



Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979)

Herbert Marcuse was born in Berlin on July 19, 1898. While a student, he became a member of the Social Democratic Party, and in 1922 he received his PhD from the University of Freiburg. After completing his studies, he worked as a bookseller in Berlin and published his first article in 1928. At this time Marcuse was attempting to form a synthesis in his work of phenomenology, existentialism and Marxism, an approach which would be continued by thinkers such as Sartre and Merleau-Ponty.



In 1929 Marcuse returned to Freiburg to write his habilitation entitled Hegel's *Ontology and the Theory of Historicity* under the guidance of Martin Heidegger. He later co-founded the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research with Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer. In this regard, members of the Institute were credited with the development of a model of Critical Theory, a type of Marxism influenced by psychoanalysis and existentialism, in addition to their influential aesthetic theories and critiques of capitalist culture. Among the projects of the Institute was a theory of the contemporary condition of state and monopoly capitalism, and an analysis and critique of German fascism. Marcuse was involved in the Institute's many interdisciplinary projects, identifying in particular with critical social theory. He continued to maintain a close relationship with the other members of the Institute throughout his life.

When Hitler came to power in 1933 Marcuse first fled to Geneva, then in 1934 to the United States. The Institute for Social Research was granted offices and an academic affiliation with Columbia University, and Marcuse worked there for seven years. During the 1930s he became a patriotic American and when the War began he offered his service to the Office of War Information and the Office of Secret Services as an analyst of German culture. He became an American citizen in 1940. Later, he headed the State Department's Central European Bureau, a position for which he would eventually express regret. In 1951 Marcuse returned to his academic career, disenchanted with US policies of the Cold War period.

In 1941 Marcuse wrote his first major work in English, *Reason and Revolution*, on modern social theory, concentrating especially on the relationship between Hegelian and Marxist thought. It was an introduction to Hegel's dialectical method combined with Marxist-influenced critical social analysis. In 1955 he wrote the book *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*, dedicated to his former wife Sophie who had died of cancer in 1951. This book laid the groundwork for his critique of modern society. In it, Marcuse looks at Freud's *Civilization and Its Discontents* and its argument that civilization necessarily involves repression and suffering. Marcuse suggests that a closer reading of Freud's work reveals evidence in the unconscious of an instinctual drive toward freedom and happiness. He cites the proof of this instinct in daydreams, art, philosophy and other cultural productions. Marcuse describes the possibility for a non-repressive civilization, furthering freedom and happiness through non-alienated labour, play, and open sexuality. The 1960s countercultural movement was intellectually and politically influenced by his visions of liberation, pushing him into the spotlight during that time.



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In 1958, Marcuse accepted a tenured position as professor of politics and philosophy at Brandeis University in Waltham, Massachusetts. Considering the political environment in the United States at the time, and Marcuse's avowed Marxism, it was a courageous move on the part of his employer, Abram Sachar.

Marcuse married Inge Werner in 1956, and the two of them lived during this time in suburban Boston. In 1964, Marcuse published *One-Dimensional Man*, a critique of advanced capitalism and communism. The book looked at the loss of potential for revolution and new forms of social control in capitalist society. He argued that mass media, advertising and industrial management are attempts to quiet any oppositional activity to the dominant system of production and consumption. This elimination of negativity creates a one-dimensional universe, a place bereft of ability for critical thought. Marcuse's popular lectures at the university were harsh critiques of American civilization. His audience included many students who would eventually make their own marks as influential thinkers, such as Angela Davis and Abbie Hoffman. He was a charismatic teacher, inspiring admiration and encouragement from students even when the institution would fail to support him.

Although he openly criticized the established order, Marcuse felt that the student demonstrations of 1968 were misguided. He saw the American University system as "an oasis of free speech and real critical thinking", and felt that students should work to change the departments inside the schools while protecting the institution as a whole. His later works are more pessimistic, filled with his observations of post-war consumerism and its role in maintaining the stability of capitalism while keeping the masses in intellectual and spiritual captivity.

In 1965, as a result of the conflict between Marcuse's Marxist views and the University sponsors, Brandeis refused to renew Marcuse's contract. During his final year of work at the University he was vocal about his views against American policy in Vietnam, going so far as to compare the militarism and repression he saw in the US to the rise of the Nazi party in Germany. He took a position at the University of California at La Jolla, and taught there until he retired in the 1970s. Marcuse continued to write critiques of capitalist society in *Repressive Tolerance* (1965), *An Essay on Liberation* (1969), and *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (1972). He married again in 1976 to Erica Sherover after the death of Inge in 1972, and continued to lecture throughout the world.

Marcuse never compromised his revolutionary vision and commitments, and defended Marxian theory and libertarian socialism to the end. In 1979 he published his last book entitled *The Aesthetic Dimension*, defending his belief in the emancipatory potential of "high culture". He argued that within bourgeois art there exist powerful indictments of bourgeois society, and visions of emancipation. He saw great art and Cultural Revolution as necessarily bound to revolutionary politics. Marcuse died in July of 1979.

Source: Adapted from: www.egs.edu/library/herbert-marcuse/biography/



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