

The Triumph of Social Control? A Look at Herbert Marcuse's "One Dimensional Man", 25 Years Later

Author(s): Brad Rose

Source: *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 35 (1990), pp. 55-68

Published by: Regents of the University of California

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41035497>

Accessed: 15-01-2018 02:05 UTC

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <http://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

*Regents of the University of California* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*

# The Triumph of Social Control? A Look at Herbert Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man*, 25 Years Later

Brad Rose

Nineteen eighty-nine marked the 25th anniversary of the publication of Herbert Marcuse's influential critique of "advanced industrial society," *One Dimensional Man*. Of the many books that Marcuse was to write during the 1960's and 70's, *One Dimensional Man* was the first to address the central concerns of the then emerging student and New Left movements. Ironically, a book that: analyzed the profoundly debilitating effects of technological rationality on the human capacity for critical thought, spoke of the incorporation and abnegation of the traditional "revolutionary subject," and proclaimed the seeming disappearance of organized resistance to political oppression, also influenced a generation of radicals and New Left politicians who, together with the mass movements of the 1960's and 70's, altered the political landscape of the last third of the twentieth century by challenging the U.S. invasion of Vietnam, confronting the viciousness and tenacity of American racism, and protesting the senseless and devastating effects of the proliferation of nuclear weapons.<sup>1</sup>

While the ultimate accuracy of *One Dimensional Man's* formulations may be debated, there can be little doubt that Marcuse's book stood as a theoretical milestone which, in retrospect, may be seen to have marked the beginning of a period of multiple resistances to the benighted and politically repressive 1950's and early 1960's,<sup>2</sup> while it simultaneously formulated the apparent

---

1. For Marcuse's impact on the New Left, see especially Chapter 9 in Doug Kellner's *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); Paul Breines, "Herbert Marcuse and the New Left", in *Antworten Auf Herbert Marcuse*, Jürgen Habermas, ed. (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1971). For a contemporary journalistic impression of Marcuse's influence, see L. Abels' "Seven Heroes of the New Left", *The New York Times Magazine*, May 5, 1968. For the New Left's progressively critical assessment of Marcuse, see Paul Breines, "From Guru to Spectre: Marcuse and the Implosion of the Movement", in *Critical Interruptions: New Left Perspectives on Herbert Marcuse*, Paul Breines, ed. (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972).

2. A social and political period whose characteristics included: the hegemonic articulation of the Cold War doctrine of Soviet containment and anti-Communism (i.e., McCarthyism); growing racial segregation and oppression, despite the rise and increasing strength of the U.S. civil rights movement; a stultifying sociocultural conformity supported by the growth of standardized mass production industries and correlatively, by an expanding mass consumer culture; the articulation of Cold War liberalism, the "logic" of mutually assured destruction, and the ever-escalating production of nuclear weapons; and the portentous expansion of the American military presence in Indochina, etc.

triumph of that period's (and perhaps our own era's?) darkest subterranean tendencies.

### The Triumph of Social Control in Advanced Industrial Society

In *One Dimensional Man*, Marcuse argues that advanced industrial society has perfected new, deceptively insidious, and immeasurably effective forms of social control. Through the successful expansion of systems of mass production and distribution, the implementation of a "totalitarian" economic/technical coordination, and the manipulation of the deepest and innermost human needs by "vested interests," advanced industrial society has successfully implemented a technological rationality<sup>3</sup> that simultaneously obliterates the possibility of radical critique, as it creates an extensive regime of manipulated and unauthentic "needs".<sup>4</sup>

---

3. Technological rationality is based on a system of production in which the productive apparatus (manufacturing, distribution, and services) is characterized by increasing centralization, coordination and harmonization of all constituent components; a progressively minute division of labor for the purpose of optimizing capacities of material output; an increasing regimentation, standardization and rationalization of the methods of production; and the apotheosis of technique. The continuously expanding utilization of technology in production initiates a pervasive and totalizing social logic (technological rationality) in which potential challenges to the purposes and goals of the productive system are subordinated to, and silenced by, the presumed virtues of ever greater technical efficiency, technological expediency, and material growth.

Marcuse argues that advanced industrial society (and technological rationality) are the most recent expression of a "specific historical project" at the center of which is the "experience, transformation and organization of nature as the mere stuff of domination."

As the project unfolds, it shapes the entire universe of discourse and action, intellectual and material culture. In the medium of technology, culture, politics, and the economy merge into an omnipresent system which swallows up or repulses all alternatives. The productivity and growth potential of this system stabilize the society and contain technical progress within the framework of domination (Marcuse, 1966: xvi).

Our society distinguishes itself by conquering the centrifugal social forces with Technology rather than with Terror, on the dual basis of an overwhelming efficiency and an increasing standard of living (Marcuse, 1966: x).

4. In regard to the unauthentic nature of needs in advanced industrial society, Marcuse writes:

The distinguishing feature of advanced industrial society is its effective suffocation of those needs which demand liberation--liberation also from

In the opening chapter, "New Forms of Control," Marcuse declares that "the prevailing forms of social control are now technological" (p. 9). He forcefully argues that the expansion of productivity, the growth of technological efficiency, and the mass distribution of goods to formerly disenfranchised sectors of the population have enabled industrial society to deploy a new and extremely effective set of introjected social controls, which are themselves rooted in a set of newly produced commodity-hungry human needs.<sup>5</sup>

Marcuse observes of industrial society, as did Marx of industrial capitalism, the progressive development of commodity fetishism. "The people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, (and) kitchen equipment" (p. 9). "If individuals find themselves in the things which shape their life, they do so not by giving, but by accepting the law of things--not the law of physics, but the law of their society" (p. 11).

But the new commodity fetishism of advanced industrial society reaches deeper than Marx ever anticipated. It not only veils the human origins of "value" embodied in impersonal, market-exchanged commodities, but it promotes attitudes of compliance and assent toward the social system of advanced industrial society:

The productive apparatus and the goods and services which it produces, "sell" or impose the social system as a whole. The means of mass transportation and communication, the commodities of lodging, food, and clothing, the irresistible output of the entertainment and information industry carry with them prescribed habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumers more or less pleasantly to the producers and through the latter to the whole. The products indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood (Marcuse, 1966:11-12).

Marcuse further argues that the historically emerging "technological reality" of advanced industrial society (1966:10) now lays claim to ever-larger dimensions of human consciousness. The private "space" of individual

---

that which is tolerable and rewarding and comfortable--while it sustains and absolves the destructive power and repressive function of the affluent society. Here, the social controls exact the overwhelming need for the production and consumption of waste; the need for stupefying work where it is no longer a real necessity; the need for modes of relaxation which soothe and prolong this stupefaction; the need for maintaining such deceptive liberties as free competition at administered prices, a free press which censors itself, free choice between brands and gadgets" (Marcuse, 1966:7).

5. "The very mechanism which ties the individual to his society has changed, and social control is anchored in the new needs which it has produced" (Marcuse, 1966:9).

consciousness that once nourished the human capacity for critical thought and supported the potentially creative tension between subjectivity and the social object (i.e., society), has been invaded and "whittled down" by a progressively expanding technological reality and its manifold methods of "...scientific management and organization" (1966:10). The cumulative result of this contraction of subjective space, Marcuse claims, has been the unmediated identification of human subjectivity with the interests and modes of existence of technological society.<sup>6</sup>

This relatively new state of affairs signals the historic diminution of the "power of negative thinking" (i.e., critical reflection). While formerly, subjectivity had been able to construct in the realm of imagination a critique of "the given" in the vocabulary of "the possible," now its restricted subjective space and increasingly uncritical identification with the existing "order of things" (what Marcuse terms the "new immediacy") makes opposition appear neurotic and futile. Thus, Marcuse writes, the diminution of subjectivity's critical space represents not only "...the ideological counterpart to the very material process in which advanced industrial society silences and reconciles opposition" (1966:11), but also the fact that "...social controls have been introjected to the point where individual protest is affected at its roots" (1966:9).

At first glance it would appear that a regime capable of producing a happy, if profoundly manipulated, union between the innermost needs of its citizens and the prolific commodities of its productive apparatus has solved the problem of alienation. Marcuse assures us, however, that the contrary is the case: alienation has not been eliminated by one-dimensional society, it has been raised to a new level of perfection:

I have just suggested that the concept of alienation seems to become questionable when the individuals identify themselves with the existence which is imposed upon them and have in it their own development and satisfaction. This identification is not illusion but reality. However, the reality constitutes a more progressive stage of alienation. The latter has become entirely objective; the subject which is alienated is swallowed up by its alienated existence (Marcuse, 1966:11).

And lest we mistake the disappearance of "the tangible sources of exploitation behind the facade of 'objective rationality'" (Marcuse, 1966:32) and administration for anything but the profound unfreedom and alienation that it is, Marcuse is quick to point out that:

---

6. "Mass production and mass distribution claim the *entire* individual, and industrial psychology has long since ceased to be confined to the factory. The manifold processes of introjection seem to be ossified in almost mechanical reactions. The result is not adjustment, but *mimesis*: an immediate identification of the individual with his (sic) society and through it, with the society as a whole" (Marcuse, 1966:10, emphasis in original).

With technical progress as its instrument, unfreedom--in the sense of man's subjection to his productive apparatus--is perpetuated and intensified in the form of many liberties and comforts...In reality neither the utilization of administrative rather than physical controls (hunger, personal dependence, force), nor the change in the character of heavy work, nor the equalization in the sphere of consumption (can) compensate for the fact that the decision over life and death, over personal and national security are made at places over which the individuals have no control. The slaves of developed industrial civilization are sublimated slaves, but they are slaves, for slavery is determined (1966:32).

With the perfection of alienation and the total administration of the sociopolitical world:

There emerges a pattern of one dimensional thought and behavior in which ideas, aspirations, and the objectives that by their content transcend the established universe of discourse and action are repelled or reduced to terms of this universe. They are redefined by the rationality of the given system... (Marcuse, 1966:12).

Ultimately, Marcuse contends, "there is only one dimension and it is everywhere and in all forms" (p. 10).

We may well wonder, then, what is the social and material basis for the apparent triumph of this brave new one dimensional society?

Marcuse contends that contemporary Western industrial society is based upon an integrated and totally mobilized welfare and warfare state<sup>7</sup> whose multiple articulations of state, economy, and administered private life act to confirm the unfreedom and totalizing power of a system where political opposition has been contained by rising standards of living, an expanding welfare state, and citizens' "rational" compliance with technological rationality. Thus the political and social integration of the working class, which Marcuse terms "the convergence or unification of opposites,"<sup>8</sup> has been accomplished under the aegis of "subdued pluralism in which the competing institutions

---

7. This mobilization includes: 1) the orientation of national economies to the needs of big corporations; 2) government intervention in the economy and society; 3) the gradual assimilation (i.e., ideological and social homogenization) of the blue and white collar populations; 4) a harmonizing of the interests of scholarship with the "national purpose"; 5) the "invasion of the private household by the 'togetherness' of public opinion,"; and 6) the opening of the bedroom to the mass media (Marcuse, 1966: 19 & ff.).

8. Marcuse sketches the features of the historic "unification of opposites" in advanced industrial civilization. These include: the social assimilation of the blue and white collar populations due to the aggregate decline in physical labor made possible by the continuous extension of mechanized labor; "the social and cultural integration of the laboring classes with capitalist society"; and the weakening of the negative position of the working class which is no longer "the living contradiction to the established society" (1966:24 & ff.).

concur in solidifying the power of the whole over the individual" (Marcuse, 1966:50). Of this nullifying pluralism Marcuse observes:

Advanced industrial society is indeed a system of countervailing powers. But these forces cancel each other out in a higher unification--in the common interest to defend and extend the established position, to combat the historical alternatives, to contain qualitative change (1966:51).

### **Art and Sexuality in One Dimensional Society: The Apotheosis of the "Happy Consciousness"**

Marcuse illustrates the pervasiveness of one dimensionality via an analysis of the relationship between art and culture in advanced industrial society. In the chapter "The Conquest of the Unhappy Consciousness," he discusses the "flattening out" of the antagonism between a socially critical, classical high culture and contemporary social reality.

The high culture of the West, Marcuse argues, once "expressed a conscious, methodological alienation from the entire sphere of business and industry, and from its calculable and profitable order" (1966:58). This inherent antagonism to the philistinism of middle class culture (which might be thought of as the feudal, fiercely anti-capitalist moment of classical high art) was preserved in the domain of artistic production, even with the transition to and later consolidation of bourgeois society. Art managed to retain a "rationality of negation" which represented the "Great Refusal" to accept the "givenness" of the existent social reality.<sup>9</sup>

---

9. Marcuse viewed art as a repository of resistance because it represented an alienation (i.e., estrangement) from, and rupture with, the existing social reality. Though accessible only to the privileged, "high art" once provided "...a protected realm in which the tabooed truths could survive in abstract integrity--remote from the society that repressed them" (p. 65).

In its advanced positions, it is the Great Refusal--the protest against that which is. The modes in which man (sic) and things are made to appear, to sing and sound and speak, are modes of refuting, breaking, and recreating their factual existence (p. 63).

With the development of advanced industrial society, however, the "artistic alienation" of high art (and culture), which persisted even with the ascendancy of the bourgeoisie, is subdued by the progressive encroachment of a totalizing technological rationality:

The absorbent power of society depletes the artistic dimension by assimilating its antagonistic contents....Artistic alienation succumbs, together with other modes of negation, to the process of technological rationality (pp. 61, 65).

And though the assimilation of high art into mass culture would appear to democratize access to the once privileged truths of high art, Marcuse warns that this massification

The progressive encroachment of technological rationality, and the continuing commodification of culture (with its incorporation of high art into a commercialized and "democratized" mass culture),<sup>10</sup> transformed "artistic alienation" and diminished its one socially critical and potentially liberating insights:

If mass communications blend together harmoniously, and often unnoticeably, art, politics, religion, and philosophy with commercials, they bring these realms of culture to their common denominator--the commodity form. The music of the soul is also the music of salesmanship. Exchange value, not truth value counts. On it centers the rationality of the status quo, and all alien rationality is bent to it (Marcuse, 1966:57).

The arts now take their place "...in a harmonizing pluralism, where the most contradictory works and truths peacefully coexist in indifference" (p. 61). Consequently, "the 'essential gap' between the arts and the order of the day has been closed by the advancing of technological society" (p. 64). And with this narrowing gap, the critical dimensions of art, literature, music and philosophy subsequently become merely light entertainment, like innocuous background muzak, that neither threatens nor destabilizes the established order.

The high culture of the past was many things--opposition and adornment, outcry and resignation. But it was also the appearance of the realm of freedom: the refusal to behave. Such refusal cannot be blocked without compensation which seems more satisfying than the refusal. The conquest and unification of opposites,

---

should not be mistaken either for progress or for democratization:

...such assimilation is historically premature; it establishes cultural equality while preserving domination. Society is eliminating the prerogatives and privileges of feudal aristocratic culture together with its content. The fact that the transcending truths of the fine arts, the aesthetics of life and thought, were accessible only to the few wealthy and educated was the fault of a repressive society. But this fault is not corrected by paperbacks, general education, long-playing records, and the abolition of formal dress in the theater and the concert hall (pp. 64-65).

It is good that almost everyone can now have the fine arts at his (sic) fingertips, by just turning a knob on his set, or by just stepping into his drugstore. In this diffusion, however, they (the arts) become cogs in a culture-machine which remakes their content (p. 65).

10. "Today's novel feature is the flattening out of the antagonism between culture and social reality through the obliteration of the oppositional, alien, and transcendent in the higher culture by virtue of which it constituted *another dimension* of reality. This liquidation of *two-dimensional* culture takes place not through the denial and rejection of the 'cultural values' but through their wholesale incorporation into the established order, through their reproduction and display on a massive scale" (Marcuse, 1966:57, emphasis in original).



which finds its ideological glory in the transformation of higher into popular culture, takes place on the material ground of increased satisfaction. This is also the ground which allows a sweeping desublimation (Marcuse, 1966:72).

This desublimation of art is also accompanied by a *repressive* desublimation of human sexuality for the purpose of pacification and social control.<sup>11</sup> Marcuse writes that this repressive desublimation is "practiced from a position of strength on the part of society because its (i.e., society's) interests have become the innermost drives of its citizens and because the joys which it grants promote social cohesion and contentment" (Marcuse, 1966:73). A repressively desublimated sexuality, like the once critical expressions of high art, now no longer poses a threat that demands direct repression for the purpose of augmenting production. On the contrary, every pleasure and personal liberty is now granted and legitimated by society for the purposes of further, more effective domination and containment.

With the growing, though thoroughly administered, sexualization of every aspect of social life, we witness a paradoxical de-eroticization of human activity. "Sex is integrated into work and public relations, and this is made

---

11. Marcuse utilized and modified the Freudian notions of repression and sublimation, according to which instinctual (sexual) energy is necessarily repressed and redirected (sublimated), in the interest of both individual development (socialization) and societal development (production). Where Freud viewed repression as a necessary and ahistorical condition of societal development, Marcuse believed that the progressive development of the productive capacities of society and the consequent decrease in necessary labor time required for society's reproduction, made the repression of instinctual energies unnecessary. Thus by Marcuse's account, instinctual energies might be *nonrepressively desublimated* under societal conditions of increased productivity, leisure time, and play.

The growth of free time and play thus promised a context in which a once narrowly defined and highly constrained sexuality might blossom into a "polymorphously perverse" Eros. Accordingly, a nonrepressively desublimated sexuality would result in a new, fuller and more humane sexuality, unconfined by the necessity of repression and restriction to a narrowly genitalized definition of sexuality.

*One Dimensional Man*, however, raised the possibility of a *repressive* desublimation in which sexual gratification would be conjoined with the interests of domination inherent in technological society. Such a prospect intimated the spectre of an administered, controlled and unthreatening orchestration of instinctual sexual energy, tied not to liberation but to the further consolidation of the social order of advanced industrial society.

See Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955). See also Morton Schoolman, *The Imaginary Witness: The Critical Theory of Herbert Marcuse* (New York: Free Press, 1980) for a critique of Marcuse's appropriation and reformulation of Freud's "repression" and "sublimation".

more susceptible to controlled satisfaction" (Marcuse, 1966:73). The once potentially revolutionary demands for satisfaction and pleasure have now become merely the polite requests of an administered and domesticated libido. Marcuse writes:

The range of socially permissible and desirable satisfaction is greatly enlarged, but through this satisfaction, the Pleasure Principle is reduced--deprived of the claims which are irreconcilable with the established society. Pleasure, thus adjusted, generates submission (Marcuse, 1966:75).

As society increasingly tames the instinctual sphere, it simultaneously reduces and absorbs political opposition and critique. Thus the institutionalization of desublimation presents itself as the "conquest of transcendence". "The result," Marcuse writes, "is the atrophy of the mental organs for grasping the contradictions and alternatives, and in the one remaining dimension of technological rationality, the 'happy consciousness' comes to prevail" (Marcuse, 1966:79).

#### ***One Dimensional Man's "Pessimism"***

Marcuse has written an immensely powerful critique of advanced industrial society. His account of the absorption of the classical forces of opposition, the pacification of a citizenry through the domestication and taming of the libido, the apparent elimination of subjective capacities for critical reflection, and the proliferation of psychosexual links to an extensively administered and profoundly superficial mass culture, all mark Marcuse's acute insight into the forces of late capitalism (and statist, bureaucratic socialism). The triumph of the internalization of social control, if not yet accomplished, would by *One Dimensional Man's* account appear to be close at hand.

Even though Marcuse introduces his historic work with the caveat that:

*One Dimensional Man* will vacillate between two contradictory hypotheses: 1) that advanced industrial society is capable of containing qualitative change for the foreseeable future; 2) that forces and tendencies exist which may break this containment and explode the society (Marcuse, 1966:xv).

The prevailing tenor of *One Dimensional Man* is its overarching and undeniable pessimism.<sup>12</sup> Without an awakening to the insidious process at work, Marcuse then warned, "...not even a catastrophe will bring about a change," in the trajectory of advanced industrial society (Marcuse, 1966:xv).

The bleakness of *One Dimensional Man's* analysis cannot be refuted by a recitation of the many resistances that followed the publication of Marcuse's

---

12. A pessimism Marcuse would later amend in such books as *Counter Revolution and Revolt* and *An Essay on Liberation*.

work.<sup>13</sup> A tabulation of these resistances does not so much contradict the analysis of *One Dimensional Man* as it serves to confirm Marcuse's prognosis that the fiercest resistance to the "order of things" might come from "outsiders" who had not been lulled into complacency by the pleasantly repressive forces of advanced industrial society.<sup>14</sup>

---

13. Though even a partial tabulation of these resistances would comprise an extremely long list which would need at the very least to include: the events of May, 1968 in France; the uprisings of workers in the Italian "Hot Autumn" of 1969; the flowering of a massive and international student opposition to the American invasion of Vietnam; the later global transformations in the decades of the 70's and 80's which witnessed, among other events, the end of Franco's fascism in Spain; the approach of a prerevolutionary situation in Portugal in 1974-75 (precipitated by the success of anticolonial forces in Angola and Mozambique); the fall of "Rhodesia"; the growth and maturation of an international women's movement in Europe and America; the development of ecological, nuclear disarmament, anti-apartheid, and anti-intervention movements; the growth, suppression, and rebirth of the Solidarity movement in Poland; recent world-altering movements for democracy in Eastern Germany, Romania, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, etc.

14. In the closing pages of *One Dimensional Man*, Marcuse explicitly raises the question of where revolutionary resistance to one dimensional society might arise:

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 possible that the vicious circle be broken (Marcuse, 1966:251)?

His answer is that "an essentially new historical Subject" is required. Yet, his estimation of the likelihood that such a new historical subject might emerge appears to be overcome by his pessimism: "The power and efficiency of this system, the thorough assimilation of mind with fact, of thought with required behavior, of aspirations with reality, militates against the emergence of a new Subject" (Marcuse, 1966: 252).

Convinced that there were no "liberating tendencies within the established society," Marcuse looked toward those not yet assimilated by one dimensional society, the marginalized, "the substratum of outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and unemployable" (Marcuse, 1966:256). These were the people whose conditions of life demanded "the end of intolerable conditions and institutions" and whose opposition would not be deflected by the system. Their opposition is revolutionary even if their consciousness is not (Marcuse, 1966:256).

Throughout his development, Marcuse persisted in looking to the socially marginalized as potential revolutionary agents. In writings subsequent to *One Dimensional Man*, he variously looked to the New Left, students, counter culture devotees, technical workers in alliance with the working class, and women. For a discussion of Marcuse's evolving

Yet one wonders if the events of the decades subsequent to the publication of *One Dimensional Man* do not also reveal a global reconfiguration of political, economic, and subsequently ideological currents which have produced profound (if unforeseeable) transformations, even in the heartlands of the advanced industrial societies that *One Dimensional Man* once judged beyond the pale of sociopolitical redemption.

In recent years, we have seen an entrenchment of conservative forces in the Western advanced industrial societies, particularly in the U.S., West Germany and Britain. In these nations, governments have chosen to deal with the problems of fiscal crisis and, in the case of the U.S. and Britain, stagnating rates of growth of industrial productivity, with direct evisceration of the welfare state. These strategies, while they have thus far successfully displaced the costs of the respective fiscal crises to the growing numbers of their own and third-world poor, have also produced unprecedented deterioration of social, economic and ecological conditions for ever larger segments of the population. Fiscal strategies entailing curtailment of state social spending have resulted in the abandonment of significant portions of once vital urban areas to a perpetual condition of social and material decay, the growth of ever-higher levels of "acceptable" unemployment, the attempted or accomplished privatization of formerly socially underwritten costs (e.g. health care, education, retirement systems, etc.), and the entrenchment of institutionally supported (i.e. juridically unprosecuted) racism and sexism.

At the level of the economy, the actions of the "leaner and meaner" welfare states<sup>15</sup> and their conservative administrators have produced state

---

search for revolutionary subjects, see Chapter 10, "Revolutionary Subject, Revolutionary Class," in Morton Schoolman, *The Imaginary Witness: The Critical Theory of Herbert Marcuse* (New York: Free Press, 1980). See also Joan Alway's unpublished PhD. dissertation, *The Vanishing Subject: Agency and Social Change in Critical Theory*, Brandeis University, 1990.

15. Marcuse considers the welfare state as a crucial factor in the harmonizing of interests and the unification of opposites that appeared to mark the triumph of one dimensional society:

...the prospects of containment of change offered by the politics of technological rationality, depend on the prospects of the Welfare state. Such a state seems capable of raising the standard of administered living, a capability inherent in all advanced industrial societies where the streamlined technical apparatus--set up as a separate power over and above individuals--depends for its functioning on the intensified development and expansion of productivity. Under such conditions, decline of freedom and opposition is not a matter of moral or intellectual deterioration or corruption. It is rather an objective social process insofar as the production and distribution of an increasing quantity of goods and services make compliance a rational technological attitude (Marcuse, 1966:48).

policies that encourage: the proliferation of non-productive financial speculation at the expense of socially productive capital investment; the decline of real wages for a growing sector of the domestic workforce; the creation of an anti-union and anti-minority social atmosphere; an unprecedented tendency toward destructive and unproductive corporate mergers; and the creation of what in recent years has been identified as a proliferating "underclass" of socially and economically marginal people who will never receive the "benefits" of advanced industrial society.

And despite the happy images portrayed by the unflagging machinery of consumer advertising, significant numbers of the once conciliated "middle class" are now subject to the social and economic transformations wrought by developing trends in the political economy of the advanced industrial societies. As a result, the once "reconciled" and "harmonized" middle class increasingly faces a world of intensifying social insecurity and ominous uncertainty as it too registers the debilitating effects of substance abuse, family violence, social atomization, resurgent racism, and the decay of public life and social community.

In light of Marcuse's analysis of the central role played by rising productivity and the expanded role of the welfare state in advanced industrial society, we can only speculate as to whether current trends toward the reduction and elimination of welfare state services, deteriorating economic and social conditions, and increasing disparities between the icons produced by Madison Avenue and the stark realities of "main street" will have a reversing effect upon the levels of consumption and, subsequently, the ideological consensus that Marcuse held to be the precondition of a politically manipulated society.<sup>16</sup>

We may now wish to ask whether the much touted promises of the "good life" offered by the ubiquitous ideology of one dimensional society are not beginning to be subverted, even for significant numbers of the middle class, by the effects of successive global ecological disasters; the shrinking of community and social life to the relations of commodity exchange; the debasement of political discourse to glib "sound bites"; the reduction of culture to the trivialities of fashion, interior design, and tales of escapades with the "glitterati"; and media celebrations of ostentation, private wealth, and the "cult

---

16. Marcuse maintained that 1) growing productivity, 2) increasing levels of consumption, and 3) a rising standard of living, were the "...material ground for the unification of opposites [and] for one dimensional political behavior." "On this ground, the transcending political forces within society are arrested, and qualitative change appears possible only as a change from without" (Marcuse, 1966:49). See also note 15, above.

of Trump", against the ever-encroaching background of homelessness, family dislocation, unemployment, and "the new American poverty".<sup>17</sup>

While the apparatus of mass culture (electronic and print media, spectator sports and entertainment; from MTV to *People* magazine, from Monday Night Football to Disneyworld) is unquestionably more prolific than in the period of *One Dimensional Man's* publication, the disparity between its promises of abundance, leisure and freedom and the daily lived experience of its audience has never been greater: abundance becomes the exclusive "property" of the super-rich, aggregate leisure time for the majority of Americans precipitously falls, and the ideals of freedom narrow to the formal economic liberty to succeed or fail in the "free" market.

It may be the case that there has occurred in recent years the beginnings of the erosion of the economic preconditions, and with them, the erosion of the ideological grounds on which the triumph of "the happy consciousness" and "the unification of opposites" was founded. In such an event, we may begin to look for resistance to the totalitarian tendencies inherent in the historical project of one dimensional society, not only from the marginalized of advanced industrial society, but also from sections of the "middle class" who Marcuse maintained had been incorporated into the stratification system of one dimensional society.<sup>18</sup> Moreover, the profit-driven desecrations of the national and global environments, the growing inaccessibility of affordable housing and home ownership, the increasing scarcity of affordable education, child care, and health care, may create the grounds for another kind of unity, though hardly one of "opposites", in which the poor and dispossessed may find new and unanticipated allies in their continuing struggle to resist the inequities that have perennially plagued the poor and working class, and which have, in recent years, begun to permeate even the once comfortably ensconced middle strata.

---

17. See Michael Harrington, *The New American Poverty*. New York: Penguin, 1984.

18. The categories "marginalized" and "middle class" lack specificity and precision. Following Marcuse, the former category may be interpreted to contain people of color, immigrant workers from the "developing countries", ethnic and sexual minorities, the homeless, the unemployed, etc. The constituent members of the latter category are open to much debate. Among the "middle class", I include sections of the once prosperous working class, especially in the U.S. and Britain, who increasingly confront deteriorating economic and social conditions and who look to a grim future of limited economic prosperity and diminished social mobility. I, therefore, include among the lower strata of the middle class significant numbers of single female headed households, low paid service workers (whose numbers and relative size in the "advanced economies" is rapidly increasing), young labor force entrants, and displaced workers from declining manufacturing industries, etc. See Katherine S. Newman, *Falling from Grace: The Experience of Downward Mobility in the American Middle Class*, New York: Vintage, 1988.

On the other hand, the mollifying powers of mass culture: the progressive erosion of the "inner space of privacy in which the individual, thrown back on himself [sic], can think and question and find" (Marcuse, 1966:244); the increasingly interlocking messages of the news, information and entertainment media with the interests of their corporate sponsors; the orientation of educational institutions to the expediencies of the market; and the articulation of individuals' deepest psychosexual impulses with the goals and interests of a thoroughly rationalized and administered social system, may have advanced to the point where the social and individual bases for resistance are effectively abolished. In the quarter century since *One Dimensional Man's* publication, mass culture may have so entranced its audience, technological rationality so thoroughly eradicated the individual and social bases for challenging the assumptions of advanced industrial society, and human sexuality been so inextricably bound to the gratifying mechanisms of repressive desublimation, that resistance to one dimensional society, from any quarter, may have become not merely historically improbable, but more disturbingly, theoretically unimaginable. In such an event, declining levels of productivity and consumption, the pervasive effects of diminishing welfare state services, the deterioration of public and political life, and the increasingly stark contradiction between the privatized pursuit of "living well" and the necessarily social constitution of a collective "good life" may fail to stimulate resistance from either the "outsiders" of one dimensional society to whom Marcuse once looked, or from the "insiders" that *One Dimensional Man* dismissed as pacified by technological rationality and the logic of domination. In that case we may well find that the pessimism of *One Dimensional Man* was not too great, but far too little.

### References

Marcuse, Herbert.

1964 *One Dimensional Man*. Boston: Beacon Press.