Malicious Marcuse

by Anthony Daniels

On the “tolerance” of Herbert Marcuse.

The influence exerted by an intellectual is not necessarily proportional to the quality of his ideas, and there is a certain kind of erudition which, allied to a talent for polysyllabic obfuscation, is not incompatible with extreme shallowness. I make these remarks with Herbert Marcuse (1897–1979) in mind.

One might have expected that some slight experience of the First Word War and the subsequent Spartacist uprising in Berlin, followed by having to live through the rise of Nazism in Germany, would have given a person a fairly strong sense of proportion and of the fragility of things, but possibly no writer was more impervious to political common sense than was Marcuse. He could go in a short space from utter and total condemnation of the modern world, as strong as any Baptist preacher denouncing sin, to the most far-fetched utopianism—without ever having passed through anything that might be called realism. De Maistre said that in his life he had met Frenchmen, Italians, Russians, etc., but as for Man, he had never encountered him. With Marcuse, it was the other way around: he knew Man (at least, in his own opinion he knew him), but as for actual men, he knew them not—other, perhaps, than persons of his own type.

It seems to me likely that had it not been for the Vietnam War, Marcuse would have remained an obscure academic émigré.
It seems to me likely that had it not been for the Vietnam War, Marcuse would have remained an obscure academic émigré, amusing himself and a perhaps a tiny handful of others with unreadable dialectical pirouettes and angry anathemata. But the times were kind to him, at least if public notice or even acclamation is what he desired. Unexpectedly, he became famous in the 1960s. His combination of denunciation and offers of salvation by something called “liberation” were perfectly calculated to appeal to a generation of spoiled youth that had never known real hardship but was frightened to death by the prospect of the military draft.

Marcuse’s popularity was not due to the accessibility or wit of his style, which for some reason always brings dumplings to my mind (though I quite like dumplings—in soup), but rather in the mistiness of many of his pronouncements, which did not denote, but only connoted. They were therefore not easily refuted, or even argued with, because connotations are not assertions and can always be denied as having been mistakenly apprehended.

He also, however, sowed his pronouncements with vivid images—the hell of consumer society, for example—which were bound to appeal to the self-pity of the privileged young, who are always ready to mistake the dissatisfactions of their existence for the rottenness or depravity of the world. But Marcuse never bothers to tell us why or in what respects consumer society is akin to a painting by Bosch, or by what standards it is to be adjudged hellish. It is hellish only because Herbert Marcuse says it is.

Marcuse often wrote incomprehensibly, but in that academic manner that subtly communicates to the reader who is unsure of himself (as perhaps most young and inexperienced readers are) that the incomprehensibility is the fault not of the writer, who has something deep and difficult to say, but of the reader, whose mentation is not of a sufficient power to understand it:
Education offers still another example of spurious, abstract tolerance in the guise of concreteness and truth: it is epitomized in the concept of self-actualization. From the permissiveness of all sorts of license to the child, to the constant psychological concern with the personal problems of the student, a large-scale movement is under way against the evils of repression and the need for being oneself. Frequently brushed aside is the question as to what has to be repressed before one can be a self, oneself. The individual potential is first a negative one, a portion of the potential of his society: of aggression, guilt feeling, ignorance, resentment, cruelty which vitiate his life instincts. If the identity of the self is to be more than the immediate realization of this potential (undesirable for the individual as a human being), then it requires repression and sublimation, conscious transformation. This process involves at each stage (to use the ridiculed terms which here reveal their succinct concreteness) the negation of the negation, mediation of the immediate, and identity is no more and no less than this process. “Alienation” is the constant and essential element of identity, the objective side of the subject—and not, as it is made to appear today, a disease, a psychological condition. Freud well knew the difference between progressive and regressive, liberating and destructive repression. The publicity of self-actualization promotes the removal of the one and the other, it promotes existence in that immediacy which, in a repressive society, is (to use another Hegelian term) bad immediacy (schlechte Unmittelbarkeit). It isolates the individual from the one dimension where he could “find himself”: from his political existence, which is at the core of his entire existence.

I think that what this passage means (though I cannot be sure) is that people ought to learn to control themselves and also take seriously those political factors that render their lives unsatisfactory. Whether the latter is desirable or not must depend on circumstances: the source of the misery of the man in the Gulag is not the same as that of the misery of the man whose wife has left him because of his infidelity. What astonishes me, however, is that the writings of a man who uses language so barbarously should have become so popular among those who wanted to turn on, tune in, and drop out. But gurus have always benefited from a degree of indefiniteness of language. What, after all, would count as a refutation of the above passage, or any of its components?

If the world is contradictory and indeed driven by contradiction, then surely any attempt to describe its workings must be contradictory or contain contradictions?
It is possible that Marcuse’s tendency to philosophical verbigeration was learned early in his life, as a consequence of too much attention to Hegelian studies. This also might explain his tolerance of obvious contradiction both in the sphere of logic and of evidence. If the world is contradictory and indeed driven by contradiction, then surely any attempt to describe its workings must be contradictory or contain contradictions? Thus it was that many years of teaching in American universities (and not the least of them, but rather in elite institutions) might have suggested to a less subtle and Hegelian mind than his that there was a fundamental absurdity about his anathematizing the Western education of his time as little more than a factory for the production of obedient men in gray-flannel suits—unless he too were engaged on that activity by promoting a negation of the negation.

No doubt he would have found this reference to his own career so vulgar, because it was so mechanistically—rather than dialectically—linked to the observable or empirical phenomena of the world, that he would have considered it unworthy of notice. For Marcuse, as for Freud, whom he tried to reconcile with Marx, everything was the opposite of what it seemed, except when it was precisely what it seemed. Sometimes, Freud is alleged to have said, a cigar is just a cigar, but it took a Freud to know exactly when that was. Marcuse was a magus of this kind.

Where Marcuse resorts to the easily comprehensible, he is usually either mistaken, foolish, or nasty, at least by implication. In his famous, or infamous, essay on what he called “repressive tolerance,” he says first that tolerance is an end in itself and then, a few paragraphs later, that the telos—the ultimate goal—of tolerance is truth.

I have never studied philosophy, but it seems to me obvious that, by definition, an end in itself can have no telos, for that is the whole point of ends in themselves, they are the end point of purpose, not the beginning or intermediate stage of it. This is so whether or not there exist, in fact, ends in themselves. And it likewise seems to me that tolerance is not the kind of thing that could plausibly be an end in itself independent of whatever is to be tolerated. It is in the delineation of what is to be tolerated that the difficult judgment lies.

Let us agree with the later Marcuse (later, that is, by about a minute) that tolerance has a telos: could truth possibly be it? Note that he does not say the ascertainment of truth, but truth itself, as if the American Declaration of Independence had asserted the right not to the pursuit of happiness, but to happiness itself. But even the ascertainment of truth is not plausibly the telos of tolerance, though it may well be, as Mill suggested, that tolerance makes the ascertainment of truth much easier. At the very most, the ascertainment of truth can be a part of the telos of tolerance; it cannot be the telos of tolerance.
It seems obvious—and therefore obscure to Marcuse—that the principal aim of tolerance derives from the recognition that no large group of humans will ever have the same tastes, opinions, and beliefs, and that therefore without tolerance some people will inevitably seek to impose themselves by force upon others. Only the quality of tolerance can prevent perpetual conflict, a lesson painfully and incompletely learned after the Thirty Years’ War. Part of the telos of tolerance, therefore, is social peace, no doubt a commonplace reflection, but too easy to understand for Marcuse’s mistrained mind.

The dialectic having vouchsafed to Marcuse so much of the truth (one is tempted to write the Truth, or even Mr. Chadband’s Light of Terewth), which according to him is the telos of tolerance, it is hardly surprising, indeed logical, that Marcuse should find true tolerance to be the suppression of all that he knows, or thinks he knows, to be false. “Certain things cannot be said,” Marcuse tells us, “certain ideas cannot be expressed, certain policies cannot be proposed.”

In Marcuse’s world of true—which is to say repressive—tolerance, in which only those would be allowed to speak who are in fundamental agreement with him, there would not be much to discuss. He acknowledges (here at least he is realistic) that true tolerance could only be brought about by undemocratic means, which

would include the withdrawal of toleration of speech and assembly from groups and movements which promote aggressive policies, armament, chauvinism, discrimination on the grounds of race and religion, or who oppose the extension of public services, social security, medical care, etc.

In other words, it would not be permissible to question the extension of public services until they engulfed the totality of human activity. Although Marcuse was a critic of the Soviet Union—a psychological necessity for him, perhaps, to justify his long, unmolested, and remunerated residence in the United States—it is clear from the above that he had nothing to learn from Stalin in the matter of totalitarianism.

Nor did Marcuse shy away from the use of political violence. Just as true tolerance meant for him the freedom of others to voice his ideas, or something at least quite similar to them (he never really grasped the fact that you can only be tolerant towards what you dislike or disagree with, since the idea of tolerance towards your own tastes and ideas is intrinsically absurd), so he was ready to approve of violence provided it was in pursuit of the goal of liberation:

Liberating tolerance, then, would mean intolerance against movements from the Right and toleration of movements from the Left. As to the scope of this tolerance and intolerance . . . it would extend to the stage of action as well as of discussion and propaganda, of deed as well as of word.
Marcuse is all but forgotten now, no doubt, a figure who, with so many others, has entered the landfill of history, yet there is something almost prophetic in what he wrote. If Black Lives Matter and other such movements have not read him and taken him as a blueprint, it is as if they have.

Underlying all of Marcuse’s thought is a thinly veiled disdain of mankind. He regards the masses with a fastidious disgust. His is not the savage indignation of a Swift, in which may be read a bitter disappointment that people are not as good they ought, or as attractive as one would wish them, to be; nor is it the genuine compassion that Thoreau expressed when he said that most men live lives of quiet desperation. No; it is disgust simpliciter. Marcuse is unmistakably disgusted by most people as they actually are, and since his utopian notions to make them better are purely abstract, having no real graspable content, all that is left in the reader’s mind is the disgust.

In essence, Marcuse is a Marxist aesthete and snob. That is why he is able to say that the consumer society in which he prospered and had a pleasant bourgeois existence was hellish, and why he so airily dismisses the lives of millions as essentially dreadful even if they don’t experience them as such. Indeed, their failure to do so appalls him all the more, the only explanation being that they suffer from false needs, false consciousness, and false happiness. They are, above all “inauthentic.” A few citations will establish this strain of his thought:

The slaves of developed industrial civilization are sublimated slaves, for slavery is determined “pas par l’obéissance, ni par la rudesse des labours, mais par le statu d’instrument et la reduction de l’homme a l’état de chose” [neither by obedience nor by hardness of labor but by the status of being mere instrument, and the reduction of man to the state of a thing].

We may distinguish both true and false needs. “False” are those which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression . . . . Their satisfaction might be most gratifying to the individual, but this happiness is not a condition which has to be maintained and protected if it serves to arrest the development of the ability (his own and others) to recognize the disease of the whole and grasp the chances of curing the disease. The result then is euphoria in unhappiness. Most of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate, belong to this category of false needs.

As long as they [the masses] are kept incapable of being autonomous, as long as they are indoctrinated and manipulated (down to their very instincts) their answer to [the question of what is true and false] cannot be taken as their own.
Honesty compels me to admit that thoughts not dissimilar to these must have occurred to many intellectuals as they contemplate modern society, perhaps all the more frequently with the increasing dominance of the constant, shallow, and almost contentless communication in people’s lives that seems to preoccupy them and take up so much of their mental life. I freely admit that I am far from immune to such thoughts myself.

Nothing disgusts like the tastes and pleasures of others. What fastidious aesthete or intellectual has not looked upon the conduct and enjoyments of mankind in the mass and not felt some frisson of horror, disdain, or disgust? Few are really capable, like Breughel or Shakespeare (sometimes), of taking real pleasure or delight in the contemplation of the simple and often coarse enjoyments of 99 percent, or at least some large proportion, of the population. How is it possible, we fastidious aesthetes and intellectuals are inclined to ask ourselves, that people can really be interested in, or satisfied with, their trivial, superficial, and vulgar amusements and pleasures, when what is so much deeper, so vastly superior, is easily available to them? Why, in short, is the circulation of Hello! magazine, packed as it is with news of Monaco’s royal family, hundreds of times larger than that of, say, The New Criterion?

To this question, Marcuse would have returned the answer, “Because the population had been conditioned and manipulated” (not that he would have approved of The New Criterion; he would have considered it one of “the means of communication, the irresistible output of the entertainment and information industry [that] carry with them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumers to the producers and, through the latter, to the whole social system”).

There is no awareness in Marcuse that the fastidious denigration of most of mankind has to be kept under control if one’s inner dictator is not to emerge. Consider the passages cited above. What do they reveal? The first thing is that they all have the tone of de haut en bas. Marcuse is bringing down tablets of stone from his Hegelian Zion. Second, he sees in all the millions of people around him nothing but the instruments into which their enslavement has made them. They are thus as good as inanimate. Insofar as they are not, they have been comprehensively duped, so that they cannot even distinguish their own happiness from their own unhappiness. Third, their thoughts and desires are not genuinely their own: they have been put into their minds in the way that schizophrenics sometimes believe that their thoughts have been inserted into their minds by outside malign forces. For Marcuse, then, all who do not think as he thinks are not fully human because they lack the most important attributes of true humanity, namely those of conscious reflection and self-direction. Until the liberation brought to it by the Marcusian vanguard, humanity will remain but a lumpenhumanity.
The totalitarian potential or corollary of this way of thinking hardly needs emphasis. And although Marcuse criticized the Soviet Union because of its repressive bureaucracy (and perhaps because an émigré Marxist who was also a supporter of the Soviet Union might have been too much for American tolerance in the 1950s), his views on art would have gladdened the heart of Zhdanov himself. True, Marcuse is against the censorship of art, but that is because all art that does not accord with his views is pseudo-art, and therefore to forbid it would not really be censorship of art at all:

The authentic oeuvre is not and cannot be a prop of oppression, and pseudo-art (which can be such a prop) is not art. Art stands against history, withstands history which has been the history of oppression, for art subjects reality to laws other than the established ones . . . . But in its struggle with history, art subjects itself to history: history enters the definition of art and enters into the distinction between art and pseudo-art.

From what standpoint does one criticize contemporary culture and avoid Marcuse’s dangerous amalgam of misanthropy and utopianism, the first decrying the world as it is and the second proposing an impossible world in which no one will ever again have to do something at someone else’s behest?

Marcuse was not very strong on irony and had little sense of the tragic.

Marcuse’s defects were twofold. First, he was completely lacking in common sense—whether from congenital defect or too strong a training in the dialectic is immaterial. The second, allied to but not identical to the first, is that he resolutely refused to look down the other end of the telescope. He looked down one end of it, saw man in the mass, and said, “My God, how awful! They are all the same, like ants!” But if he had looked down the other end of the telescope, he would have realized that those ants were human beings, ineradicably individual, with their strengths and their weaknesses, vices and virtues, charms and defects. Had he realized this, or been capable of realizing it, he would not have regarded most of humanity as infrahuman, as he evidently did. His criticism would have been tempered by humanity. It is an irony of a kind—Marcuse was not very strong on irony and had little sense of the tragic—that he fled a regime that believed in Untermenschen in order to spread a doctrine of infrahumanity in his land of exile and asylum.
If Marcuse is still worth reading today, it is not because of the merit of his ideas, but because, as I have mentioned, he was a prophet of sorts. It seems that some of the very people in whom he placed his hope to institute his utopia—the disaffected intellectuals, the racial and sexual activists, the marginals of various kinds—are intent upon creating the very kind of unidimensional man, thoroughly indoctrinated and unable to think for himself, who Marcuse thought were overwhelmingly prominent in the America of his time. I do not think that they will succeed in the long run, but it will be—to use one of Marcuse’s favored words—a struggle.

Anthony Daniels is a contributing editor of City Journal.

This article originally appeared in The New Criterion, Volume 40 Number 1, on page 57
Copyright © 2021 The New Criterion | www.newcriterion.com
https://newcriterion.com/issues/2021/9/malicious-marcuse