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**MARCUSE: NEGATIVE THINKING, CRITICAL SOCIAL
THEORY AND PHILOSOPHY**

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Abstract. What is critical theory? What relevance does it have for us today? These are the questions I try to address in this paper. I look into the works of Herbert Marcuse, a critical theorist of the Frankfurt School of Marxism.

The paper is generally divided into 3 chapters: Hegel's logic; Marxian theory; and Critical social theory and Philosophy. I argue, in this paper, that what Marcuse does is to retrieve the revolutionary and emancipatory character of philosophy; and that the relevance of critical theory, and philosophy for this matter, is the fulfillment of human freedom and the good or happy life.

Keywords: Herbert Marcuse, Negative Thinking, Hegel's Logic, Marxian Theory, Critical Social Theory and Philosophy

Introduction

What is critical theory? What is its relevance for us today? These are the questions that I attempt to explore in this paper. In this attempt I propose to look at the thought of Herbert Marcuse, one of the pioneers of critical theory among the Frankfurt school Marxists, on critical theory, negative thinking, and philosophy.

I try to trace the influences on Marcuse in his elaboration of critical theory, especially in his two major works, namely, *Reason and Revolution* and *One-Dimensional Man*. I examine primarily the influences of G.W.F. Hegel and Karl Marx, and Plato, in Marcuse's thinking. I argue here that for Marcuse the fulfillment of qualitative social change, the aim of his critical theory, requires philosophical knowledge, and that this is essentially related to negative thinking. I would like to present in this paper that what Marcuse really does in his works and efforts is to retrieve the revolutionary character of philosophical thought.

Hegel's logic

Marcuse saw in Hegel a negative worldview: the world or reality is saturated with negativity. This negativity meant two things. It meant, firstly, that reality is false, that it is not in its truth. Secondly, in order for the truth

of reality to emerge or be made actual such false reality must be negated. Such, according to Marcuse, are the two moments in Hegel's logic. It is in this sense that Hegelian thinking is negative thinking.

What then is this Hegelian logic? More appropriately for our case, what is this Hegel's logic as interpreted or conceived by Marcuse? What is Marcuse's reading of Hegel? Answering these questions is important for us if we are to understand Marcuse's concept of critical theory; Marcusean critical theory has its foundation on his reading of Hegel.

According to Marcuse, Hegelian dialectic begins with the view that reality, the state of affairs, is negative. It is not what it is. "Finite things are 'negative'—and this is the defining characteristic of them; they never are what they can and ought to be."¹ Reality or the world is negative in the sense that it falls short of its ideal. The world is a sad one because it has not fulfilled its destiny. The world is not in its happiness; it is in its untruth.

This negative view, however, is but simply a first step in the Hegelian dialectic. It does not end with such a view. This negativity of finite things moves the world to the fulfillment of its truth. "It is a state of privation that forces the subject to seek remedy."² Such an attainment, however, requires another negation. The negative character of finite things in turn must be negated for the attainment of its truth. Finite things must shake off itself and pass into its opposite; from 'what it is not' to 'what it is'; from negative to affirmative.

How is such a movement possible? What are the basis for such views and conclusions? Marcuse points out that although there are many who claimed that Hegel's Logic was something novel, it is not really something new. "Hegel simply reinterpreted the basic categories of Aristotle's Metaphysics and did not invent a new one."³ Aristotelian metaphysics has a dynamic philosophical standpoint about the world and reality. It posits that all beings move towards an end; a movement from potentiality to actuality, from what is latent potential to its fulfillment. Beings fulfill their destiny, happiness, otherwise something is problematic. This idea of ends, in a sense, is a determining principle in this dynamism, a posited ideal, a necessary principle. All movements and stages of the development of beings happen for the achievement of their end. Therefore, the end is what makes changes and movement a possibility; without it no growth or development would be possible. The seed's destiny is and ought to be the tree; a human person's destiny, his happiness, is and ought to be the contemplative life, philosophy. It is this Aristotelian dynamic principle of beings that is thought of by Hegel in his dialectical method. Perhaps because of this Aristotelian origin that, according to Marcuse, for Hegel

there is no distinction between metaphysics and logic.⁴ Logic and metaphysics are one and the same for Hegel. What he does is to apply logical categories into his metaphysical views of reality or to apply metaphysical categories into his logic.

We may understand this better if we look at Hegel's intention in developing such kind of logic. One of Hegel's philosophical aims was to bridge the gap between thought and reality; for Hegel the "principles of thought thus also become principles of the object of thought (of the phenomena)".⁵ According to Marcuse, Hegel attempted to bridge this gap by his elaboration of being. For the latter, everything more or less exists as subject.⁶ That is, beings *comprehend* and draw the various states of existence into a single unity. The unfolding of truth is more or less the work of thought and reality. It is the synthesis of thought and reality.

This synthetic element in Hegel's logic, his dialectical method, is often contrasted with the traditional or formal logic. Hegelian logic is immanent; it is a concrete logic. Formal or mathematical logic is not looked upon with favor by Hegel because it meant conformism to facts; such logic is a static philosophical world view. Formal logic is not able to bridge the gap between thought and reality; its categories and rules leave the world untouched. Thus, what we get with it is correct thinking but with an incorrect world; a gap between thinking and reality.

Such dualism, he thinks is tantamount to a compliance with the world as it is and a withdrawal of thought from its high task of bringing the existing order of reality into harmony with the truth.⁷

Thus, Hegelian logic does not mean to delegate or claim that all things have thought. What it really intends and means is that the human person, the thinking subject, has to comprehend the truth of things, and bring it into fruition, to make it real. It ultimately envisions a praxis guided by *theoria*.

We now turn to what Hegel calls the process of actualization. The actual is "the one wherein the discrepancy between the possible and the real has been overcome."⁸ The actual is the really real, the truth, the 'rational'. As such, the actual has the nature of a necessity. It is a necessity in two senses: a determining principle and an ideal. The actual is a necessity because "it follows the inherent laws of its own nature and remains in all conditions the same."⁹ The actual is the limitation and essence of every being. It is the affirmation of what was before negative, a possibility, in the given reality. The given state of facts therefore is not something final, an

end, but simply a contingent to the actual, the necessity. Facts, stages of development, acquire meaning from such an ideal.

The actual is also at the same time freedom.¹⁰ It is freedom because it is self-determination. The nature of beings, the actual, is something that comes from the developing being itself. That which unfolds through the process of actualization is something possessed by every being, not something exterior to it. As such, the process of actualization is a self-development, the development of every being's true identity. The actual is the freedom, the autonomy of beings; it is the achievement of subjectivity—being the master of reality and the self. Actualization is the movement towards freedom.

If for Hegel the actual is the determination of beings, it is related to what he refers to as the notion of things. "The notion of a thing is 'the Universal immanent in it'."¹¹ According to Marcuse, the implication of this immanent universal is that the identity of beings centers on it. It determines being; it is the principle of beings. A human individual is a man because the universal notion of man is immanent in such individual. But this more importantly suggests that the notion, the universal, partakes the nature of an ought. Thus, the humanity of every human person for instance should be "measured up against what man can and ought to be." Every human person should be measured up according to what the ideal human person is.

In social-political philosophy, the idea of the universal is in turn translated to mean the reaction against the subjugation of the individual by the group or culture, or society, a reaction against totalitarianism. The notion of the human person transcends culture and group interest; the individual is more than his nation or race. Man is first and foremost man and not his culture. His freedom therefore should center on the universal idea of the human person and not from what his culture or society arrogate upon the individual. Only the universal has the ultimate right to legislate over the individual.¹² The freedom of the human person, the actual, or his happiness, is the fulfillment of the universal idea of the human person. That the human person be allowed to be himself, to let man be man.

Marcuse saw in Hegel's idealism a philosophy of change. It provided him the foundation or direction for conceiving a change in the world; without an ideal there could never be an idea of change, only from it can we view the possibility or idea of change. It begins with the view that the world is negative, not what it truly is, but ultimately culminates into the actualization of truth; that the given state of affairs is not final and that the truth is yet to come. It has the conviction that change happens, and is thus a philosophy of hope.

For Marcuse negative thinking is to think about change; it is idealism. Its idealism leads it to view that the given state of affairs is negative or misses short of the ideal; that the world is in its untruth and unhappiness. The high task of negative thinking is to bring about the truth. The task of philosophy is change.

Marxian theory

Marcuse's concept of critical theory also had influences from Marxian theory; he is after all a Frankfurt school Marxist. To have a better understanding of Marcuse's views about critical theory a look at his readings of Marxian theory may prove useful. Therefore, at this point, we ask what this Marxian theory is. What are Marcuse's readings or interpretations of the Marxian theory?

According to Marcuse, Marxian theory aims at changing the world; the establishment of a rational society.¹³ It is a theory of social change that provides praxis a direction. It demonstrates "the tendencies that make for the attainment of a rational order of life, the conditions for creating this, and initial steps to be taken."¹⁴ It envisions the negation of, what perhaps may be referred to as an irrational, repressive, or negative society. Marxian theory therefore is a negative theory.

It is a negative theory in two senses. Firstly, it starts with a negative social viewpoint; it begins with the "economic fact of estrangement". Secondly, it is a negation of the given negative state of affairs. It "embraces the prevailing negative state of affairs and its negation."¹⁵ In this sense Marxian theory is quite similar with the movement of beings in the Hegelian Logic; a dialectical movement from untruth to truth; from unfreedom to freedom. But for Marx, the dialectical movement is the passage from the class society to the classless society.

How is this so in Marxian theory? Marxian theory begins with the view that the prevailing society is saturated with negativity. It is not what it ought to be; it is in its untruth. We live in a world of commodities, a reified world, where everyone is reduced to objects. In the capitalist society, the human person is estranged from his work, from his fellow human persons, and from himself; the human person is lost of a home, living in estrangement. The "free development of all" is hampered.

Marxian theory, however, does not end with such a negative worldview. After exposing the deplorable conditions under the commodity world, the total alienation of the human person, it points out solutions to such a problematic matter: the escape from the vicious cycles of class society, from pre-history to the achievement of human history. For Marx

only a revolution from the base, the real producers of society and social life, can solve such a problem. This revolutionary class is the proletariat, and the task is the abolition of labor, the bases of society, and hence social life.

Marcuse points out that such a revolution, for Marx, has a character of necessity. It will happen, but with some qualifications. It must be a work of conscious activity; it must be a work of knowledge. "Not the slightest natural necessity or automatic inevitability guarantees the transition from capitalism to socialism."¹⁶ It must be praxis with *theoria*. It is incompatible with fatalistic determinism.¹⁷ True change can only be achieved through rational and free actions. "It is the realization of freedom and happiness that necessitates the establishment of an order wherein associated individuals will determine the organization of their life."¹⁸ It requires a certain attained level of both material and intellectual culture and a self-conscious proletariat.¹⁹ For Marx this development is inevitable in the development of capitalism, overproductions in capitalist society will provide the material condition for freedom and knowledge towards its advanced level; capitalism will form its own negation, the revolutionary class; capitalism begets its own negation, the proletariat.

It is important to stress here that the dialectical movement of society in Marx's theory is historical. This means that it occurs in history or reality; the dialectic is a concrete event. History is the dialectic; or true history is the passage from the negative state to its negation; it is the dialectic. The realization of freedom and truth, the classless society, is fulfilled through the historical action of men and women.

The new state is *the truth* of the old, but the truth does not steadily and automatically grow out of the earlier state; it can be set free only by an autonomous act on the part of men that will cancel the whole existing negative state.²⁰

Marxian theory aims at this negating task, changing the world. The role of theory is to provide the means toward the achievement of this negating task. "According to Marx, the correct theory is the consciousness of a practice that aims at changing the world."²¹ Marxian theory therefore does not simply describe the prevailing negative state but also embraces the discovery of practical methods for the negation of the prevailing state of affairs. They aim at "a new form of society even when describing its current form."²² By getting into the roots or bases of social life, the labor process, Marxian theory saw a solution on how to change entirely the order of social life, to finally put an end to the vicious cycle of class society, finally a true historical moment. Marx saw that this was the abolition of labor. In

Marxian thinking, theory leads or ends with practice; the task of true thinking is practice: to change the world.

Marcuse saw in Marxian theory a social theory of change, that is, the task of thought is to change the prevailing negative order of life. Negative thinking has a revolutionary task and is not simply a description of the world. Negative thinking becomes revolutionary thinking, the consciousness of practice that aims at changing the world.

Critical social theory and philosophy

We now look at Marcuse's thoughts about critical theory. What is the Marcusean critical theory all about? What are its goals or aims? How is negative thinking related to Marcuse's views about critical theory? These are some questions that we now address into.

Marcusean critical theory, according to Douglas Kellner, is a theory of social change. Marcuse oftentimes makes a distinction between what he calls quantitative and qualitative changes in civilization. Quantitative change, on the one hand, means simply the material progress of civilization, the increase in material production and accumulation and development of technology. For instance, from the development of computers to cars; from the abacus to digitalization of multi-tasking computers, and from simple carts to trains to airplanes. Qualitative change, on the other hand, means the liberation of the human person from the slavery of an inherently repressive and irrational civilization, or what he refers to as the achievement of a pacified existence. It is this latter meaning of change that Marcusean critical theory is more preoccupied with. Thus, it is a theory of qualitative change.

A critical theory of society, according to Marcuse, is a "theory which analyzes society in the light of its used and unused or abused capabilities for improving the human condition."²³ Thus, the critical social theory's important task or aim is to point out the possibilities present in a society for improving the quality of life of human persons. It asks the question: How can the available intellectual and material resources given in a society "be used for optimal development and satisfaction of individual needs and faculties with a minimum toil or misery?"²⁴ With the available resources, how can qualitative change happen? What is done is that

The established way of organizing society is measured against other possible ways, ways which are held to offer better chances for alleviating man's struggle for existence; a specific historical practice is measured against its own historical alternatives.²⁵

Historical practice and alternatives are evaluated in terms of how much they may lead to a qualitative change in civilization, the amelioration of human living. A critical social theory, ultimately, aims at a qualitative social change. In this sense it is a revolutionary theory; it points out the directions or possibilities for a real social change.

Marcuse tells us that a critical theory of society works with some value judgments or assumptions. Marcuse explicitly mentions two. Namely: “the judgment that human life is worth living, or rather can be and ought to be made worth living”; and “the judgment that, in a given society specific possibilities exist for the amelioration of human life and specific ways and means of realizing these possibilities”.²⁶ The basic assumption of a critical social theory then is that the amelioration of human living, that the “happy and free life”, is possible, and that this possibility is, or has to be shown to be, present in a society. The aim is to discover and disclose real, existing, possibilities for social change within the reach of society; that possibilities for change exist in society. “Critical analysis has to demonstrate the objective validity of these judgments, and the demonstration has to proceed on empirical grounds.”²⁷ A critical theory of society therefore is a theory of optimal social development; it is all about the greatest possibilities, present in a society, for the improvement of human condition or, what Marcuse called, “pacified existence”. It has to show that qualitative change is empirically valid, or is a historical possibility. Critical theory “must be a historical position in the sense that it must be grounded on the capabilities of the given society.”²⁸

Marcuse saw in his *Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* the refutation or defeat of critical social theory in the advanced industrial society. He saw that the advanced industrial civilization has the singular achievement of containing social change.²⁹ The highly industrialized and affluent society, through its accumulation of technological knowledge and capacity to efficiently spread comfort and deliver the goods, has integrated into its system negative forces, the agents of social change, and has effectively refuted or defeated any possibility of protest against it. The advanced industrial society has developed into a higher stage of totalitarianism, a one-dimensional universe. This development deprives critical social theory of its very basis—the agents or catalysts of qualitative change in society.³⁰ “In the absence of demonstrable agents and agencies of social change, the critique is thus thrown back to high level abstraction.”³¹ It may or has become an idle speculation, and that qualitative social change seems to be impossible or utopian.

Despite this, Marcuse maintains that the need for qualitative change is as pressing as before,³² and that forces and tendencies exist in the advanced industrial society that may break the containment of social change and explode the society.³³ He hopefully claims that the tendencies for a real social revolution are still present in the one-dimensional universe of the advanced industrial civilization. For him, the quantitative changes in the contemporary civilization, the increase in production and development of technology, are requisites for the satisfaction of human needs; as such, they open up the possibility for real social change. Production on a greater scale and automation may lead to the greater freedom of the human person and the happy life, the alleviation of misery and toil. It would be wrong therefore to think that Marcuse is against the development of technology and industrialization of society.

Marcuse insists that if the advanced industrial society refutes critique, then negative thinking, the logic of protest, must be revived. We saw earlier the Hegelian and Marxist roots of negative thinking and from them knew that negative thinking has confidence in reason, and have a subversive character; it is reason and revolution. I would like to point out, at this juncture, that negative thinking greatly involves philosophical thinking and has origins in the ancient Greek philosophy. Negative thinking is philosophy or philosophical thinking.

Marcuse's understanding of reason, though expressly Hegelian as many commentators point out, also has its origins in ancient Greek philosophy. He saw its presence in Plato's philosophy and dialectical logic. To the Plato of the early and middle dialogues, philosophy is epistemology, a loving search for knowledge. But this knowledge is of high order; it has to be true knowledge and not simply opinions or "shadows". It is therefore a search for the truth, philosophical truth. In this search or dialectical logic, reason plays a central role. Reason is the faculty that grasps the truth and falsity of reality or of the world.³⁴ Reason is preoccupied or concerned with the truth, and in this case, gives truth a value; truth is to be preferred from false. Truth then becomes ethics; it becomes a preference for the truth over falsity. "Epistemology is in itself ethics, and ethics is epistemology."³⁵

Negative thinking, reason and revolution, is saturated with value; it has a leaning. It is ethical and political thinking in the Platonic sense. It is ethical insofar as truth is virtue, and political insofar as it entails the realization of truth in action. It is the thinking of the ironic and critical Socrates in the early Platonic dialogues; a man of science and morality—the model western philosopher—but killed because of his subversive activities, the "corruption" of the youth. Negative thinking then is philosophical thinking;

it is epistemology and ethics. Its dictum is knowledge is virtue and virtue is knowledge. It preoccupies itself with the realization of reason.

Marcuse, thus, thinks that qualitative change requires a philosophy or philosophical knowledge. It does so primarily because of the critical character of philosophical thinking. The synthetic and transcendent character of philosophical thought renders it capable of seeing beyond variations and manifestations; it is able to see what truth is. In this sense, philosophical thought is also negative; it does not simply surrender itself to what is given. In its assumption of an ideal truth, philosophic thought is capable of truly evaluating the given state of affairs. It provides a standard for the critical analysis. If knowledge of the truth is what is required for social change, then philosophy may open up the possibility for the fulfillment of qualitative change.

In this case Marcuse proposes what Plato has done more than 2000 years ago: philosophical education. If the human person were to live the good life, the end of human living, then philosophical education is necessary. Thus, the relevance of philosophy to the aims of the critical theory of society is the achievement of qualitative change. In this sense Marcuse wants to retrieve the revolutionary and emancipatory character of philosophy.

Conclusion

Marcuse's contribution in reviving negative thinking is aimed at achieving qualitative change. He sees in Hegel, Marx, and even Plato the same attempts; all are negative thinkers. Their highly philosophical thoughts disclose the negative conditions of the world or reality, and aim at its negation. Marcuse insists on the revival of negative thinking from such influences and intentions, and tries to apply them in his critical social theory. As such, Marcusean critical theory is a negative theory in as much as it is a theory of real social change. Marcuse, in his efforts and works, always wants to contribute to the revival of negative thinking primarily for the fulfillment of qualitative change.

Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri tell us that the "Empire" is materializing before us.³⁶ This Empire is seen to be a new emerging global political order; in this sense, it determines or creates the kind of life a human person has. This can now be seen in the emergence of the overwhelming increase in Filipino OFW's and the kind of higher educational courses and technical professions in demand in our society today. It would seem that this new global order emerges as new form of domination and control over the human person. The Empire therefore is a

new political sovereign. By this, it would mean a civilization that determines or represses the individual. Yet, Hardt and Negri maintain that human freedom and the good life is possible within the emerging order of the Empire. Like Marcuse, they both assert that a kind of thinking or consciousness is a requisite for the possibility of human freedom and the good life. The only way to oppose the repression of the Empire is an adequate consciousness of its central repressive operations.³⁷

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Endnotes

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- ² Ibid., 66.
- ³ Ibid., 122.
- ⁴ Ibid., 64.
- ⁵ Ibid., 63.
- ⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷ Ibid., 123.
- ⁸ Ibid., 153.
- ⁹ Ibid., 154.
- ¹⁰ Ibid.
- ¹¹ Ibid., 127.
- ¹² Ibid., 126.
- ¹³ Ibid., 321.
- ¹⁴ Ibid., 322.
- ¹⁵ Ibid., 315.
- ¹⁶ Ibid., 318.
- ¹⁷ Ibid., 319.

¹⁸ Ibid., 317-318.

¹⁹ Ibid., 318.

²⁰ Ibid., 315.

²¹ Ibid., 321.

²² Ibid., 258.

²³ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), x.

²⁴ Ibid., xi.

²⁵ Ibid., x.

²⁶ Ibid., x-xi.

²⁷ Ibid., xi.

²⁸ Ibid., xv.

²⁹ Ibid., xii.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid., xiii.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., xv.

³⁴ Ibid., 124.

³⁵ Ibid., 125.

³⁶ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (USA: Harvard University Press, 2001), xi.

³⁷ Ibid., 399.