



# DISSONÂNCIA

Revista de Teoria Crítica

ISSN: 2594-5025

Instituto de Filosofia e Ciências Humanas

Universidade Estadual de Campinas

[www.ifch.unicamp.br/ojs/index.php/teoriacritica](http://www.ifch.unicamp.br/ojs/index.php/teoriacritica)

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**Título** Presentation

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**Fonte** Dossiê Herbert Marcuse, Parte 1 (*Dissonância: Revista de Teoria Crítica*, volume 2, número 1. 1, junho de 2018)

## Como citar este artigo:

Abromeit, J., Nobre, M. "Presentation". *Dossiê Herbert Marcuse, Parte 1 (Dissonância: Revista de Teoria Crítica, v. 2, n. 1.1)*, p. 6-13, junho de 2018.

# PRESENTATION

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One of the main guidelines of this issue has been the challenge of presenting the many different facets of Marcuse's work while at the same time not ignoring the image of him that emerged late in his life and that functions like an irresistible magnet – namely, the “guru of the New Left”.<sup>1</sup> On the one hand, this image appears as an undue limitation, since it does not do justice to the richness of Marcuse's trajectory as a whole. On the other hand, it is certainly not a coincidence that so many interpretations of his thought and political actions focus on this period from the mid-1960s to the late 1970s. The reason seems fairly obvious. The Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School never had such a large impact on transformative social movements before Marcuse – nor has it again since Marcuse's death. An obvious example can be found in the fact that many movements of the 2011-2013 global cycle of democratic revolts did not establish any relationship to the work of more recent Critical Theorists.

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<sup>1</sup> For a lengthier discussion of the ways in which Marcuse's image as the “guru of the New Left” created a barrier to a serious reception of his theoretical work, see the “Introduction” to *Herbert Marcuse: A Critical Reader*, eds. John Abromeit and W. Mark Cobb (New York and London: Routledge, 2004), p. 1-40.

And yet, understandable as it may be, privileging of this one public image of Marcuse should not take the place of reading his work, which spans over six decades. At the same time, this image cannot be ignored. So, a sound way to balance the two approaches is to highlight the most important aspects and contributions of Marcuse's work throughout his life as a whole, without ignoring the distinctiveness of this later period.

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In the essays collected in this issue there are a number of themes that recur relating to both the philosophical and social theoretical aspects of Marcuse's works. Not surprisingly, in a journal issue dedicated to the memory of Maria Erbia Cassia Carnaúba, Marcuse's understanding of utopia, in general, and the concept of "concrete utopia", in particular, is discussed and analyzed in several of the essays. Whereas some authors, such as Arnold Farr, seek to refute the common claim that Marcuse's work is utopian in the pejorative sense, others – such as Rosalvo Schütz and Silvio Carneiro – highlight the critical function of utopian thinking in Marcuse's work.

A second philosophical theme that appears in several of the essays is Marcuse's call for a determinate negation of philosophy itself. José Manuel Romero Cuevas, Arnold Farr and John Abromeit all describe the movement of Marcuse's thinking from philosophy to critical social theory, which took him beyond philosophy to a concrete engagement with the socio-historical, social-psychological and political forces that shaped advanced industrial and post-industrial societies. As was the case with Marx in the 19<sup>th</sup> century,

Marcuse's negation of philosophy was determinate insofar as it preserved its critical and self-reflexive impulses.

In the essays one also finds a number of recurring themes relating to Marcuse's critical social theory. In the 1930s, Marcuse's senior colleague at the Institute for Social Research, Max Horkheimer, developed a socio-historical and social psychological theory of bourgeois subjectivity -- what Horkheimer called "the anthropology of the bourgeois epoch", which was the subtitle of his 1936 essay "Egoism and Freedom Movements". According to Horkheimer, modern capitalism was defined not only by a new system of production based on the appropriation of value created by commodified human labor power; it also gave rise to new, dominant forms of subjectivity that first emerged among the ascendant bourgeoisie, but were subsequently imposed upon society as a whole.

Several of the essays explore Marcuse's efforts to theorize these repressive forms of bourgeois subjectivity, and the possibility of overcoming them practically. They also show the peculiar way Marcuse found to explore these themes, not rarely in formulations that diverged from the ones that were put forward by Horkheimer and other thinkers of the Institute. Jaeho Kang presents a comprehensive overview of Marcuse's writings on aesthetics in order to highlight – and critique – the centrality of autonomous art to Marcuse's critical theory. He stresses Marcuse's broad definition of aesthetics as relating to the senses and the sensual, the imagination, and the emotional and libidinal foundations of subjectivity. He views Marcuse as following the surrealists in emphasizing the potential of art to dissolve reified character structures and create new forms of emancipated subjectivity, but breaking with some of the surrealists in his consistent refusal to politicize art in any direct way.

Farr examines Marcuse's efforts find an alternative to the "possessive individualism" of the bourgeoisie, which becomes "second nature" of modern capitalist societies by discouraging and suppressing more humane impulses towards solidarity. Farr presents a reinterpretation of Marcuse's later work – from *Eros and Civilization* onwards – in order to demonstrate how and why contemporary capitalist societies are still haunted by the specter of liberation. Despite the dominance of regressive social and political tendencies in the neo-liberal period, Farr draws on Marcuse's work to identify three interrelated areas in which objective possibilities of emancipation continue to exist: the critical potential of reason, in general, and practical reason, in particular; our instinctual desires for happiness, which can never be completely suppressed; and the sphere of social and political organization, which has become ripe for fundamental transformation in light of recent tendencies to abolish labor and, with it, surplus repression.

The concept of repressed objective possibilities for emancipation that continue to "haunt" contemporary society is another theme that emerges in several of the essays. Zacarias and Abromeit examine Marcuse's analysis of capitalism's tendency – as already analyzed by Marx in the *Grundrisse* and elsewhere – to eliminate labor and to put an end to the dominance of our lives by abstract time and repressive sublimation. Exploring a whole new set of unpublished documents, the "Fonds Guy Debord" of the *Bibliothèque nationale de France*, Zacarias shows how profound the affinity between the two thinkers was and how influential Marcuse's position was for the emergence of the "society of spectacle". Taking *Eros and Civilization* as a starting point and support, Zacarias reconstructs Guy Debord's reading of Marcuse. He argues that Marcuse was even more radical than the French thinker in his theorization of the objective possibility of new forms

of emancipated subjectivity that began to emerge in the radical protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s, and could fully emerge in a post-bourgeois, post-capitalist society.

Nina Power and Farr both emphasize that, even during dark times like the present, when authoritarian leaders and social movements continue to make substantial gains around the world, such emancipatory possibilities continue to exist. They can be deciphered – like a *Spiegelschrift der Erlösung*, as Adorno once put it<sup>2</sup> – not by denying, but instead by focusing intently on the most troubling tendencies in contemporary society. Farr, Abromeit and Power also point to the regressive political tendencies in the present to remind us of one the most central theses of Critical Theory as a whole, namely, the powerful inherent tendency of capitalism to realize barbaric, rather than emancipatory possibilities. One final theme that appears in several of the essays is the ongoing relevance of Marcuse’s concept of “repressive desublimation”. Zacarias, Carneiro and Power all offer insightful analyses of this key concept, through comparisons of Marcuse’s later writings with the theories of Guy Debord, Michel Foucault and Mark Fisher.

Even such a brief overview of the essays collected here shows how wide the range of themes and interests of Marcuse’s trajectory was. More than that, this issue of *Dissonancia* also tries to pinpoint some of the most significant stages of said trajectory. It starts with Cuevas’ account of the early Marcuse, from the 1928 essay “Contributions to a Phenomenology of Historical Materialism” – a direct engagement with Heidegger’s *Time and Being* – to the 1936 essay “On the Concept of Essence”, and it continues all the way up to Kang’s examination of the last book

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2 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflexionen aus dem beschädigten Leben* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1951), p. 334.

published by Marcuse, in 1977, *The Aesthetic Dimension*. Cuevas' essay shows how Marcuse's critique of the Heideggerian concept of historicity was decisive in shaping his own entry in the interdisciplinary materialism that was put forward by Horkheimer in the 1930s. Cuevas presents such a move as an appropriation and an interpretation of concepts like "Dasein" and "Sorge" in terms of the theoretical framework provided by Marx, Lukács, and Korsch. It is interesting to see how Cuevas's interpretation highlights a progressive convergence between Marcuse and Horkheimer, despite the divergences that eventually emerged between the two.

Moving forward two decades, to one of the most significant stages in Marcuse's trajectory, Carneiro's essay focuses on the major book of the mid-1950s, *Eros and Civilization*, and its central concept of "surplus repression". Carneiro patiently reconstructs the concept, which made it possible to bring together Freud and Marx in such an original way. In making *Eros* somewhat the gravitational center of Marcuse's work, Carneiro claims also that a sound interpretation of this book and its resonances in later works would offer a different and more interesting way to approach the biopolitical phenomena so many theorists rightfully struggle with today.

Many of the essays in the issue also pose the question of how to interpret Marcuse's theoretical and practical moves in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, which also means that they are explicitly or implicitly concerned with Marcuse's relevance to a diagnosis of our present time – as one would expect from Critical Theorists. Nina Power shows the affinities between Marcuse's 1964 *One-Dimensional Man* and Mark Fisher's 2009 *Capitalist Realism*. Adopting the "standpoint of hell" – that is, focusing precisely on some the most troubling aspects of contemporary capitalist society – Power reveals the unbroken explanatory power of some of

Marcuse's key concepts, such as "repressive desublimation". She demonstrates how Fisher's theory can be interpreted as continuing and updating many of Marcuse's critiques of the "socially necessary" ideology of "happy consciousness".

Abromeit returns to an unpublished essay that Marcuse wrote soon after the reelection of Richard Nixon as president in 1972, in order to examine Marcuse's prescient analysis there of the "neo-fascist" tendencies in the United States, which have gained much strength since then and have culminated in the election of Donald Trump. Abromeit argues that Marcuse's theoretical insights remain relevant, but must be supplemented by an engagement with more recent, critical studies in the social sciences of phenomena such as mass incarceration, rising inequality and increasing precarity of life that has come with the ongoing capitalist abolition of labor.

It is not a coincidence either that in their essays both Schütz and Giesen refer to public appearances by Marcuse in his last years of life, so we can see what it is to analyze the events as they are happening, in the heat of the moment. Schütz takes Marcuse's last public lecture in 1979 as a starting point to build his argument for the specificity of the Marcusean critical model. For Schütz, as for Maria Carnaúba, this is the specificity of the "concrete utopia". Going back to the 1967 discussion of *The End of Utopia* and to the debate between Marcuse and Bloch, Schütz presents the Marcusean requirements for the socio-historical negation of the present that lead to utopian possibilities that are not in fact utopian.

One could not stress enough the liveliness of Giesen's account. He revisits a debate in 1976 between Marcuse and the conservative West German politician Kurt Biedenkopf. He interprets the debate – and the fact that Biedenkopf was even willing to debate Marcuse at all – as a sign of the much larger shift



that was underway throughout the Western world at this time to a new period of neo-liberal hegemony, and a resurgence of conservative and right-wing populist politics in the 1980s. These tendencies have continued uninterrupted into the present, despite the fact that the capitalist crisis of 2008 largely discredited neo-liberal ideology. A clear alternative to neo-liberalism – and its monstrous Doppelgänger, right-wing populism – has yet to emerge. At such a time it is more important than ever to revisit the theoretical and practical legacy of Herbert Marcuse, as we continue to search for a real alternative to capitalist barbarism.