

## Book Review

---

### Reactionary Philosophy and Ambiguous Aesthetics in the Revolutionary Politics of Herbert Marcuse—A Review Essay

Ralph Dumain

*Art, Alienation, and the Humanities: A Critical Engagement with Herbert Marcuse.* By Charles Reitz. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2000. 336 pages, cloth \$26.50, paper \$25.95.

Charles Reitz's essential contribution to the study of Marcuse is his marvelous demonstration of how deeply Marcuse's philosophical framework is imbued with reactionary *Lebensphilosophie*. While Reitz successfully locates Marcuse's ideas in their original European social and intellectual context, he fails to explain adequately how Marcuse's ideas function in the U.S. context. Though chapter 10, presenting Reitz's contemporary perspective, is disappointing, this book is an outstanding achievement and indispensable for anyone interested in Marcuse.

Reitz points out that "Marcuse holds positivism and rationalism, rather than metaphysics or irrationalism, to be among the more pernicious intellectual forces," favoring "romantic oppositional philosophies of protest like *Lebensphilosophie*" and finding "a liberating negative, that is countercultural, value in Nietzsche

and Schopenhauer” (114–15). Marcuse even finds a spirit of negativity in traditional metaphysics and advocates a retooled Platonism (153). Marcuse assigns an important role to imagination and the consciousness of death. The influences of Heidegger and Nietzsche are pervasive.

Reitz provides an extensive analysis of Marcuse’s early intellectual work, imbued with the weighty influence of Dilthey (chapter 2). Marcuse was the first to review Marx’s newly available 1844 manuscripts, but Dilthey and Heidegger determined Marcuse’s reading of the young Marx (58–61). Marcuse was heavily influenced by Lukács, whose notion of reification is rooted in German idealism, not Marx (65–66). Marcuse was concerned here and elsewhere with reification and the alienation of the human essence, not historical materialism.

Marx is nowhere mentioned in the “critical” philosophical discussion central to *Eros and Civilization*. There is also no evidence to suggest that Marcuse’s “philosophical inquiry into Freud,” . . . occurs on the basis of a Marxist philosophical analysis. Quite to the contrary, it appears that Marcuse turns primarily to Nietzsche’s critique of the traditional metaphysics in this regard. (126)

### ***Culture and aesthetic ontology***

Reitz is troubled “by the way in which *Marcuse’s* theories of art, alienation, and the humanities displace *Marx’s* structural analysis of social life to such an extent that the former’s work also takes on ironically conservative political overtones.” Reitz concludes that Marcuse’s concept of reification is “ultimately detached from the materialist context of the Marxist economic analysis” (7–8).

Art, alienation, and the humanities (humanistic education) coalesce as the decisive themes of Marcuse’s lifelong work. Marcuse pitches his philosophical tent in the humanities, demarcated from the world of science and technology. In his “militant middle period” (approximately 1932–1970), he promotes an educational activism in opposition to traditional aestheticist quietism, to which he reverts in this third period (11–12). His questionable philosophical foundations are rooted in the Frankfurt School’s

conception of *alienation as reification*.

After 1933, Marcuse shifts his affiliation from Heidegger to the Frankfurt School. Marcuse bases his investment in critical theory on utopianism, not scientific objectivity (81). His aesthetic conceptions undergo a shift in his second period, decisively registered in his 1937 essay “The Affirmative Character of Culture.” Here he attacks the quietism of the traditional role of culture, advocating instinctual gratification—not just the liberal arts, but a reshaping of life and experience (81–84). Even in this most progressive period, his aesthetic ontology is predicated on an aesthetic rationality (as opposed to science) that negates the existent (106–7). Marcuse’s “dialectic” is Romantic negation, a conception rooted in dualism, not historical materialism (109).

### ***High culture, popular culture, and politics***

Reitz rightly sees a lasting contribution in Marcuse’s notion of *repressive desublimation* brilliantly articulated in *One-Dimensional Man* (144). In 1964, Marcuse concluded that popular culture had obliterated the negative, that the disjunction between culture and the social order was closed, no longer to be disrupted by unruly outsiders (149). Reitz’s neglect of a comparison between that period and today augurs a fundamental defect in his conclusions about the present.

In his 1967 lecture “Art in the One-Dimensional Society,” Marcuse emphasizes the liberatory power of art against the prosaic routine of daily life. He argues that revolutions in art and culture—manifestations of the rebellious spirit of the aesthetic imagination—can fuel social-protest movements, especially in today’s advanced technological society, in spite of the danger of cooptation (166–71). Reitz interjects a perplexing criticism:

In contradistinction to dialectical materialism, Marcuse preserves here a dualistic conception of the relationship of politics to art (as “extraneous activity”). While aesthetics must *inform* politics, Marcuse is adamant in emphasizing throughout his middle period that “the real change which would free men and things, remains the task of political action.” Marcuse’s major contention in this essay is, how-

ever, that no negation of the alienating conditions of social existence is even possible apart from the emancipatory potential of the aesthetic dimension.(173–74)

While highlighting a possible contradiction in Marcuse's program for the aesthetic emancipation of social life, Reitz is unclear about what is precisely wrong with Marcuse's view of the division of labor between art and instrumental politics. Perhaps this confusion is a foreshadowing of what will go wrong in chapter 10.

### ***Education, reification, and social change***

Marcuse's views come closest to revolutionary politics in his 1969 book, *An Essay on Liberation*, when student activism was at its height. Lukács and Marcuse both saw the necessity for a new form of reason to serve an educative function in the struggle against reification. Unlike Lukács, Marcuse adopted Schiller's principle of aesthetic education, directing education not against capitalism, but against the reification of reason (177–79). Marcuse incorporated psychoanalysis into educational and aesthetic theory (180). Reitz is correct to criticize Marcuse's substitution of the dialectic of aesthetically conceived forces for the conceptual apparatus of historical materialism and class struggle, but he detracts from the validity of his argument by opposing Marcuse's aesthetic ontology to the historical-materialist philosophy of art (181), injecting a philistine leftist approach to art into the discussion.

While Marcuse's reversal of the position of his middle period is clearly marked in his 1978 *The Aesthetic Dimension*, precedent for it can be found in his 1972 *Counterrevolution and Revolt*. Marcuse presents essentially "a favorable reappraisal of the *validity* of the culture of the bourgeois era." He speaks of art as a "second alienation," which is "emancipatory rather than oppressive."

Here, the *affirmative* character of art itself is thought to become the *basis* for the ultimate negation of this affirmation. Affirmation represents a dimension of withdrawal and introspection, rather than engagement. This permits the artist to disentangle consciousness and conduct from the continuum of first-dimensional alienation, and thus to create and communicate the emancipatory truth of art." (197)

---

Marcuse is convinced that overtly bourgeois art—because it is *art*—retains a critical dimension, and should, itself, be regarded as a source of sociopolitical opposition to domination. Marcuse maintains in fact that the art of the *bourgeois* period indelibly displays an *antibourgeois* character, and in this manner he rejects the orthodox Marxist emphasis on the class character of art. (198)

Marcuse also criticizes the “living-art” and “anti-art” tendencies that he associates with the politically progressive art of the leftist-oriented “cultural revolution,” as representing a “desublimation of culture” and an “undoing” of the aesthetic form . . . Marcuse explicitly turns away from the immediacy of sensuousness and militance characteristic of his own middle-period aesthetic. (198)

There may well be abstract justification for Marcuse’s position, but the warrant for immediacy or critical distance must surely depend on particular circumstances. Without a detailed analysis of the aspects of the counterculture of the 1960s to which Marcuse specifically reacted, there is no way of judging his position. Is there a generational issue here? Could Marcuse have been too traditional, too elitist and European, or did the counterculture merit such criticism? Reitz’s total failure to address this crucial question contributes to the central flaw in his book. Reitz only hints at a few cultural expressions of the 1960s that Marcuse condemned. On the other hand, it seems that Bob Dylan joins the august company of Joyce, Beckett, and others in standing up for art-as-alienation (199). Marcuse reverses his former critique of affirmative high culture against the attempt of the countercultural revolution to eradicate it (202). Again, nothing could be more crucial than a detailed analysis, but Reitz has nothing to offer here.

In his last book, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Marcuse opposes Marxist aesthetics and argues for the permanent value of art (204–6). Marcuse has returned to his earliest ideas. There is a dualism between art and society; art is permanently incompatible with life. Art is inherently alienated and rebels against the established reality principle (210). Marcuse’s conception of education is affected

also, as he attempts to deploy the notion of “educational dictatorship” to oppose an otherwise hopelessly reified reality (215–16).

Marcuse argues for the universality and permanence of the classics. Aesthetic “stylization reveals the universal in the particular social situation.” The historical content of an artwork becomes dated, but the universality of the forces represented transcends the particular history (217–19). While it is clear that the aesthetic *ontology* supporting Marcuse’s judgments is highly questionable, it is not immediately evident that his aesthetic *principle* is wrong. This is an important distinction that Reitz does not make. Specific examples must be analyzed. Since Marcuse’s death, in the culture at large and in the specialized world of cultural criticism, cultural and social assumptions have altered so drastically that we are now aware of the vast discrepancy between our assumptions today and those current in former times and even when Marcuse wrote in the 1970s. A sophisticated analysis of what is permanent and what is dated in works of art is needed, but apparently Marcuse did not provide it, nor does Reitz.

In sum, an analytical distinction should be drawn between Marcuse’s aesthetic *ontology* and some of his stated aesthetic *principles* or *judgments*, and between the latter and his politics.

### ***The missing link: Marcuse and U.S. culture***

The most glaring omission in Reitz’s presentation is an analysis of the links connecting Europe of Marcuse’s youth and the United States today. We see Marcuse’s intellectual and cultural socialization in Europe, and the circumstances of his radicalization with the conservative ideological baggage he inherits. Then as an émigré living in the United States, he develops his ideas further in an altered context. Emerging from the repressive 1950s, Marcuse makes his closest approach to a popular movement at the height of the protest movements of the 1960s, then retreats as revolutionary hopes recede. We require, however, an assessment of the transplantability of ideas based on a European cultural heritage to American conditions.

Why did the youthful revolutionary generation of the 1960s find Marcuse’s ideas so congenial? Does the reactionary, irrationalist *Lebensphilosophie* that Marcuse imbibed intersect with

the very different youth culture of the sixties on the basis of the latter's primitivist, escapist, instinctualist tendencies? Do the two then diverge because the latter was putting into practice what the former could only theorize? What did the students who studied Marcuse think of his reactionary *Lebensphilosophie*? What did they think of the irrationalist, New Age currents in their own generation?

When avant-garde and popular culture are contrasted, the issue of art as immediacy vs. alienation enters. I do not find the rigid opposition that grew out of the European context adequate to American conditions. (Consider the history of jazz, for instance.) There is no a priori way to decide when a principled refusal to participate in compromising cultural forms is warranted. When is participation in popular forms possible without being swallowed up by the mechanisms of the culture industry? Is it even possible now for an avant-garde to deploy alienation effects to break through the wall of commodity fetishism, conformity, and false values? The old avant-gardes were squeezed dry to feed the popular culture of the present; no technique seems to be left by which to defamiliarize the taken-for-granted.

It is astounding that Reitz, who experienced the generational cultural shifts of both the 1960s-70s and the 1980s, fails to pose any of these questions. How can the baby boomer intellectuals' amnesia about their own history be accounted for?

### *The future*

Chapter 10 asks how the "critical" in critical theory can be liberated. Reitz summarizes the ways in which Marcuse dissociates himself from the traditional concerns of Marxism, but here he adds "the identification of revolutionary art and education with the cultural forms actually experimented with by communist societies" (224). What can he mean by "communist societies"? Have any existed? Can Reitz have in mind the Soviet Union, since he criticizes Marcuse's analysis of Soviet education and aesthetics (157-63)? Or perhaps Mao's China?

Following Mitchell Franklin's lead, Reitz argues that Marcuse is a "beautiful soul" in Hegel's sense, essentially dualist and incapable of overcoming contradiction (228). Reitz also

documents the sense of betrayal that radical activists felt towards *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, taken to be a call for postponement of revolutionary action (229). Reitz is guilty of two significant omissions here. First, he assumes that Marcuse's stance was the direct result of the quietism implicit in his underlying ontology and the vacillation inherent in his dualism. The second omission is even more glaring: an uncritical attitude toward the student radicals and the ultraleftist revolutionism of the time. Could Marcuse's pessimism have had sound reason?

Reitz is quite correct that an ontological, abstract philosophical anthropology cannot adequately cope with the specificity of historically occurring social and cultural forms (234). He has little to offer, though, in delineating the dialectical materialist alternative to cultural analysis, except to cite some of its stodgiest representatives. He takes this opportunity to attack essentialism by quoting some fashionable ideas and thinkers of the current postmodern dispensation (235–42), not a move that inspires confidence. Reitz wants to preserve the “militant and adversarial dimension of Marcuse's philosophy,” but adds nothing about what there is in it worth preserving except for its militant and adversarial moments (243, 246).

The assumptions behind the academic activist agenda that Reitz advocates need to be critically examined, and the fruitful proposals sifted from the unconvincing social-service rhetoric so characteristic of the middle class professional, activist or not. How is it possible that Reitz combines such brilliant analysis of Marcuse's philosophy with such blithe gullibility in an attempt to make it more politically relevant? Again, the missing link is the failure to analyze the application of Marcuse's European ideas in the American context. The failure lies in the silence about the relationship of these ideas to the 1960s student generation beyond the congruence or rift between Marcuse's advocacy or quietism and the students' activism. Finally, I conjecture that there is a failure here of the sixties generation to mature and to disentangle a century of confusion over the relation of intellectual and cultural work to political practice.

My harsh evaluation of the final chapter should not distract



unduly from my overall commendation of the book. The book's shortcomings reflect the lack of opportunity for meaningful dialogue in this society. I urge the reader to use this invaluable book as a springboard for further discussion.

For a more detailed critique, see my unabridged draft of this review at <http://www.autodidactprojct.org/my/marcuse2.html>.

*Washington, D.C.*