Herbert Marcuse. One-Dimensional Man
10 – Conclusion (Source: Marxists Internet Archive)

The advancing one-dimensional society alters the relation between the rational and the irrational. Contrasted with the fantastic and insane aspects of its rationality, the realm of the irrational becomes the home of the really rational – of the ideas which may “promote the art of life.” If the established society manages all normal communication, validating or invalidating it in accordance with social requirements, then the values alien to these requirements may perhaps have no other medium of communication than the abnormal one of fiction. The aesthetic dimension still retains a freedom of expression which enables the writer and artist to call men and things by their name – to name the otherwise unnamable.

The real face of our time shows in Samuel Beckett’s novels; its real history is written in Rolf Hochhut’s play Der Stellvertreter. It is no longer imagination which speaks here, but Reason, in a reality which justifies everything and absolves everything – except the sin against its spirit. Imagination is abdicating to this reality, which is catching up with and overtaking imagination. Auschwitz continues to haunt, not the memory but the accomplishments of man – the space Bights; the rockets and missiles; the “labyrinthine basement under the Snack Bar”; too pretty electronic plants, clean, hygienic and with flower beds; the poison gas which is not really harmful to people; the secrecy in which we all participate. This is the setting in which the great human achievements of science, medicine, technology take place; the efforts to save and ameliorate life are the sole promise in the disaster. The willful play with fantastic possibilities, the ability to act with good conscience contra naturam to experiment with men and things, to convert illusion into reality and fiction into truth, testify to the extent to which Imagination has become an instrument of progress. And it is one which, like others in the established societies, is methodically abused. Setting the pace and style of politics, the power of imagination far exceeds Alice in Wonderland in the manipulation of words, turning sense into nonsense and nonsense into sense.

The formerly antagonistic realms merge on technical and political grounds – magic and science, life and death, joy and misery. Beauty reveals its terror as highly classified nuclear plants and laboratories become “Industrial Parks” in pleasing surroundings; Civil Defense Headquarters display a “deluxe fallout-shelter” with wall-to-wall carpeting (‘soft.’), lounge chairs, television, and Scrabble, “designed as a combination family room during peacetime (sic!) and family fallout shelter should war break out.”[179] If the horror of such realizations does not penetrate into consciousness, if it is readily taken for granted, it is because these achievements are (a) perfectly rational in terms of the existing order, (b) tokens of human ingenuity and power beyond the traditional limits of imagination.

The obscene merger of aesthetics and reality refutes the philosophies which oppose “poetic” imagination to scientific and empirical Reason. Technological progress is accompanied by a progressive rationalization and even realization of the imaginary. The archetypes of horror as well as of joy, of war as well as of peace lose their catastrophic character. Their appearance in the daily life of the individuals is no longer that of irrational forces – their modern avatars are elements of technological domination, and subject to it.
In reducing and even canceling the romantic space of imagination, society has forced the imagination to prove itself on new grounds, on which the images are translated into historical capabilities and projects. The translation will be as bad and distorted as the society which undertakes it. Separated from the realm of material production and material needs, imagination was mere play, invalid in the realm of necessity, and committed only to a fantastic logic and a fantastic truth. When technical progress cancels this separation, it invests the images with its own logic and its own truth; it reduces the free faculty of the mind. But it also reduces the gap between imagination and Reason. The two antagonistic faculties become interdependent on common ground. In the light of the capabilities of advanced industrial civilization, is not all play of the imagination playing with technical possibilities, which can be tested as to their chances of realization? The romantic idea of a “science of the Imagination” seems to assume an ever-more-empirical aspect.

The scientific, rational character of Imagination has long since been recognized in mathematics, in the hypotheses and experiments of the physical sciences. It is likewise recognized in psychoanalysis, which is in theory based on the acceptance of the specific rationality of the irrational; the comprehended imagination becomes, redirected, a therapeutic force. But this therapeutic force may go much further than in the cure of neuroses. It was not a poet but a scientist who has outlined this prospect:

“Toute une psychanalyse matérielle peut nous aider a guérir de nos images, ou du moins nous aider à limiter l’emprise de nos images. On peut alors espérer ... pouvoir rendre l’imagination heureuse, autrement dit, pouvoir donner bonne conscience à l’imagination, en lui accordant pleinement tous ses moyens d’expression, toutes les images matérielles qui se produisent dans les rêves naturels, dans l’activité onirique normale. Rendre heureuse l’imagination, lui accorder toute son exubérance, c’est précisément donner à l’imagination sa véritable fonction d’entraînement psychique.”[180]

Imagination has not remained immune to the process of reification. We are possessed by our images, suffer our own images. Psychoanalysis knew it well, and knew the consequences. However, “to give to the imagination all the means of expression” would be regression. The mutilated individuals (mutilated also in their faculty of imagination) would organize and destroy even more than they are now permitted to do. Such release would be the unmitigated horror – not the catastrophe of culture, but the free sweep of its most repressive tendencies. Rational is the imagination which can become the a priori of the reconstruction and redirection, of the productive apparatus toward a pacified existence, a life without fear. And this can never be the imagination of those who are possessed by the images of domination and, death.

To liberate the imagination so that it can be given all its means of expression presupposes the repression of much that is now free and that perpetuates a repressive society. And such reversal is not a matter of psychology or ethics but of politics, in the sense in which this term has here been used; throughout: the practice in which the basic societal institutions are developed, defined, sustained, and changed. It is the practice of individuals, no matter how organized they may be. Thus the question once again must be faced: how can the administered individuals – who have made their mutilation into their own liberties and satisfactions, and thus reproduce it on an enlarged scale – liberate themselves from themselves as well as from their masters? How is it
even thinkable that the vicious circle be broken?

Paradoxically, it seems that it is not the notion of the new societal institutions which presents
the greatest difficulty in the attempt to answer this question. The established societies themselves
are changing, or have already changed the basic institutions in the direction of increased
planning. Since the development and utilization of all available resources for the universal
satisfaction of vital needs is the prerequisite of pacification, it is incompatible with the
prevalence of particular interests which stand in the way of attaining this goal. Qualitative
change is conditional upon planning for the whole against these interests, and a free and rational
society can emerge only on this basis.

The institutions within which pacification can be envisaged thus defy the traditional
classification into authoritarian and democratic, centralized and liberal administration. Today, the
opposition to central planning in the name of a liberal democracy which is denied in reality
serves as an ideological prop for repressive interests. The goal of authentic self-determination by
the individuals depends on effective social control over the production and distribution of the
necessities (in terms of the achieved level of culture, material and intellectual).

Here, technological rationality, stripped of its exploitative features, is the sole standard and
guide in planning and developing the available resources for all. Self-determination in the
production and distribution of vital goods and services would be wasteful. The job is a technical
one, and as a truly technical job, it makes for the reduction of physical and mental toil. In this
realm, centralized control is rational if it establishes the preconditions for meaningful self-
determination. The latter can then become effective in its own realm – in the decisions which
involve the production, and distribution of the economic surplus, and in the individual existence.

In any case, the combination of centralized authority and direct democracy is subject to
infinite variations, according to the degree of development. Self-determination” will be real to
the extent to which the masses have been dissolved into individuals liberated from all
propaganda, indoctrination, and manipulation, capable of knowing and comprehending the facts
and of evaluating the alternatives. In other words, society would be rational and free to the extent
to which it is organized, sustained, and reproduced by an essentially new historical Subject.

At the present stage of development of the advanced: industrial societies, the material as well
as the cultural system denies this exigency. The power and efficiency of this system, the
thorough assimilation of mind with fact, of thought with required behaviour, of aspirations with
reality, militate against the emergence of a new Subject. They also militate against the notion that
the replacement of the prevailing control over the productive process by “control from below”
would mean the advent of qualitative change. This notion was valid, and still is valid, where the
laborers were, and still are, the living denial and indictment of the established society. However,
where these classes have become a prop of the established way of life, their ascent to control
would prolong this way in a different setting.

And yet, the facts are all there which validate the critical theory of this society and of its fatal
development: the increasing irrationality of the whole; waste and restriction of productivity; the
need for aggressive expansion; the constant threat of war; intensified exploitation;
dehumanization. And they all point to the historical alternative: the planned utilization of resources for the satisfaction of vital needs with a minimum of toil, the transformation of leisure into free time, the pacification of the struggle for existence.

But the facts and the alternatives are there like fragments which do not connect, or like a world of mute objects without a subject, without the practice which would move these objects in the new direction. Dialectical theory is not refuted, but it cannot offer the remedy. It cannot be positive. To be sure, the dialectical concept, in comprehending the given facts, transcends the given facts. This is the very token of its truth. It defines the historical possibilities, even necessities; but their realization can only be in the practice which responds to the theory, and, at present, the practice gives no such response.

On theoretical as well as empirical grounds, the dialectical concept pronounces its own hopelessness. The human reality is its history and, in it, contradictions do not explode by themselves. The conflict between streamlined, rewarding domination on the one hand, and its achievements that make for self-determination and pacification on the other, may become blatant beyond any possible denial, but it may well continue to be a manageable and even productive conflict, for with the growth in the technological conquest of nature grows the conquest of man by man. And this conquest reduces the freedom which is a necessary a priori of liberation. This is freedom of thought in the only sense in which thought can be free in the administered world – as the consciousness of its repressive productivity, and as the absolute need for breaking out of this whole. But precisely this absolute need does not prevail where it could become the driving force of a historical practice, the effective cause of qualitative change. Without this material force, even the most acute consciousness remains powerless.

No matter how obvious the irrational character of the whole may manifest itself and, with it, the necessity of change, insight into necessity has never sufficed for seizing the possible alternatives. Confronted with the omnipresent efficiency of the given system of life, its alternatives have always appeared utopian. And insight into necessity, the consciousness of the evil state, will not suffice even at the stage where the accomplishments of science and the level of productivity have eliminated the utopian features of the alternatives – where the established reality rather than its opposite is utopian.

Does this mean that the critical theory of society abdicates and leaves the field to an empirical sociology which, freed from all theoretical guidance except a methodological one, succumbs to the fallacies of misplaced concreteness, thus performing an ideological service while proclaiming the elimination of value judgments? Or do the dialectical concepts once again testify to their truth – by comprehending their own situation as that of the society which they analyze? A response might suggest itself if one considers the critical theory precisely at the point of its greatest weakness – its inability to demonstrate the liberating tendencies within the established society.

The critical theory of society, was, at the time of its origin, confronted with the presence of real forces (objective and subjective) in the established society which moved (or could be guided to move) toward more rational and freer institutions by abolishing the existing ones which had become obstacles to progress. These were the empirical grounds on which the theory was
erected, and from these empirical grounds derived the idea of the liberation of inherent possibilities — the development, otherwise blocked and distorted, of material and intellectual productivity, faculties, and needs. Without the demonstration of such forces, the critique of society would still be valid and rational, but it would be incapable of translating its rationality into terms of historical practice. The conclusion? “Liberation of inherent possibilities” no longer adequately expresses the historical alternative.

The enchained possibilities of advanced industrial societies are: development of the productive forces on an enlarged scale, extension of the conquest of nature, growing satisfaction of needs for a growing number of people, creation of new needs and faculties. But these possibilities are gradually being realized through means and institutions which cancel their liberating potential, and this process affects not only the means but also the ends. The instruments of productivity and progress, organized into a totalitarian system, determine not only the actual but also the possible utilizations.

At its most advanced stage, domination functions as administration, and in the overdeveloped areas of mass consumption, the administered life becomes the good life of the whole, in the defense of which the opposites are united. This is the pure form of domination. Conversely, its negation appears to be the pure form of negation. All content seems reduced to the one abstract demand for the end of domination — the only truly revolutionary exigency, and the event that would validate the achievements of industrial civilization. In the face of its efficient denial by the established system, this negation appears in the politically impotent form of the “absolute refusal” — a refusal which seems the more unreasonable the more the established system develops its productivity and alleviates the burden of life. In the words of Maurice Blanchot:

“Ce que nous refusons n’est pas sans valeur ni sans importance. c’est bien à cause de cela que le refus est nécessaire. Il y a une raison que nous n’accepterons plus, il y a une apparence de sagesse qui nous fait horreur, il y a une offre d’accord et de conciliation que nous n’entendrons pas. Une rupture s’est produite. Nous avons été ramenés à cette franchise qui ne tolère plus la complicité.”[181]

But if the abstract character of the refusal is the result of total reification, then the concrete ground for refusal must still exist, for reification is an illusion. By the same token, the unification of opposites in the medium of technological rationality must be, in all its reality, an illusory unification, which eliminates neither the contradiction between the growing productivity and its repressive use, nor the vital need for solving the contradiction.

But the struggle for the solution has outgrown the traditional forms. The totalitarian tendencies of the one-dimensional society render the traditional ways and means of protest ineffective — perhaps even dangerous because they preserve the illusion of popular sovereignty. This illusion contains some truth: “the people,” previously the ferment of social change, have “moved up” to become the ferment of social cohesion. Here rather than in the redistribution of wealth and equalization of classes is the new stratification characteristic of advanced industrial society.

However, underneath the conservative popular base is the substratum of the outcasts and
outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployable. They exist outside the democratic process; their life is the most immediate and the most real need for ending intolerable conditions and institutions. Thus their opposition is revolutionary even if their consciousness is not. Their opposition hits the system from without and is therefore not deflected by the system; it is an elementary force which violates the rules of the game and, in doing so, reveals it as a rigged game. When they get together and go out into the streets, without arms, without protection, in order to ask for the most primitive civil rights, they know that they face dogs, stones, and bombs, jail, concentration camps, even death. Their force is behind every political demonstration for the victims of law and order. The fact that they start refusing to play the game may be the fact which marks the beginning of the end of a period.

Nothing indicates that it will be a good end. The economic and technical capabilities of the established societies are sufficiently vast to allow for adjustments and concessions to the underdog, and their armed forces sufficiently trained and equipped to take care of emergency situations. However, the specter is there again, inside and outside the frontiers of the advanced societies. The facile historical parallel with the barbarians threatening the empire of civilization prejudices the issue; the second period of barbarism may well be the continued empire of civilization itself. But the chance is that, in this period, the historical extremes may meet again: the most advanced consciousness of humanity, and its most exploited force. It is nothing but a chance. The critical theory of society possesses no concepts which could bridge the gap between the present and its future; holding no promise and showing no success, it remains negative. Thus it wants to remain loyal to those who, without hope, have given and give their life to the Great Refusal.

At the beginning of the fascist era, Walter Benjamin wrote:

“Nur um der Hoffnungslosen willen ist uns die Hoffnung gegeben.”

It is only for the sake of those without hope that hope is given to us.