

“Heidegger and Marcuse: On Reification and Concrete Philosophy,” *The Bloomsbury Companion to Heidegger*,” F. Raffoul and E. Nelson, eds., Bloomsbury Press, 2013, pp. 171-176

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## **Introduction**

Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979) completed his doctorate in 1922 but decided not to pursue the habilitation which would have qualified him for an academic career. Instead, he returned to Berlin where he established an antiquarian bookstore with a partner. When he read *Being and Time* shortly after its publication in 1927, he reconsidered his options. He believed that unlike the philosophy he had studied previously, Heidegger’s philosophy was “concrete,” relevant to life. He later said, “We saw in Heidegger what we had first seen in Husserl, a new beginning, the first radical attempt to put philosophy on really concrete foundations – philosophy concerned with human existence, the human condition, and not with merely abstract ideas and principles” (Marcuse 2005, 165-166).

In 1928 Marcuse became Heidegger’s student and in 1930 he delivered a brilliant thesis entitled *Hegel’s Ontology and the Theory of Historicity*. Apparently Heidegger rejected the work and in any case it would soon be impossible for a Jew like Marcuse to find employment in a German university (Kellner 1984, 406, n.1). Edmund Husserl, with whom

Marcuse also studied, contacted Max Horkheimer on Marcuse's behalf. In 1933 Marcuse joined the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research Institute in exile.

Marcuse's most detailed discussion of his early relation to Heidegger is in a 1972 interview with Frederick Olafson. He observes that he and Heidegger's other students were surprised by their teacher's sudden adherence to Nazism. But he also claims that the gloominess of *Being and Time* already suggests a joyless, repressive concept of existence not incompatible with Nazism. There is one further comment in this interview which illustrates the unreliability of philosophers' self-interpretations. Marcuse says that he had few reservations about Heidegger's thought during this period, which implies that he was a loyal disciple. We will see that this is far from the case.

In 1934 Marcuse settled accounts publicly with his Heideggerian past in an essay entitled "The Struggle against Liberalism in the Totalitarian State" (Marcuse 1968). This essay argues that Heidegger and other Nazi sympathizers such as Carl Schmitt abandoned the fundamental concepts and norms of the philosophical tradition. The "existentialists" attempted to concretize the abstract categories of philosophy but ended up producing new and still more empty abstractions that cancelled the ethical implications of the traditional ones and surrendered thought to power.

In 1947 Marcuse met Heidegger at his hut near Freiberg and came away dissatisfied: Heidegger apparently admitted his political errors but

declined to make a public apology. In the following months, in an exchange of letters, Heidegger asserted the moral equivalence of Nazi crimes and the hardships suffered by Germans during and after the war. This was the last straw for Marcuse who denounced his former teacher in a final letter that broke off all relations (Wolin 1993, 152-164). Nevertheless, Heidegger's thought had a continuing influence on him.

Marcuse's appropriation of Heideggerian themes divides into two periods. The first phase has been called "*Heidegger-Marxismus*." It focuses on the existential problematic of revolutionary action as a form of authentic existence. This phase is cut short not only by historical contingencies but by Marcuse's discovery in 1932 of Marx's *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts*. The *Manuscripts* offered him a Marxist language and conceptual framework in which to pursue many of the themes of his Heideggerian phase. Much later, in the 1960s, Marcuse focuses on the critique of science and technology. In this period Heidegger again appears as a significant interlocutor, although there are few explicit references.

### Heidegger-Marxismus

Marcuse was a Marxist all his life. He participated in the soldier's councils in Berlin during the 1919 revolution that followed World War I and remained true to the socialist ideal to the end. Thus his interest in Heidegger's philosophy may seem surprising. In fact he found in Heidegger the basis for a response to the crisis of Marxism.

With the defeat of the wave of revolutionary offensives that followed World War I, the mechanistic and economistic Marxism of the pre-war period was discredited theoretically. It could neither account for the one successful revolution in Russia—a backward country—nor the failed revolutions that occurred in advanced ones with low proletarian participation. Marxist theorists such as Georg Lukács argued for a theory of class consciousness to explain the actions of the proletariat, both its revolutionary enthusiasms and its disappointing acquiescence. Lukács introduced the concept of reification to describe the objectivistic and instrumentalist culture that blocked revolutionary aspirations in capitalist society.

This is where Heidegger comes in. One could read his theory of inauthenticity and authenticity as an implied critique of reification and a call to historical participation in a radical project of social transformation (Goldmann 1973). This was roughly how Heidegger himself understood his theory in 1933, with disastrous consequences. Marcuse appropriated the same theory for a diametrically opposed politics. Such different interpretations were possible because of what Marcuse would later call the “phony concreteness” of Heidegger’s thought. However, at the time Marcuse believed Marxism could grant it truly concrete meaning.

Marcuse develops what I call a “meta-critique” of the Heideggerian concepts. On the one hand, he draws on Hegel and Marx to provide a social content to Heidegger’s ontological claims. On the other hand, the Marxist

concept of labor is ontologically grounded in the Heideggerian concept of being-in-the-world. Heidegger's *Being and Time* was thus transformed into a political theory with a normative foundation.<sup>1</sup>

Marcuse argues that subject and object are related most fundamentally, *ontologically*, not through consciousness or knowledge but through labor. Being-in-the-world is now understood as the objectification of the self in the appropriation of thinghood. The relation between this rather forced interpretation and Heidegger's analysis of readiness-to-hand was apparent to Heidegger himself. In his only recorded comment on Marcuse, he says that Marcuse saw a parallel between Marx's claim that being has precedence over consciousness and his own rejection of the priority of consciousness in *Being and Time* (FS, 52).

Marcuse reinterpreted the concept of *Dasein* on these terms. Heidegger's concept already represents a concretization of the philosophical concept of the subject. He is influenced by Dilthey in identifying this concrete subject with the living individual as opposed to a pure cognitive function. Marcuse agrees with the general approach, but argues that the material needs of the individual are not merely an ontic complication but belong to its essential nature. The temporality of *Dasein* is now concretized through the notion of labor. *Dasein* must "project" itself, not in the abstract but concretely through the transformation of nature. Its fundamental relation to the world, its "being-in" is now explained not just by the individual relationship to ready-to-hand tools, but

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<sup>1</sup> For a full account of these transformations, see Feenberg 2005.

by the social conditions of labor. This ties its ontologically fundamental relation to the future to its social relations with the others alongside whom it labours.

This radical revision of Heidegger's concepts situates the individual in antagonistic relations. Class now enters the ontological domain described by Heidegger. Marcuse asks,

...is the world 'the same' even for all forms of *Dasein* present within a concrete historical situation? Obviously not. It is not only that the world of significance varies among particular contemporary cultural regions and groups, but also that, within any one of these, abysses of meaning may open up between different worlds. Precisely in the most existentially essential behaviour, no understanding exists between the world of the high-capitalist bourgeois and that of the small farmer or proletarian. Here the examination is forced to confront the question of the material constitution of historicity, a breakthrough that Heidegger neither achieves nor even gestures toward (Herbert Marcuse, *Heideggerian Marxism*. R. Wolin and J. Abromeit, eds. (Lincoln and London: University Nebraska Press, 2005), 16).

From a Heideggerian standpoint this seems a mere substitution of sociology for ontology. Is there not a more fundamental ontological level shared by all these various types of *Dasein*? Marcuse would agree, but he argues that that fundamental level can only be described starting out from

the concrete human situation which is characterized by the struggle for the necessities of life.

Marcuse's politics then follow from his concretization of the concepts of inauthenticity or "fallenness" and authenticity. Inauthenticity is no longer identified with absorption into the anonymity of "*das Man*" but is due to the reification or alienation of labor. Inauthentic objectivism is now identified with the reduction of possibility to actuality in the reified world of the capitalist economy. Authentic action, which Heidegger describes as "precisely the disclosive projection and determination of what is factually possible at the time," that is, the response called for by the situation, is now redescribed as the "revolutionary act" in which the situation—reification—calls for a transformation of the conditions of labor (BT, 345). Marcuse writes, "Knowledge of one's own historicity and concrete historical existence becomes possible at the moment when existence itself breaks through reification" (Marcuse 2005, 32).

The existentials Heidegger introduces appear arbitrary or excessively abstract in the light of Marcuse's meta-critique. But given the collapse of the idea of proletarian revolution, Marcuse's early attempts at concretization appear as arbitrary as Heidegger's. Nevertheless, the meta-critical structure of his Marxist argument will continue to rule his later much less orthodox writings. He will continue to transform philosophical abstractions into ontologized historical categories. The concept of reason is subjected to this treatment in the later critique of technology.

## Technology and Rationality

In 1960 Marcuse published a short article entitled “De l’Ontologie à la Technologie: Les Tendances de la Société Industrielle” (*Arguments*, 1960). This article promises a forthcoming book which will be *One-Dimensional Man*. The article contains a significant reference to *Being and Time*. Once again Heidegger’s text is metacritically interpreted.

A machine, a technical instrument, can be considered as neutral, as pure matter. But the machine, the instrument, does not exist outside an ensemble, a technological totality; it exists only as an element of technicity. This form of technicity is a “state of the world,” a way of existing between man and nature. Heidegger stressed that the “project” of an instrumental world precedes (and should precede) the creation of those technologies which serve as the instrument of this ensemble (technicity) before attempting to act upon it as a technician. In fact, such “transcendental” knowledge possesses a material base in the needs of society and in the incapacity of society to either satisfy or develop them. I would like to insist on the fact that the abolition of anxiety, the pacification of life, and enjoyment are the essential needs. From the beginning, the technical project contains the requirements of these needs....If one considers the existential character of technicity, one can speak of a *final technological cause*



and the repression of this cause through the social development of technology (Marcuse 2011, 136-137).

This passage translates Heidegger's transcendental analysis of worldhood as a system of instrumentalities based on a generalized concept of "care" into the historically specific concept of "technicity" as the system of technology. Heidegger's "care" has become the orientation toward human needs which is intrinsic to instrumental action as such, including modern technology. But service to human needs has been blocked by capitalism. Thus what Heidegger thought of as an ontology of instrumental action unifying human being and world in terms of an unspecified possible end has become a normative account of the failure of technology to realize its quite definite proper end. Marcuse sets up the contrast between a truncated technological "a priori" aimed exclusively at domination and an alternative a priori that would fulfill the *telos* of technology in the creation of a harmonious society reconciled with nature. Technology is not neutral, but rather it is ambivalent, available for two different developmental paths.

In 1964 Marcuse finally published *One-Dimensional Man*. Chapters 5 and 6 can be seen as an implicit response to Heidegger's "The Question Concerning Technology." The problem Marcuse poses is how to explain the connection between capitalism as a system of domination and scientific-technical rationality. Chapter 5 corresponds to Heidegger's discussion of Aristotle and contrasts premodern ontology with modern

science. Chapter 6 then explores the science-technology connection and concludes with a discussion of their political role under capitalism.

Marcuse's history of rationality can be read as an alternative to Heidegger's history of being. Marcuse explains that in its ancient Greek form, reason encountered a world of substantial things. For the Greeks, exemplified by Aristotle, things are not composed of functional units awaiting transformation and recombination, but rather they are "substances" with an essence that lays out their form and purpose. "Is" and "ought" are harmonized in the potentialities belong to the essence. The Greek conception is realized practically in *technē*, the knowledge associated with craft production and artistic creation, which actualizes essence in a material.

This Greek conception of rationality is superseded in modern times by the scientific mode of experiencing and understanding the world. The new a priori has two essential features, quantification and instrumentalization. Science does not address experience in its immediacy but transforms everything it encounters into quantities. This stance eliminates purpose and hence also potentiality from the world. This is the basis of the value-neutrality of science, its indifference to the good and the beautiful in the interests of the true.

The world, now stripped of any valuative features and disaggregated, is exposed to unrestrained instrumental control. Within the framework of scientific research this instrumentalism is innocent enough. Science learns

by manipulating its objects in experiments. But the innocence of science is lost when the possibilities of instrumental control opened by the a priori of science are exploited on a much larger scale by technology. This is the inner connection between science and technology. It reveals the inherently technological nature of science hidden in the cloister of the lab. Thus Marcuse writes, “The science of nature develops under the *technological a priori* which projects nature as potential instrumentality, stuff of control and organization” (Marcuse 1964, 153).

In support of this view Marcuse cites several passages from Heidegger’s writings on science and technology. Heidegger explains that the “essence of technics”—Marcuse’s a priori—is the basis of mechanization. “Modern man takes the entirety of Being as raw material for production and subjects the entirety of the object-world to the sweep and order of production.” “...the use of machinery and the production of machines is not technics itself but merely an adequate instrument for the realization of the essence of technics in its objective raw materials” (quoted in Marcuse 1964, 153-154).

Marcuse diverges from Heidegger in arguing that the congruence of science, technology and society is ultimately rooted in the social requirements of capitalism and the world it projects. As such science and technology cannot transcend that world. Rather, they are destined to reproduce it by their very structure. They are thus inherently conservative, not because they are ideological in the usual sense of the term, or because

their understanding of nature is false. Marcuse never calls into question the cognitive value of science and technology. Rather, they are conservative because they are intrinsically adjusted to serving a social order which views being as the stuff of domination. Thus “Technology has become the great vehicle of *reification*” (Marcuse 1964, 108).

On this account capitalism is more than an economic system; it is a *world* in the phenomenological sense of the term. This world is the historical project of a specific historical subject, that is, it is only one possible world among those that have arisen in the course of time. The subject of this world, capitalism, can be displaced by another subject. The question of the future is thus raised.

The progressive alternative Marcuse imagines would have a different mode of experience, of “seeing,” from the prevailing one. “The leap from the rationality of domination to the realm of freedom demands the concrete transcendence beyond this rationality, it demands new ways of seeing, hearing, feeling, touching things, a new mode of experience corresponding to the needs of men and women who can and must fight for a free society” (Marcuse 2001, 117-118.) Marcuse develops this idea in *An Essay on Liberation* (1969) with his theory of the “new sensibility.” The new sensibility projects an aesthetic lifeworld oriented toward needs rather than domination. It would be technological but in a different way, respectful of the potentialities of its objects, both human and natural. Is there a hint here of a response to Heidegger’s suggestion that someday art might find the

**power to again shape worlds? Perhaps so, but by the time Marcuse writes this text Heidegger has disappeared as a reference.**