

HERBERT MARCUSE: A CRITIQUE OF CONSUMER SOCIETY

Ira Chernus

The philosopher Herbert Marcuse was one of the best known radical writers of the 1960s. He lived in Germany until 1933, when he fled the Nazi regime and came to the U.S. His most influential book was One-Dimensional Man (1964). In the first chapter of that book he gives his analysis of contemporary Western society, including U.S. society. He argues that our society is deeply distorted because we use our resources to meet false needs while we often ignore true needs.

TRUE AND FALSE NEEDS

How can we know the difference between true and false needs? Marcuse argues that there are a small number of vital human needs that every society must meet. "The only needs that have an unqualified claim for satisfaction are the vital ones--nourishment, clothing, lodging at the attainable level of culture" (5; numbers refer to pages quoted from One-Dimensional Man). Everyone in every society would like to satisfy their vital needs completely with as little work as possible. In other words, everyone would like to reduce poverty, and eliminate it if possible. If the basic goods were distributed to everyone, there would be much less injustice and oppression in the world. There would also be much more leisure time to enjoy pleasure and beauty. These goals of justice and enjoyment are inherent in the universal desire to satisfy basic needs.

Although we all share the same vital needs, we are free to meet them in a very wide variety of ways (as Peter Berger explained in The Sacred Canopy). Every society creates particular ways of meeting the vital needs, and then tries to convince its members that its chosen ways of meeting needs are objectively necessary. This means that every society surrounds the basic needs with many other needs that are not basic or universal. These are socially created needs. They arise at a certain time in the group's history for certain reasons (often to give specific people more wealth or power). The need to own property, the need to be monogamous (or polygamous), the need to have a hereditary king (or a democratically elected president)--these are examples of socially created needs.

Marcuse points out that socially created needs may have nothing to do with our basic needs. Indeed they may even work against our basic needs. In that sense, they may be false needs. False needs are unnecessary needs. They have been invented by a society and do not contribute at all to our vital needs. To meet false needs we repress our genuine needs and the real needs of others. We perform unneeded labor, miss opportunities to enjoy life, and deprive others of their basic needs. No one really needs a million-dollar mansion; adequate housing can be purchased for much less. But some people will work 70 hours a week for a corporation in order to afford that mansion. They will put themselves under constant stress and perhaps die prematurely from it. And their corporation may employ people in other countries to do its basic labor for five dollars a day. False needs are needs "superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice" (5).

Until the present century most human labor was directed toward meeting basic needs. Goods and services were valued because they were useful; they could help meet basic needs. (Economists call this "use-value.") But the 20th century has seen perhaps the greatest revolution in the history of humanity: our technology now allows us to meet all the basic needs of all the people in the world with very little labor. Marcuse thinks this is true no matter how much the population grows. Indeed if everyone worked at producing goods to meet basic needs, there would be far too many of these goods. This would drive the price way down, and no one could make a profit. So to keep the capitalist system going, most work must be done for socially created needs that have little to do with basic human needs. In other words, most work must be done to meet false needs. Goods and services that meet these false needs are valued simply because they have a high price tag, which usually has nothing to do with their use-value. We are willing to pay a lot for them only because everyone else is willing to pay a lot. (Economists call this "exchange-value.") Diamonds and ballplayers are good examples of very low use-value and very high exchange-value.

We produce an incredible variety of such unneeded goods and services. And we unnecessarily replace those goods and services because they are "out of fashion" or because the goods are made to wear out too quickly. (Note: "We" here means Marcuse's image of the average American. It includes all of us, insofar as we typify that average American--and virtually all of us do typify him/her to some degree, often much more than we'd like to think.) We keep doing unneeded work so that we can earn money to buy unneeded goods and services. This is the essence of our nomos today. We accept this nomos as objectively true and necessary, as Berger's theory predicts we would. In Berger's terms, the nomos used to be maintained and legitimated by religion. Now the nomos is maintained and legitimated by useless labor and consumption.

We also internalize the nomos and base our sense of personal identity upon it. We experience ourselves, above all, as consumers. We define ourselves in terms of what we consume. In fact we learn at an early age to need all these unnecessary consumer items. We come to believe that everything we need can be purchased in the marketplace (nowadays usually the shopping mall). We also come to believe that we need everything that is for sale in the marketplace. We don't even ask ourselves whether we really need a microwave, a home computer, a VCR. Our sense of individual identity is shaped by these socially created needs. "This civilization transforms the object world into an extension of man's mind and body. . . The people recognize themselves in their commodities. They find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment" (9). So our positive self-image depends on an endless round of buying: When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping.

All of this presents quite a contrast to the industrial society of the 19th and early 20th century. At that time the technology was not yet able to meet everyone's basic needs. So the people of that era (probably your great-grandparents) were needed to produce as many goods as possible as quickly and efficiently as possible. They learned to see themselves as rational minds--what Theodore Roszak calls the "In-Here"--skillfully analyzing and manipulating the "Out-There." Their goal was perfect control over the "Out-There." In the consumer society of the middle and late 20th century, we are no longer needed as producers of goods and services. Technology can do almost everything without us. But we are needed as consumers. To keep the system going

we must keep buying. So we experience the world "Out-There" not as material to be shaped by our skills but as items to be purchased. And we experience ourselves "In-Here" not as rational manipulators but as passive consumers, who are often impulsive and compulsive rather than rational.

This gives us a different motivation for our work. Our great-grandparents worked in order to gain mastery over nature. We work in order to be able to consume. So we learn to need to work within the system, although most of the work it provides is repetitive, boring, and useless. "The social controls exact the overwhelming need for the production and consumption of waste; the need for stupefying work where it is no longer a real necessity; the need for modes of relaxation which soothe and prolong this stupefication" (7). Most importantly, for Marcuse, the rewards of the system are handed out very unfairly. Looking at the world as a whole, a few people get huge amounts of money, power, and other resources. But most get virtually nothing. They live their lives in relative poverty, often a squalid grinding poverty. So the system perpetuates toil, aggressiveness, misery, and injustice--all of which are unnecessary.

THE NEW TOTALITARIANISM

Marcuse's analysis raises serious questions about our way of life. His main question is: Why do we continue to accept it and value it, if it is based on wasteful toil and injustice? Berger would remind us that every nomos provides satisfaction simply because the alternative is anomy. We feel secure as long as we have a familiar predictable order in our lives. As with any nomos, we take our system for granted and we are afraid to imagine any alternative to it. Marcuse also points out that we accept the prevailing production/consumption system because it gives so many of us economic security. There is no other system around to meet our basic needs. We are afraid that if we reject the system, or even question it, we will lose our place in it; we are all afraid of being poor. These factors have probably been at work in nearly every human society.

But Marcuse's work achieved great influence because it also tries to explain certain distinctive features of our nomos that make it especially difficult for us to choose, or even imagine, any alternative way of life. Once again, he points out the contrast between the industrial society of the 19th and early 20th century and the consumer society of the middle and late 20th century. In the industrial society the technology was not yet able to meet everyone's basic needs. Widespread poverty was an obvious problem. Everyone agreed that change was needed (though there was a widespread faith that improved technology would eventually solve every problem). So individual initiative and inventiveness were valued. The society needed people who would criticize the present and point out its problems in order to create a better future. Alternative ideas were encouraged, and there was ample room to imagine a future quite different from the present. Individuals based their identities on their hopes for change.

Now, however, we need no new inventions to meet everyone's basic needs. The technology is already here. There is no incentive to think about significant technological change. So we aim to preserve and extend the status quo by working and, even more, by consuming. This is what we now call "making progress." There is no longer a role for individual initiative or critical thinking about the status quo--especially when the status quo makes most of us so comfortable. As

long as we work and earn money within the system, it offers us an amazing variety of goods and services to buy. Most of these are quite luxurious, compared with past eras or most countries today. As long as the system delivers the goods, we don't seriously question it. It seems much wiser, and easier, to let the experts in the corporate/government world make the decisions for us. This allows the experts to coordinate the machines without interference from the public. But it also allows the experts to coordinate the public. We generally do the jobs that the experts say need to be done, we buy the goods and services the experts (and ad agencies) say need to be bought, and we enjoy the recreational opportunities that the experts advise us to pursue.

This, says Marcuse, is the true totalitarianism--a total way of life administered by a handful of administrators. The machines and the people who run them are now coordinated by a very efficient network of corporate and governmental authorities. All of our needs, as the system defines them, are foreseen and generally taken care of in advance. We can listen to the latest hit songs on the stereo FM radio while we drive through the bank to pick up cash, then drive through our favorite fast-food restaurant, so we won't be hungry while shopping at the air-conditioned mall, with plenty of parking and the same hit songs coming out of the ceiling. At the mall, we inevitably find some new gadget that meets a need we didn't even know we had. But having seen the gadget, we discover the need that it fulfills, instantly learn to need it, and then fulfill the need by buying the product. (French-fry curlers, anyone? How about indoor barbecue grills?) Any needs that cannot be met by the production/consumption system seem useless, so it is pointless to pursue them. Since they lie outside the nomos, they cannot be seen as "real" needs at all. Anyway, who would even want to try to think of a better life? In a system that takes care of all our needs, there is no longer any tension between what is and what could or should be.

FREEDOM AND HAPPINESS: THE FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS

Of course we don't feel like victims of totalitarianism at all. In fact we feel very free. The system proudly boasts that it provides the maximum of human freedom, and we believe it. However the system tells us what it means to be free. Then it gratifies us only in terms of its own definition: freedom equals free enterprise--the freedom to work and consume within the system. As long as we can freely choose where to sell our labor on the job market, and then choose freely from an immense variety of goods and services after we get paid, we feel free. From Marcuse's perspective, this is a false freedom. We are free to do useless work so that we can choose from an array of useless, wasteful, and virtually identical goods and services. "The range of choice open to the individual is not the decisive factor in determining the degree of human freedom, but what can be chosen and what is chosen by the individual. . . Free election of masters does not abolish the masters or the slaves. Free choice among a wide variety of goods and service does not signify freedom if these goods and services sustain social controls over a life of toil and fear" (7).

We are free to choose between Vail and Aspen, Toyota and Dodge, Nikes and Reeboks, Wheaties and Cheerios--or Democrats and Republicans. But is there really any meaningful difference between these alternatives? They are all created by the same system. So every time we exercise free choice we reaffirm our dependence upon the system,

which gives us "such deceptive liberties as free competition at administered prices, a free press which censors itself, free choice between brands and gadgets" (7).

Our choices are determined by our needs, which are themselves created by the system. So every time we gratify a particular need, we become more enslaved to the whole system of which that need is a part. "The productive apparatus and the goods and services which it produces 'sell' or impose the social system as a whole. The means of mass transportation and communication, the commodities of lodging, food, and clothing, the irresistible output of the entertainment and information industry carry with them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumers more or less pleasantly to the producers, and through the latter, to the whole" (12).

If we try to live outside the system, or if we cannot compete successfully on its job market, we are also free--free to suffer hunger, cold, and disease. Living within the system we are free to enjoy great luxuries--but only because we deny so many other people the freedom to meet their true basic needs. They must suffer hunger, cold, and disease so that we can remain free. Our freedom is false not only because it is so severely limited, but also because it depends on so many others being so unfree. This false sense of freedom is part of what Marcuse calls our false consciousness.

A false consciousness makes us feel not only free but happy. Yet that does not mean we are genuinely happy. Our very idea of happiness is determined by the system. We can only feel happy when we satisfy the false needs it creates and share our lives with other people who are doing the same.

People in other societies have also suffered under totalitarian rule. But they have known that they were unfree and unhappy. They had an inner realm of freedom that the authorities could not control, Marcuse claims. That realm of freedom existed in their bodies and their imaginations. Their yearning for a better life could always be expressed in their erotic desires and in their dreams, both sleeping and waking. Eros and imagination gave them private moments of happiness that the rulers could not repress. These also reminded them that true happiness comes from fulfilling our genuine needs, and that people really want freedom to fulfill those needs. So they kept alive at least the idea (and occasionally the reality) of rebellion against the rulers.

Now, however, even that realm of rebellious freedom and private happiness has vanished. We live in the most complete totalitarianism, because even our sexuality and imagination are controlled by the production/consumption system. The system offers us many forms of recreation that are very physically pleasurable and luxurious. Some even make us feel euphoric, like skiing, or drinking, or sex (or all three together). The system also gives us tremendous sexual liberty through its erotic recreations (hot tubs and Caribbean beaches as well as the more overtly sexual recreations), its relaxed moral standards (instant contraception, quickie divorces, etc.), and the ubiquitous erotic images that fill our TV screens and supermarket magazine racks. These are not wrong or bad in principle. But they are only available to those who can afford them. They must be purchased through the system, by workers who labor within the system. So even our bodily gratification is now a commodity to be consumed.

When we internalize socially created needs, we not only have those needs in mind but feel them in our bodies. We physically crave the

latest faddish foods, or massages, or fast cars. We get an erotic satisfaction from color TV images and beautiful restaurants. Of course only the production/consumption system can meet these needs. Every time we enjoy ourselves physically we reaffirm our commitment to the system and the experts who control it. They now shape not only our thoughts but our hormones and our nervous system.

When we cannot have all these pleasures, we dream of having them. The production/ consumption system controls our imagination with seductive images of its commodities. Many of these images come from advertising, which manipulates dream-like images with unprecedented skill. We feel free because we can dream of success and the happiness it will bring, even if we are unlikely to attain it. But our freedom is as false as our happiness because we let the TV producers and advertising agencies define happiness and freedom for us. Their images have little if anything to do with true human needs. Even when we meet basic needs like food or sex or imagination, we do it by buying useless goods and luxuries, which we falsely believe we need. A false consciousness can only give us substitutes for real happiness and freedom.

THE ONE-DIMENSIONAL SOCIETY

We happily accept this false consciousness, Marcuse claims, because we have forgotten that there is any alternative. Every nomos tries to convince the people within it that there is no alternative. But ours is especially successful because it provides such great material luxury for most people along with such a powerful illusion of freedom and happiness. "Mass production and mass distribution claim the entire individual. . . In this process, the 'inner' dimension of the mind in which opposition to the status quo can take root is whittled down." (10). "It is a good way of life--much better than before--and as a good way of life, it militates against qualitative change. Thus emerges a pattern of one-dimensional thought and behavior." (12).

Our society is "one-dimensional" because every part of it is connected to and reinforces every other part. Every commodity, every TV image, every headline, every social problem, reflects the power of the whole. So everything we do and every choice we make immerses us more deeply in the system. We are alienated from our own sense of possibility, and we forget that we could choose to make it otherwise. "There is only one dimension, and it is everywhere and in all forms. The achievements of progress defy ideological indictment; before their tribunal, the 'false consciousness' of their rationality becomes the true consciousness" (11).

Our society is also "one-dimensional" because the whole thing seems so reasonable. But Marcuse explains that the system only seems reasonable in terms of its own particular version of reason, which comes from the modern industrial society that Roszak analyzed. All truth is reduced to the literal, empirical, and mathematically measurable. Rationality is reduced to technical efficiency. Ideas are not judged by their intrinsic value, only by their ability to help to get a practical job done. But there is no way for reason to judge whether the job is worth doing in the first place. This would require us to step outside the system and evaluate its goals from some other standpoint. No other standpoint can be found, though, because the system defines all "rational" truth in its own terms. One example of this was crucial for the many people who read Marcuse's work in the

1960s: the U.S. government kept insisting it would get the job done in Vietnam because our technical superiority could solve every problem. The only question the government couldn't answer--because it never asked it--was whether we should be fighting in Vietnam at all.

By defining rationality, the system defines "reality" itself. The system admits no reality that can stand above or outside it to criticize it. Anything outside the system is simply "unreal" and therefore can be safely ignored (like, for example, the high quality of free medical care in a socialist nation such as Cuba). From within our false consciousness, we cannot even imagine any reality outside the system; nor would any "reasonable" person want to try. In that sense our false consciousness has become our true consciousness. Anyone who questions the system as a whole is, by definition, irrational and unrealistic: "The intellectual and emotional refusal 'to go along' appears neurotic and impotent" (9).

Of course we often see individual ills created by the system. Indeed the media encourage us to see these ills. But the range of remedies that the media offer us as "realistic" are all completely within the system as well. So we cannot even consider whether all these ills might be symptoms of a more basic underlying ill: the structure of the system itself.

Consider, for example, the problem of poverty. If we could see the whole, we would recognize that the revolution in technology now allows everyone to fulfill their basic needs, and we would set that universal fulfillment as our goal. But the prevailing system must stifle its own technological potential. A capitalist system needs a large body of unemployed, underemployed, and underpaid workers. If the system were to fulfill everyone's vital needs, it would destroy itself. And that would threaten the wealth and power of the capitalist elites. So the system cannot act on, or even admit, its own technological potential to eliminate poverty: "The most advanced areas of industrial society exhibit throughout these two features: a trend toward consummation of technological rationality, and intensive efforts to contain this trend within the established institutions. Here is the internal contradiction of this civilization: the irrational element in its rationality" (17).

If the system is to survive, the problem of poverty must remain unsolved. Of course we talk a lot about poverty, since there is money and political hay to be made from programs for (or against) the poor. But there is no serious effort to reduce poverty significantly by dealing with its root causes. We only make serious efforts to solve problems that can have a technical solution within the framework of the prevailing system. If a problem is beyond the reach of our technical reasoning, we treat it as unreal or write it off as a tragic misfortune. Since no real alternative to the present state of affairs can even be imagined, much less pursued, it seems irrational to pay much attention to poverty and the misery it brings: "The impact of progress turns Reason into submission to the facts of life, and to the dynamic capability of producing more and bigger facts of the same sort of life." (11). Every part of the system reinforces the power of the whole to repress our genuine needs. But we cannot see this, because we cannot see the system as a whole. Resistance to the production/consumption system seems as illogical as it is impractical. So we forget that resistance to the system is possible.

DEALING WITH DISSENT

Obviously the system's power is not perfect. Some people do look at the system as a whole and choose to criticize and oppose it. Deep down, Marcuse claims, we all oppose it. What we really want is a future that goes beyond the present waste and misery. By imagining that future, we could gain a vantage point outside the present system-- a place from which to look down and judge the shortcomings of the system as a whole. Indeed this is the goal of Marcuse's own writings: to help us imagine, for a moment, that we are looking at the entire system from outside it and seeing its underlying structure. Of course the system tries to prevent us from doing this, in several ways.

One way is to offer us the satisfactions of religion. Instead of fulfilling our realistic desires for a better life within real history, Marcuse says, it gives us another world that is beyond history altogether. It encourages us to turn away from the public historical processes (economic, political, social) to the private realm of "the spirit" or "heaven" or "the beyond." "There is a great deal of 'Worship together this week,' 'Why not try God,' Zen, existentialism, and beat way of life, etc. But such modes of protest and transcendence are no longer contradictory to the status quo" (14). This may be less true now than it was before the '60s. Religion now more often encourages people to work for social change within history. But it still works quite often as Marcuse describes it.

What about people who do look at the system as a whole and criticize its underlying structure? Most often, they are coopted into the system, Marcuse says. The system survives by expanding to include many new ideas and behaviors while effectively blunting their potentially subversive impact. And it does so in the name of its highest value: freedom. "It's a free country" means that we are all entitled to our own beliefs and values. The most obvious example of this is in our freedom of religion. Beliefs and values are private matters (as Berger explained). But precisely because freedom is interpreted in this way, it is easy for the system to ignore dissent. Protest is written off as merely "private opinion," and one person's opinion is no better than another's. So everyone is free to protest because protest can so easily be ignored.

Moreover the media insist on the difference between "responsible" and "irresponsible" dissent. "Responsible" dissent deals with individual parts of the system (such as how the government should regulate health insurance companies). Or it criticizes peripheral issues (for example, popular music lyrics). Or it addresses those matters that everyone complains about precisely because no one expects anything to change (like the evils of bureaucracy). "Irresponsible" dissent questions the basic premises of the system, such as capitalism or racism. Of course we are encouraged to think of "responsible" dissent as addressing hugely important issues and "irresponsible" dissent as peripheral. But this just hides the truth, which is the other way around. Since "irresponsible" dissenters are supposedly peripheral, they are denied TV time and contracts with major publishers. Without access to large numbers of people, they can't spread their ideas. So they pose no threat to the status quo.

If "irresponsible" dissent begins to get too popular, the system will try to coopt it by turning it into commodities and celebrities with high price-tags. Marcuse himself was a prime example. His books were published by a prestigious publishing company and became best-sellers. He became a celebrity, written up in Time and Newsweek (they

didn't have People back then, or he would have been in it). The same fate befell '60s rock and roll on a much bigger scale. The Rolling Stones and the Jefferson Airplane were immense celebrities. The more they sang "The time is right for violent revolution" and "Up against the wall, motherfucker," the more they enriched the big music corporations. Actresses and dancers once upon a time bared their breasts on stage to protest a puritanical society. Now we expect to see bare breasts when we go to the movies, and the corporate conglomerates that own the movie studios depend on them to generate investment capital. This is what Marcuse calls "repressive tolerance." The system can go on repressing all of us precisely because it is so tolerant.

If dissenters refuse to be coopted, the system will not hesitate to destroy them. In the McCarythism of the early 1950s, hundreds of people had their careers, and often their lives, destroyed because of their alleged communist past. In the late 1960s the Nixon administration set out to destroy many groups it viewed as subversive (including even the Democratic party, which had its offices in the Watergate). The most notorious serious example was the systematic imprisonment and murder of leaders of the Black Panther party. Marcuse himself had to live in hiding for a while because of serious death threats (though not, apparently, from the government).

The same pattern of coopting and repression goes on today. The environmental movement, which began as a critique of the foundations of our production/consumption system, has been turned into stylish cloth shopping bags, Fifty Simple Things books, and leaders interviewed by Oprah. Jesse Jackson is a media celebrity. Michael Crichton's serious concerns about genetic engineering were lost in the Jurassic Park hoopla. At the same time, there are many people in prison in this country principally because of their political views. Some are on death row. The Christic Institute was destroyed, some people think, because it had too much damning evidence about illegal CIA capers. Religious options that challenge the system are repressed too. Krishna devotees are banned from sharing books and ideas in airports. The indictment of Sheik Omar Abdul Rahman was a signal to other Muslims in this country that certain religious and political views will not be tolerated. Would the Branch Davidians have been assaulted if they had a more conventional brand of Christianity? Were Herbert Marcuse still alive, he would probably look back on his theories of thirty years ago and conclude that the pieces of the society may have been rearranged many times, but the one-dimensional structure remains pretty much unchanged.