrective to the logic of domination that has been produced by Western philosophy. With Eros restored to its rightful place alongside Logos we have the unity of two sources as the ground for liberation. The result of this unification is what Marcuse calls the new “rationality of gratification.” The struggle for happiness

and reason converge in the rationality of gratification. Reason and the instincts are now capable of working together to envision a qualitatively better and non-repressive form of life that is designed to meet the needs of the human individual.

I said earlier that the third domain in which there is a haunting and quest for liberation is society itself. After all, it is the structure and form of organization of a given society that either conceals or discloses the possibility for liberation. It is the structure and form of organization of a society that makes liberation possible or impossible. The question is, what type of haunting is there in capitalist societies that might open the door for liberation. This will be addressed in our next section.

2. Utopia as Ideology and as the Negation of the Possibility of Liberation

What is the status of the concept of utopia in the work of Marcuse? This question must be asked not because Marcuse was a utopian thinker nor because he did use the term from time to time. It must be asked because of its ideological use against emancipatory projects. While there is a tradition of utopian thinking and literature in the Western world, the term is often used to shut down discussions of the possibility of real social change. Many of us who fight for social change are accustomed to being labeled utopian. In *Eros and Civilization* Marcuse says: “The relegation of real possibilities to the no-man’s land of utopia is itself an essential element of the ideology of the performance principle” (Marcuse 1966a: 150). We saw in an earlier passage that Marcuse believed that the imagination produces an image of a lost unity between the individual and the universal. That is, it produces

an image of a subhistorical past prior to the principle of individuation. He also speaks of a subhistorical unity between the pleasure principle and the reality principle.

However, more important than the image of our subhistorical past is what can be imagined and fulfilled in the present. Marcuse writes: “The historical factor contained in Freud’s theory of instincts has come to fruition in history when the basic Ananke (*Lebensnot*) – which, for Freud, provided the rationale for the repressive reality principle – is undermined by the progress of civilization” (Marcuse 1966a: 151). Here we get to the heart of Marcuse’s critique of the concept of utopia as a form of ideology. The distinction that Marcuse makes between basic repression and surplus repression in Chapter Two of *Eros and Civilization* is relevant here. We know that a certain amount of repression is needed just for human beings to co-exist. Further, the struggle for life compels us to repress certain drives insofar as we must engage in labor to overcome scarcity. However, both Marcuse and Marx anticipated a form of technological development that would make it possible to decrease labor time and engage in more fulfilling activities. Marcuse even believed that the realm of necessity (labor) and the realm of freedom (pleasure) would no longer have to be separate realms. However, what we have witnessed instead is the perpetual growth of the mechanisms of repression and the reduction of the realm of freedom. Under capitalism the reality principle in its historical form becomes a performance principle that demands more repression for the sake of domination.

One of the principle mechanisms used by the performance principle is the notion of scarcity. Marcuse argues that in advanced technological society scarcity is no longer a problem. Instead, the distribution of scarcity is the problem. That is, the basic structure of

capitalist society produces scarcity in one segment of society and enormous wealth in another. In fact, most capitalist societies already have the necessary resources to end poverty and useless toil. However, the notion of scarcity is employed to maintain the present level of toil and poverty among the majority of people. Therefore, people are further exploited for the financial gain of the most wealthy members of our society. The concept of scarcity continues to drive competition among and division among members of the working class.⁴ Members of capitalist societies are asked to perform as if scarcity is a reality. Hence, the present performance principle is maintained and any possible social change is contained. Therefore, according to the present performance principle, any talk of social change or expansion of the realm of freedom is an appeal to an impossible utopia. The practice of referring to calls for qualitative social change as utopian functions to shut down any political discourse that points out the real possibilities for social change. As such, it functions to maintain the status quo or the present order of things and is therefore merely ideological.

3. The End of Utopia

Marcuse believed that capitalist societies have developed in such a way that they have made certain concepts and world views obsolete. Notions such as scarcity and utopia have both become obsolete. Capitalism is now haunted by its own “other” the possibility for a socialist society. The historical development of capitalism has produced a new kind of grave digger. It has

4 “Class” here is used in a broader sense than Marx’s notion of the industrial proletariat. In the last decade of his life Marcuse began to work with a concept of the working class that included white collar workers.

produced the material resources that undermines its own narrative regarding scarcity. The very presence of an abundance of material resources and technology makes obsolete the degree of repression present in capitalist societies. Hence, the demand for a qualitative better form of life is not a blind utopian dream but it is a real material possibility. In a lecture from 1967 entitled “The End of Utopia” Marcuse writes:

“Today any form of the concrete world, of human life, any transformation of the technical and natural environment is a possibility, and the locus of this possibility is historical. Today we have the capacity to turn the world into hell, and we are well on the way to doing so. We also have the capacity to turn it into the opposite of hell. This would mean the end of utopia, that is, the refutation of those ideas and theories that use the concept of utopia to denounce certain socio-historical possibilities” (Marcuse 2014: 249).

Marcuse’s point is that the present social order contains within itself its own possibility for transformation. Things could be otherwise for better or for worse. To refer to the present order of things as if things cannot be otherwise is oppressive and is itself a form of utopianism. It is to say that the present order of things is the best possible order of things. He writes in “A Note on Dialectic” “This power of facts is an oppressive power; it is the power of man over man, appearing as objective and rational condition” (Marcuse 2007: 71) The power of facts is oppressive insofar as it becomes totalitarian and absorbs all opposition to the present social order (ibid.: 67). In capitalist societies those who have no wealth and do not own, control, or manage the means of production are dominated by those with wealth and the power to own, control, or manage the means of production. Hence, our social reality becomes one of class conflict and the domination of one group by another. This social order is a social fact. However, it is a fact that contains

the possibility of being otherwise, that is, it contains the possibility of ending the domination of some human groups by others. According to Marcuse, one-dimensional thinking only sees social facts, that is, things are they are. Two-dimensional or dialectical thinking sees in the present order of things its potential to be otherwise. The view that the facts are all that there are is an ideological view that establishes and protects the dominant group. Opposition to the present order is declared to be utopian thinking because a new and better order is taken to be impossible.

This way of thinking is rejected by Marcuse. For this reason he believes that the concept of utopia is obsolete and serves ideological purposes. Marcuse's notion of the great refusal is the rejection of the idea that the facts of the oppressive social world are the only possible mode of human existence. These facts contain the undeveloped possibilities for a better world. Critical consciousness rejects the narrative that suggests that the present form of social organization is fixed or final. The vision of a qualitatively better society can no longer be called utopian since real possibilities for a qualitatively better form of life do exist. However, the refusal to bring these emancipatory possibilities to fruition may also create the conditions for a qualitatively worse form of life. This we will explore in the next section.

4. Another Haunting: The Dialectic of Liberation and Barbarism

Unfortunately, this paper must end on a very sobering note. This sobering note is not written in the spirit of pessimism, but rather, in the Marcusean dialectical spirit. While capitalist societies are haunted by the spectre of liberation, the critical theorists must

also be cognizant of another haunting or spectre, the spectre of barbarism. While there is a possibility that with the proper use of present resources and technology things could get better, there is still the possibility that things can get worse. In a paper entitled “Marcuse’s Concept of Dimensionality: A Political Interpretation” Marcuse’s son Peter Marcuse (2017) attempts to expand that concept of dimensionality in a way that reveals a tension between four dimensions of our society. I will address three of them here. We’ve already talked about one-dimensionality which refers to a kind of flattening out of critical consciousness. This type of thinking reduces reality to the bare facts and fails to see within those facts alternative possibilities. Marcuse opposes to this form of thinking two-dimensional thinking wherein one is capable of seeing real, concrete possibilities for a new and liberated form of life.

We must be aware that the kind of society that produces one-dimensional thinking is an oppressive society with a social agenda driven by the need for total social and political domination. Such a society does not stand still, it is always in motion as the forces of domination seek to draw every space for critical thinking and resistance into its orbit. The forces of domination never stand still. Hence, the same society that is haunted by the spectre of liberation is also haunted by the spectre of barbarism. While this thesis is not developed by Herbert Marcuse, he does open the door for the critique that has been carried out by Peter Marcuse. In a passage cited earlier H. Marcuse said, “Today we have the capacity to turn the world into hell, and we are well on the way to doing so” (Marcuse 2014: 249). Marcuse turned his attention to our capacity to turn the world into the opposite of hell. He was more concerned with revealing and bringing to fruition the specter of liberation.

However, today we find ourselves in a position similar to that of the Frankfurt School in the 1920s and 1930s. While they had to address not only the failure of the Marxian/Marxist revolution to materialize, they also had to deal with the fact that those who would most benefit from the revolution were most likely to resist it. Today, we have to face not only the failure of the revolution or liberation to materialize, we have to address the possibility of new forms of barbarism. In his article Peter Marcuse sees liberation and barbarism as two different dimensions of the present social order. The critical theorist must not only examine the possibility of liberation and the mechanisms of one-dimensionality, she must also examine the possibility of new forms of barbarism that are equally present in the present order of things. I will conclude this paper by briefly addressing the present condition of the United States. I hope that my brief statements about the US will be useful for critical theorists from other parts of the world.

It is no secret that Donald Trump and his administration has set the US back generations. The country that once saw itself as the champion of democracy is now threatening to erupt into a form of barbarism that most Americans did not believe possible. The rise of blatant forms of white supremacy, the disrespect for women, the attack on environmental agencies, the cutting of ties with some of our most important allies, self-imposed isolation from the rest of the world, the replacement of negotiation with threats and bullying, the hostility that fills political discourse in America are just a few developments in our stride toward barbarism. So, it seems as if the spectre of barbarism may win out over the spectre of liberation.

The election of Donald Trump in 2016 caught most Americans off guard. After the election a dark mood of depression

and utter disbelief fell on America. Some on the left were tempted to give up in despair. On the other hand, many Americans who had never before been politically active became anti-Trump activists. However, there were a few among us who were not surprised and did not enter a period of despair. This was so because the ascension of Trump should have come as no surprise for the critical theorist who understands the two spectres that haunts American society. The very refusal to allow the possibility of liberation to materialize only strengthens the possibility of barbarism. Marcuse himself makes a similar point in his discussion of the struggle between Thanatos and Eros. In an oppressive society the aggressive instincts are nourished at the expense of the life instincts. Hence, such a society tends toward barbarism. The need of the oppressive society to produce one-dimensional thinking by flattening out the possibility of critical thinking also produces the trend toward barbarism. Trump is the logical outcome of a society that has systematically put under erasure the possibility of liberation for the oppressed, repressed, exploited, and alienated in that society.

Prior to Trump, racism was used to manipulate poor working class white people. Using race to divide and conquer poor working class blacks and whites protected the power elite who rob both working class blacks and whites of the necessary resources for self-development and self-determination as well as their humanity. The election of Barak Obama in 2008 and 2012 led to a form of race based fear that was protected and nourished by republicans in the US. The “othering” of Obama, the rise of the Tea Party, the cry “take our country back,” and the birther movement (led by Trump) all brought to the surface America’s deep seated race problem and the way that politicians have always used racism to further economic exploitation. While America had developed

the resources and technology to end poverty in the country it increased the exploitation of the worker and poverty continued to increase. At every turn policies were put in place to whittle down critical consciousness. For example; programs in the Humanities are being defunded all over the country. More and more citizens are encouraged to get a trade. This is all done under the façade of helping Americans get jobs. Hence, education is reduced to acquiring a skill set for getting a job and not the cultivation of critical consciousness. As a result uneducated white workers suffer from the lack of critical consciousness and are victims of economic injustice and exploitation. They then are encouraged to blame blacks, Hispanics, and other people of color for their economic suffering.

With regard to the potential for liberation and the co-existence of a tendency toward barbarism we find ourselves standing almost in the place where Freud stood at the end of *Civilization and its Discontents* when he despaired that we do not know who the winner will be in the eternal battle between Eros and Thanatos. Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* was an attempt to rescue Freud's drive theory from this apparent pessimism. The repressed human drives, Eros especially, refuses to simply surrender to the performance principle of repressive societies. They live in fantasy and in the imagination. They may very well come to fruition when the conditions for their possible liberation are present. However, we have seen that capitalist societies perpetually respond to the possible liberation of human beings with greater mechanisms of oppression. Even after recognizing the revolutionary potential of various social groups Marcuse made us aware of the possibility of barbarism. Toward the end of *One-Dimensional Man* Marcuse expresses hope in what he calls "the substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and

persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployable” (Marcuse 1966b: 256). These above groups live outside of the democratic process. Although they may vote, they can only vote for one master or the other. Marcuse has reminded us that this form of voting does not abolish the masters nor the slaves (ibid.: 7). These groups are members of our society who live under intolerable conditions and therefore are in opposition to the system that produces these intolerable conditions.

These groups mentioned by Marcuse can be interpreted as capitalism’s contemporary grave diggers. It is in their opposition to the system that the specter of liberation haunts capitalist societies. According to Marcuse, their opposition is revolutionary because their existence violates the rules and reveals that the game is rigged. That is, the intolerable conditions under which they live disclose that the system is designed to work for a small few while producing misery for the majority. At this point Marcuse begins to sound more like the Freud of the end of *Civilization and its Discontents*. At the end of *One-Dimensional Man* Marcuse continues to hope for the development of revolutionary consciousness and social change. However, he is also aware of the tendency toward barbarism. Nevertheless, the spectre of liberation is never completely put under erasure and the capitalist system continues to produce new grave diggers. Even while misery increases, the resources needed to end unnecessary human suffering also increases.

In America it was a pre-Trump form of normalcy that gave birth to Trump and the present crisis, the stride toward barbarism. Many middle-class Americans and some progressives were not inclined to expose and overthrow the oppressive and repressive forces in American society because they were comfortable. Since the election of Trump many of these same people have become

activists because their lives are now threatened. Is it too late? The conditions for a Trump presidency and all that comes with it has existed in America for decades. Even members of the Frankfurt School knew that there were fascist possibilities at work in America. Trump and America's stride toward barbarism is the result of ignoring the presence of real possibilities for a qualitatively better society. My hope is that what is happening in America will shed light on the problem of ignoring the potential of a society to develop social mechanisms for liberation while at the same time ignoring its possibilities to fall into barbarism. The demand for a qualitatively better society is not empty utopian thinking when a given society is critically evaluated not just on the facts but in light of the real potential for change contained in those facts.

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