

[Comment on one of Marcuse's last speeches, first published in *Capitalism, Nature, Socialism*, Sept. 1992, pp. 38-40.]

Marcuse: Obstinance as a Theoretical Virtue

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"The task to be accomplished is not the conservation of the past, but the redemption of the hopes of the past" (Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. xv).

From this last speech of Marcuse's one can get a good idea what he was all about. The specifics of doctrine are less important than the tone and thrust.

Marcuse was an old man when he gave this speech. Most of us knew him only as an old man. He spoke slowly, forcefully, with both seriousness and irony, from out of the depths of history to us who still had no history. Those depths were visible on his face, in his strongly accented voice. An auditorium full of young students listening to this powerful, self-assured indictment of the system must have felt the force of a judgement made from out of those depths, and taken hope.

Marcuse did not express mere personal opinions as we might have; he had the authority of an intellectual and political tradition. On that basis he unhesitatingly confronted the contemporary world, however shocking or bizarre his claims might seem to the conformist consensus of both the establishment and the left. And often he was right, on the War in Vietnam, nuclear energy, the bankruptcy of socialism in the Soviet Union, the greatness and the limitations of the New Left, the decline of the proletarian threat to capitalism, the coming importance of feminism and ecology.

The central question of Marcuse's thought appears clearly in this short speech: from what standpoint can society be judged now that it has succeeded in feeding its members? Recognizing the arbitrariness of mere moral outrage, Marx measured capitalism by reference to an immanent criterion, the unsatisfied needs of the population. But that approach collapses as soon as capitalism proves itself capable of delivering the goods. Then the (fulfilled) needs of the individuals legitimate the established system. Radicalism means opposition, not just to the failures and deficiencies of that system, but to its very successes.

It takes astonishing nerve to persist in this challenge. But, as Marcuse once wrote, "obstinance [is] a genuine quality of philosophical thought" (*Negations*, p. 143). To be obstinate means to reject the easy reconciliation with society, to keep a sense of reality based on longer time spans, deeper tensions, higher goals, than those recognized today by a fashionable "post-modernism."

Marcuse maintained a critical stance by reference to several parallel registers of phenomena. First, there are some hard facts that don't go away: the persistence of war, hunger, periodic ecological catastrophes. Second, there is the aesthetic failure of contemporary society, the undeniable contradiction between its daily ugliness and

criteria of beauty elaborated in millenia of artistic endeavor, both in folk and high art. Third, there is the equally undeniable fact of massive manipulation of consciousness through the media and consumerist ideology. Fourth, there are the self-evident demands for fulfilling work and security of life that remain unmet for the vast majority. Finally, there is the proliferation of signs and symptoms of deep psychic disturbances and dissatisfactions beneath the surface glow of success. These signs and symptoms take both personal and political forms; indeed the distinction between these two forms is often difficult to make.

What converts this list of discontents into an indictment of the system is the contention that the benefits of our society are won at this price, that unlike isolated "problems" that could be solved piecemeal, these issues reveal the inherent limitations of contemporary capitalism.

This society, Marcuse argues, has the material potential to "pacify" existence but artificially maintains competition and violence as the basis for domination and inequality. As he put it in his last speech: "The specter which haunts advanced industrial society today is the obsolescence of full-time alienation." And further: radical political struggle today consists in "existential revolts against an obsolete reality principle."

Marcuse's concept of "*obsolescence*" situates his critique historically. The revolutionary judgement has always been made in the future anterior tense, as when Saint-Just imagined what "cold posterity" *will have said* concerning the absurdity of monarchy. Thus Marcuse is not merely complaining about a system he doesn't like. He is imagining how it will appear to a backward glance rooted in the wider context of values evolved over past centuries and destined to achieve realization in future ones. The obsolescence of that system will be obvious in this hypothetical future, justifying the obstinacy of those who persisted in critique through difficult times.

With the collapse of Soviet communism, the last alibi of historicist opposition to capitalism has died. We can no longer rest our case for change, if we ever did, on the realized achievements of "socialism." We are one step closer to a world in which only Marcuse's type of principled opposition is available. His thought has never been more relevant.