Consumption and Violence

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Chapter 2

Neo-Marxist Critiques of Affluent Society: “Need to Break the Rules”

“If these young people detest the prevailing system of needs and its ever increasing mass of goods, this is because they observe and know how much sacrifice, how much cruelty and stupidity contribute everyday to the reproduction of the system.”
—Herbert Marcuse (1967)\(^1\)

The historical and intellectual developments analysed so far need to be located in the wider context of the pervasive conflict between competing concepts of universal well-being during the Cold War. The social theory of the Frankfurt School, especially Herbert Marcuse’s analysis of capitalism, and its influence on the New Left were part of this transatlantic quest for appropriate ways to organise or animate societies.\(^2\) The Frankfurt School’s insights into modern mass society were read not only as analysis but also as directions for use. However, Marcuse’s concrete influence on the protagonists of West German critiques of regimes of provision should not be taken for granted, since other influences also existed. Activists made their own observations regarding regimes of provision, and these observations had practical consequences for political action, which Marcuse would not have endorsed. While most of the existing literature inconclusively ponders the exact extent of Marcuse’s influence on the protest movement, it seems helpful to identify critiques of affluent society as a focal point in the mutual exchange between the philosopher, who openly showed his solidarity with the protest movement, and the student rebels, allowing both sides to link social theory with everyday activities.

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Consequently, activists found it easy to embrace Marcuse’s writings in which the émigré philosopher described the “preformation” of the individual both as a condition and a result of structural processes of commodity consumption. Moreover, activists followed his belief that before entering the fight for freedom, revolutionaries had to liberate themselves from capitalist consumer culture. Consumption seemed to lead to a loss of political freedom. Marcuse’s eloquent opposition to this form of “manipulation” helped to lend credibility to the idea of “emancipating” the individual from consumer society among parts of the West German intelligentsia, but they were ultimately unable to impart this position to the wider population.

The complex critique of regimes of provision and of affluent society emerging from the writings of the Frankfurt School as well as from theory papers by Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund (SDS) activists formed a central part of the cognitive orientation of the activists analysed in this volume. This chapter thus reconstructs and contextualises contemporary critiques of regimes of provision, especially the work of Marcuse, one of the first Marxists to provide a theory of consumer society, as it developed over four decades. Most existing research on the intellectual legacy of the Frankfurt School simply refers to Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*, quickly subsuming it under more general notions of Marx’s concept of commodity fetishism. This is then taken as an important influence on the New Left, usually without going into too much detail. Marcuse’s later writings in particular rarely feature in existing research. The aim is to overcome this reduction in favour of a more comprehensive contextualisation of Marcuse’s critique of affluent society from *Eros and Civilization* (1955) to *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (1972).

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A Freudian Perspective on Needs

In his Marxist Freud exegesis *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse referred critically to consumer society by assuming that repression resulted not only from the conditions of production—as in classical Marxist analysis—but also from the conditions of consumption. At this point, however, Marcuse did not yet assume “false” needs: “The high standard of living . . . is restrictive in a concrete sociological sense: the goods and services that the individuals buy control their needs and petrify their faculties. In exchange for the commodities that enrich their life, the individuals sell not only their labor but also their free time.” This process obscured the possibility of liberation: “People . . . have private automobiles with which they can no longer escape into a different world. . . . They have dozens of newspapers and magazines which espouse the same ideals.” Innumerable choices diverted attention from what Marcuse considered the real issue: the lost “awareness that they could both work less and determine their own needs and satisfactions.” The ideology of consumption thus reproduced and justified domination, but crucially, Marcuse did not deny that the goods of affluent society afforded actual benefit and use value. However, a car or a TV offered an escapism that obscured the possibility of autonomy. A connection between consumption and violence emerged only when Marcuse pointed to a new quality in the discrepancy between the enhanced possibilities of liberation as a consequence of prosperity and continuing repression: “It is with a new ease that terror is assimilated with normality, and destructiveness with construction.”

On the occasion of the one hundredth anniversary of Sigmund Freud’s birth, Marcuse delivered a much-noted public lecture in which he distinguished between quantitative and qualitative progress. The former, he argued, was aimed at growing societal wealth and thus a primary cause of culture. It increased the means to meet human needs, but thereby also expanded humans’ needs. According to Marcuse, the question remained open whether such “technical progress” also contributed to the perfection of humanity and society, to more freedom and happiness. Conversely, the second mode of progress—qualitative or humanitarian progress—aimed at realising freedom and morality and at the reduction of slavery, arbitrary rule, repression, and suffering. Initially, technical progress was a precondition for overcoming slavery and pov-

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9. Ibid., 100.
10. Ibid., 102.
erty, but this did not mean it would always entail humanitarian progress. The former was thus a necessary but not sufficient condition for the latter. There was a possibility that questions concerning the distribution and control of societal wealth became uncoupled from technical progress—for example, in a totalitarian welfare state. In the history of ideas up to the French Revolution, thinkers such as Condorcet saw technical and humanitarian progress as working hand in hand. However, a crucial change occurred in the nineteenth century, when Comte, Mill, and other theorists conceived of progress as independent of qualitative norms and thus at least theoretically uncoupled the two levels. For Marcuse, this meant that the qualitative element of progress was henceforth relegated to the realm of utopia. In the allegedly value-free concept of progress that unfolded in industrial society, productivity—that is, increased production of material and intellectual goods—was elevated to the rank of highest value. When confronted with questions about its meaning or purpose, adherents of the productivity rationale usually pointed to the satisfaction of needs. And this is where Marcuse concentrated his critical and moral impulse by questioning the perpetuating satisfaction of needs that had been elevated to a principle: “If the concept of needs includes food, clothing, and shelter as well as bombs, entertainment machines, and the destruction of unsalable foodstuffs, then we will not run into any danger in maintaining that the concept is as insincere as it is unsuitable for the definition of legitimate productivity.”

The decisive idea is that needs and productivity ought to be linked back to criteria of legitimacy. Implicitly, armaments, entertainment industries, and the destruction of vital goods became illegitimate consumption—although Marcuse did not yet use the term consumption at this point—as opposed to legitimate consumption that met basic needs. Drawing on Freud, Marcuse explained that the mainspring of the development that brought about culture—in the sense of both modes of progress—was drive displacement, including restricted consumption. Humans denying themselves full consumption of the fruits of their productivity was thus a necessary precondition for perpetuating productivity, which, however, entailed alienated labour on the basis of a promise of future benefits or happiness. On the basis of this Hegelian-Freudian overview of human development, Marcuse posed a crucial question: What if drive displacement and progress have fulfilled their historical function, making the conquest of human impotence and of material want a distinct possibility? Drawing on Friedrich Schiller’s letters On the Aesthetic Education of Man, Marcuse sought to replace progress and productivity for their own sake with an aesthetic

12. Ibid., 427.
and moral vision of “the highest development of intellectual and mental capacities” that went “hand in hand with the existence of material means and goods for the satisfaction of human needs.” He envisioned minimising modern social alienation—not a one-sided rejection of consumption or material progress but an attempt to overcome the Janus-faced character of the two modes of progress. This vision of a free society for all on the basis of technological progress—that is, “more or less total automation”13—became not only a central issue of Marcuse’s future work but also a rich source of inspiration for the intellectual and political projects of the protest movements of the 1960s and 1970s. The idea proved so attractive because it promised nondestructive consumption in accordance with genuine needs while minimising alienated and heteronomous labour.

**True and False Needs**

While avant-gardist groups such as Subversive Aktion had already begun reading Marcuse’s works of the 1950s in the early 1960s, his ideas only spread to wider circles with *One-Dimensional Man* (1964; published in German translation in 1967). The book drew on Marcuse’s long-standing preoccupation with the topic during the 1950s.14 At the heart of the New Left’s fascination with this work was the differentiation between true and false needs, the latter comprising most “of the prevailing needs to relax, to have fun, to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate.”15 This was aiming at the heteronomous character of socially generated needs—affluent humans were still alienated from their products—but it could also be read as a justification of unconventional lifestyles and protest when existing regimes of provision were identified with false needs. On the first page of *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse described a historical shift from openly employed authority towards subtle techniques of exercising control. Subjugation to the latter even became comfortable as a consequence of the experiences of joy that consumption of mass-produced goods entailed. Subsequently, a “comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom” imparted by the technological apparatus prevailed.16 The goods and services that this apparatus

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13. Ibid., 435, 438, 444.  
produced imposed the social system as a whole. Marcuse identified crucial regimes of provision that were to become focal points of protest by the new social movements: “mass transportation and communication, the commodities of lodging, food, and clothing, the irresistible output of the entertainment and information industry carry with them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumers more or less pleasantly to the producers and, through the latter, to the whole.” Consumer goods thus seemed key to indoctrination and manipulation, promoting a “false consciousness.”

Advertising, public relations, and planned obsolescence had been turned from wasteful and “unproductive overhead costs” into basic production costs that were passed on to the consumer in both material and ideological senses.

Marcuse was addressing the repressive function of the affluent society that failed to tackle the real issue: reducing alienated labour, “the need for stupefying work where it is no longer a real necessity.” This issue reverberated greatly with the lifestyle choices of the student protesters. In this reading, advanced industrial society was for all intents and purposes providing its members with “a good way of life—much better than before,” but it came at the price of militating against qualitative change, since it created “one-dimensional thought and behaviour” unable to transcend established discourse, since it was subordinated to the economic demands of consumer society. In Marcuse’s view, all benefits of technological progress—administrative control replacing physical control, reduction of heavy physical work, assimilation of occupational classes, equalisation in the sphere of consumption—did not make up for the continued lack of autonomy, since individuals still had no effective control over the crucial political and social decisions that governed their daily existence: “The slaves of developed industrial civilization are sublimated slaves, but they are slaves.” Affluence became a crucial means of perpetuating this bondage in both capitalist and state-socialist societies: “The more the rulers are capable of delivering the goods of consumption, the more firmly will the underlying population be tied to the various ruling bureaucracies.” Marcuse also addressed the transfer of this ideology to the developing world, which was to become so crucial for the anti-imperialist plank of the protest movements. A development model of rapid industrialisation—equally administered by both

17. Ibid., 12.
18. Ibid., 49.
19. Ibid., 7.
20. Ibid., 12.
21. Ibid., 32.
Cold War camps—was imposed on developing countries that had to discard pretechnological forms in favour of “mechanized and standardized mass production and distribution.” He foresaw an era of neocolonialism.22

Like most of Marcuse’s major works, One-Dimensional Man had an extended section dedicated to the aesthetic correlate of social and economic change. Here again, he diagnosed a narrowing effect on people’s consciousness and implicitly suggested a politicisation and radicalisation of artistic expression. Art and intellectual culture were bound to lose their transcendent dimension once they became familiar goods and services by means of the massive reproduction that integrated them into modern everyday commercial life. Marcuse was not prepared to see this process as a “democratization of culture.”23 He captured it with the concept of “repressive desublimation.” Art was integrated into both private life and the commercial sphere “from a ‘position of strength’ on the part of society, which can afford to grant more than before because its interests have become the innermost drives of its citizens, and because the joys which it grants promote social cohesion.” The loss of conscience that this omnipresence of formerly critical or subversive ideas entailed led to tolerance vis-à-vis injustice and evil; it made “for a happy consciousness which facilitates acceptance of the misdeeds of this society. It is the token of declining autonomy and comprehension.”24 Especially the militant offshoots of the protest movement would seek to regain this autonomy and blame commercial mechanisms for its loss.

The final chapter of One-Dimensional Man analysed why possible liberation was not commonly embraced. Lifting his analysis of needs to a higher level of abstraction, Marcuse maintained that values ultimately had been translated into needs: first, the notion of freedom had acquired a material dimension by being tied to satisfaction; second, traditional values were eroded by the increasingly uninhibited “development of needs on the basis of satisfaction.” The central values of enlightenment, such as justice, freedom, and humanity, became contingent on “the satisfaction of man’s material needs, the rational organization of the realm of necessity.”25 Marcuse identified the entertainment industries as a crucial factor in upholding this constellation. People tolerated the creation of nuclear weapons and radioactive fallout, but they could not do without media entertainment. Just before the conclusion, he imagined a society without television and advertisement: “The non-functioning of television and

22. Ibid., 43, 46–47.
23. Ibid., 61.
24. Ibid., 72, 76.
25. Ibid., 234–35.
the allied media might thus begin to achieve what the inherent contradictions of capitalism did not achieve—the disintegration of the system.”

Advanced industrial societies seemed caught up in an ever-accelerating drive on a one-way road of expansion: further “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 forms of productivity and progress gradually lost their liberating potential as they were “organized into a totalitarian system,” in the sense of an all-encompassing ideology backing a highly efficient and omnipresent system that dominated not only the realm of the actual but also the realm of the possible: “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 unite.”

From this perspective, reformist change within the system seemed impossible. Provided one accepted this analysis and intended to contribute to a revolutionary collapse of the capitalist system, symbolic or direct action against the sources of repressive needs was not entirely implausible. However, Marcuse did not suggest that the sources of such repressive needs were tangible in a way a department store is. In many respects, One-Dimensional Man was a pessimistic book that emphasised the pervasive and persistent powers of a questionable system seemingly immune to criticism and revolutionary change.

While the analysis of affluent society in One-Dimensional Man intellectually connected regimes of provision with abstract notions of repression and control, consumption and political violence were only implicitly correlated. However, Marcuse’s understanding of violence already pointed to the direction that would follow in his later writings in response to the protest movements. Violence appeared as a ubiquitous phenomenon of human existence that cultural and political development had to alleviate: “Suffering, violence, and destruction are categories of the natural as well as human reality, of a helpless and heartless universe.”

In the early 1960s, the interesting phenomenon seemed to be the continuation of domination despite the relative but deceptive lack of tangible violence. With the issue of violence taking centre stage in the course of the Vietnam War and various protest and liberation movements throughout the world, Marcuse clearly did not accept an interpretation of violence that held responsible those who allegedly threatened an otherwise orderly and peaceful society.

26. Ibid., 246.
27. Ibid., 255.
28. Ibid., 237.
Repressive Tolerance

Marcuse’s critique of “repressive tolerance” continued ideas from *One-Dimensional Man* but went a step further by focusing on “an increasing concentration of power” that integrated “the particular countervailing powers by virtue of an increasing standard of living.” He now identified possible countervailing powers, among them “the common consumer whose real interest conflicts with that of the producer.” However, consumers, like labourers or intellectuals, had to submit “to a system against which they are powerless and appear unreasonable.” This system ultimately rested on its increasing but incomplete satisfaction of needs. The practices upholding such a false regime of provision were not simply imposed from above but equally tolerated from below: “Their removal would be that total revolution which this society so effectively repels.”

After more or less dismissing art as an effective engine of change, since the forces of the market swallowed up “the protest of art against the established reality,” Marcuse turned to a discussion of “the issue of violence and the traditional distinction between violent and non-violent action,” which he crucially wished to overcome. The problem was that tolerance was extended only to practices that served “the cohesion of the whole on the road to affluence or more affluence.” Marcuse used the term *radically evil* to characterise these practices and somewhat haphazardly named publicity, propaganda, aggressive driving, special forces, merchandizing, waste, and planned obsolescence as “the essence of a system which fosters tolerance as a means for perpetuating the struggle for existence and suppressing the alternatives.” Remarkably, someone seems to have felt the urge to substantiate the claim to “radical evil” with a more convincing example and replaced “aggressive driving” with a phrase addressing the “violence in Vietnam” for the German edition. Revolutionary violence sought to break “the historical continuum of injustice, cruelty, and silence for a brief moment, brief but explosive enough to achieve an increase in the scope of freedom and justice, and a better and more equitable distribution of misery and oppression in a new social system.” Marcuse’s goal was a just regime of provision. He sought to calculate the optimal way of distribution that would prioritise vital needs yet incur “a minimum of toil and injustice.” The lofty ideal was a satisfaction of needs that did “not feed on poverty, oppression,

and exploitation.”\textsuperscript{31} Crucially, Marcuse treated questions of distribution in immediate conjunction with questions of violence. Despite the systemic violence that he diagnosed, he denied that anyone could claim a fundamental right of resistance “against a constitutional government sustained by a majority.” However, according to natural justice, oppressed minorities were allowed “to use extralegal means if the legal ones have proved to be inadequate.” In such cases, extralegal resistance had the function of unmasking injustice: “They do not start a new chain of violence but try to break an established one.”\textsuperscript{32} Dieter Kunzelmann, Andreas Baader, and others invoked this passage to justify their rebellion.

**Lecturing Rebellious Students**

In May 1966, when the German translation of *One-Dimensional Man* was not yet published, Marcuse spoke at the first Vietnam Congress organised by the SDS at Frankfurt. In his opening passage, Marcuse acknowledged oppositional youth as an important factor and asserted that their rebellion resulted from disgust with surrounding lifestyle. The youth movement was, he declared, “the negation of . . . the system of the ‘affluent society.’” He contrasted societal wealth, technological progress, and domination of nature with the unnecessary perpetuation of the struggle for existence both on a national and a global level. A fatal unity of productivity and destruction, of prosperity and misery, appeared as the root of a diffuse aggressiveness that included the “commercial rape of nature.” His example tried to bridge the everyday experience of highly industrialised societies with the horrors of war in a distant country: “The same aggressive forces lead from death on the highways and streets to bombings, torture, and burnings in Vietnam.” Compared to the forty-nine thousand highway deaths and four million injuries from traffic accidents each year in the United States, casualty figures from Vietnam seemed less significant. People, especially members of the working class, were tied into a system of increased productivity and of rising standards of living that only a few minorities started to resist. Even among America’s underprivileged, being drafted and sent to Vietnam could appear like an improvement, the first step up the ladder of social mobility.\textsuperscript{33}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{31} Marcuse, “Repressive Tolerance,” 105.
  \item \textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 116–17.
  \item \textsuperscript{33} Marcuse, “Vietnam” (English trans., http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/pdf/eng/Chapter6Doc3Intro.pdf (accessed 12 June 2011)).
\end{itemize}
Marcuse wrote a new preface for the 1966 edition of *Eros and Civilization* in which he adopted a very political tone and referred to affluent society, the Vietnam War, and Auschwitz in conjunction. He asserted that the scientific management of instinctual needs turned merchandise into objects of the libido. Self-propelling productivity was seeking ever new outlets for consumption and destruction both domestically and globally, but at the same time it was restrained from “overflowing” into the regions where misery prevailed. When he came to the Vietnam War, he argued that “science, technology, and money” would first destroy and then do “the job of reconstruction in their own image.” In passing, he referred to “photographs that show a row of half naked corpses laid out for the victors in Vietnam: they resemble in all details the pictures of the starved, emasculated corpses of Auschwitz and Buchenwald.”

Writing to Max Horkheimer in June 1967, Marcuse pointed to U.S. atrocities “outside the metropole” and went so far as to call contemporary America “the historic heir to fascism.”

A month after the shooting of student Benno Ohnesorg by a plainclothes police officer on 2 June 1967, Marcuse came to the Freie Universität Berlin, where he gave two lectures and participated in four panel discussions organised by the SDS and the students’ union executive committee. His performance turned him into a media star. The notion of consumer society did not figure explicitly in Marcuse’s talk on “The Problem of Violence and the Radical Opposition.” However, he crucially legitimised the radical opposition triggered by the experiences of the American civil rights movement and the Vietnam War with reference to a *system* comprising wars, productivity, destruction, and waste that “degrades everything, in an increasingly inhuman way, to the status of a commodity whose purchase and sale provide the sustenance and content of life.” Marcuse not only referred to “the terror employed outside the metropolis” but also suggested that this system comprised both fascism and affluent society: “We find ourselves up against a system that from the beginning of the fascist period to the present has disavowed . . . the idea of historical progress.” He made it clear that German and American student activists were opposing the majority of the population and “a democratic, effectively functioning society that at least under normal circumstances does not operate with terror.” Marcuse’s position on violence was pragmatic: for the time being, the

opposition was in no position to create a “new general interest” in its projects; violence was thus a question of tactics and could easily backfire.\(^3^7\) In a London lecture in late July 1967, Marcuse briefly appealed to his audience to use any means of protest that fulfilled two conditions: it needed to be able to cope with the “institutionalized violence” of the authorities, and it needed to have “a reasonable chance of strengthening the forces of the opposition.” Specifically, he mentioned flexible forms of demonstration and boycott, a piece of advice that was heeded.\(^3^8\)

While in Berlin, Marcuse also gave a talk that did not mention violence at all but held out an alluring concept stemming from Marx: the realm of freedom, which Marcuse wished to reanimate. In “The End of Utopia,” he declared, “I believe that one of the new possibilities, which gives an indication of the qualitative difference between the free and the unfree society, is that of letting the realm of freedom appear within the realm of necessity—in labor and not only beyond labor.”\(^3^9\) In his expression of the aim of socialism at the end of the third volume of *Das Kapital* (chapter 48, section 3), Marx saw the realm of freedom beyond the realm of necessity.\(^4^0\) According to Marcuse’s interpretation, Marx saw the latter as providing the precondition—including alienated labour—for the former, which he conceived as allowing for artistic and scholarly pursuits. A basic requirement for the blossoming of the realm of freedom was thus a reduction in working hours. Now that this condition had at least partially been met, Marcuse could hold out the perspective that the obligation to alienated wage labour might be largely overcome with the help of technology. He thus drew Marx’s utopian perspective on socialism much closer to present-day reality and suggested that the student movement might play a decisive role in bridging the remaining gap.

Marcuse thus sought to undo a historical development in which Marx and Engels had shifted the emphasis away from questions of consumption and towards gradualism and productionism, thus projecting a communist mode of provision into the future of socioeconomic development: “Only then can . . . society inscribe on its banners: From each according to his ability, to each ac-

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Neo-Marxist Critiques of Affluent Society

This passage from Marx’s *Critique of the Gotha Programme* popularised the old socialist notion of consumption according to one’s needs that had been theoretically established by various French thinkers—Étienne-Gabriel Morelly, Gabriel Bonnot de Mably, Étienne Cabet, and Louis Blanc—well before Marx. However, Marx now put the focus onto the obstacles preventing the realisation of such a regime of provision. In this view, the state was by no means only a neutral entity to secure market regulations but rather a concentration of the means of violence to uphold the existing power structures, especially the bourgeoisie’s right to appropriate the products of other people’s work via the commodification of labour—in other words: a repressive regime of provision. In actual political practice, the conceptual linking of consumption to a revolutionary objective took a backseat. For the time being, Marx and his followers emphasised the idea that concentration of property went hand in hand with corresponding structures of authority.

The monopoly on violence in the hands of modern centralised territorial states has complex roots, one of which is the emergence of market societies. The state had to ensure the security of trade routes, commercial contracts, and markets. The freedom of commodity owners required a specialised apparatus combining means of law and violence.42 Hegel derived the monopoly on violence from the market without taking into account other forms of legitimacy deriving from the individual: “The different interests of producers and consumers may come into conflict. . . . Police control and provision are intended to intervene between the individual and the universal possibility of obtaining his wants.”43 Hegel also observed that disproportionate accumulation of wealth would drive a society on a course of expansion: “It must find consumers and the necessary means of life amongst other peoples, who either lack the means, of which it has a superfluity, or have less developed industries.”44

In the summer of 1967, when Marcuse gave a short interview to one of the most important periodicals of the German New Left, Hans Magnus Enzensberger’s *Kursbuch*, Hegel’s commercial expansionism had apparently taken a violent turn. On the question of whether modern affluent society had not made the idea of revolution completely obsolete, Marcuse quickly came to the topic

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42. This is following Fisahn, “Legitimation des Gewaltmonopols,” 13–15.
44. *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, section 246.
of the Vietnam War, where he thought the limits of capitalism and “neocolonialism” were apparent. Especially in the German version, his vocabulary was clearly reminiscent of the Holocaust—for example, he invoked a Vietnamese “Final Solution” and referred to “Sieg durch totale Verbrennung und totale Vergiftung” (victory by burning and poisoning everything). He emphasised that liberation movements in the developing world could succeed only with support from the metropole. Marcuse offered a rather lucid analysis of the eventually successful Western strategy in the Cold War: the state-socialist societies were subject to “a life and death competition” in which the social needs of their citizens had to be subordinated to political and military exigencies.\(^{45}\)

By December 1968, Marcuse had gone remarkably far in taking sides with the New Left. In a speech for the New York radical weekly Guardian, he rejected the idea of a unified leftist political party but recommended that groups of activists protest local grievances by creating unrest and riots. He explicitly stated that “militant minorities” would take the lead in this endeavour. He intended to steer a middle course between conventional party politics and an illegal underground. The fragmentation of the Left thus became a virtue, because a multitude of competing “small and highly flexible autonomous groups” could act simultaneously in many local contexts, creating “a kind of political guerrilla movement in times of peace or so-called peace.”\(^{46}\)

### Horkheimer Adorno and Galtung

Marcuse was criticised by his colleagues from the Frankfurt School, who did not embrace the new revolutionary movement in the same way that he did. In their view, his notion of universal liberation and happiness being just around the corner but hindered by a repressive system was ultimately a simplification.\(^{47}\) Not unlike Marx’s critique of the anarchists, they emphasised their own approach of a more complicated development. Nevertheless, Marcuse greatly admired the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and was clearly influenced by it.\(^{48}\) Horkheimer and Adorno had put forward their critique of consumer society in


the chapter, “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception.” They assumed that society no longer systematically excluded the working class from consumption but achieved total integration via consumption, which became an element of social control and thus prevented subjective autonomy. Completed in Horkheimer and Adorno’s American exile in 1944, after several years of experience with American consumer society, the Dialectic of Enlightenment did not have a wider impact until its 1969 reissue, although pirated copies circulated among students much earlier. Horkheimer and Adorno introduced the dimension of violence into the analysis of their contemporary society via the assumption that fascism was a derivative of capitalism, an assumption that originated in the 1930s. Therefore, the democracies of the Western world could also be seen as containing the seeds of totalitarianism, which germinated in the realms of consumption, advertisement, and the production of “false needs.” An implicit comparison between consumer society and the regime of National Socialism was thus established.

In 1968, Adorno observed that his contemporary society had not moved beyond what Marx criticised as “the anarchy of commodity production.” Although the borders between material production, distribution, and consumption seemed to be melting away, the social destiny of the individual remained as contingent as ever. The availability of consumer goods made class differences become less visible, but affluent society only concealed “the more visible forms of poverty” and strove “to maintain the illusion that utopia . . . had already been realised.” The chair of the German Society for Sociology had his doubts but did not wish to negate affluence: on the contrary, the “increasing satisfaction of material needs” foreshadowed the concrete possibility of a life without misery. Marx and Engels only criticised the utopias of their time because they thought they would hinder the realisation of “a truly humane organisation of society.” Unforeseeable for them, needs had completely become “the function of the production apparatus . . . instead of the reverse.” Consequently, needs remained conditioned on profits. Certain needs were artificially produced by the profit motive, and thus at the cost of the objective needs of the consumers, that is adequate housing . . . education and information over the processes that most affect them.”

51. Ibid., 355.
52. Ibid., 361–62.
the consumers was achieved “by means of the culture and consciousness industries” via the concentration and centralisation of the mass media, through which “it has become possible to force into line [gleichzuschalten] the consciousness of countless individuals from just a few points.”

But what was it that most affected the consumers? Adorno was a bit evasive on this question. He lamented a lack of “indispensable critical ideas” and an incapacity “to imagine the world differently than it overwhelmingly appears.” However, at one point he stated rather clearly that the universal interest was not universal employment but liberation from heteronomous work. While acknowledging that differentiation between true and false needs ought not to be signed over to bureaucratic regimentation, Adorno still thought that such differentiation contained a worthwhile point concerning the relations of violence: “Delimited to a horizon in which at any moment the Bomb can fall, even the most luxuriant display of consumer goods contains an element of self-mockery.” However, the concept of Gewalt had a much wider significance in Adorno’s political thought than just physical threat. In the chapter on the culture industry, Horkheimer and Adorno claimed that its products conveyed an “omnipresent power” by virtue of their being a “model of the gigantic economic machinery, which . . . keeps everyone on their toes, . . . at work and in the leisure time.” Consumers are tied to the productive apparatus and its pressures and hierarchies even after their shifts are finished. While “power” is a correct translation for Gewalt in this context, it is important to bear in mind the double meaning of the German term, combining senses of violentia and potestas, which cannot easily be reduced to “force” wielded by state actors and “violence” used by nonstate actors. Horkheimer and Adorno thus arrived at the statement, “The power [Gewalt] of industrial society is imprinted on people once and for all.” Later generations of experts on violence have tried to restrict the scholarly use of the term Gewalt to the narrower sense of certain forms of violence, but the more philosophical perspective on the relationship between abstract powers and concrete manifestations of violence is also legitimate.

In this context, Norwegian sociologist Johan Galtung developed the notion of “structural violence” to raise awareness of violence by supplementing the phenomenon of manifest violence with the harmful consequences of social

53. Ibid., 367.
54. Ibid., 364.
55. Ibid., 365–66.
57. See Baumann and Schwind, Ursachen, Prävention, und Kontrolle.
structures—that is, clusters of social institutions that prevent people from meeting their basic needs. Positive influences emanating from such structures could be accompanied by a narrowing down of ranges of action and life chances. In this context, Galtung explicitly mentions the consumer society’s rewards, drawing on Marcuse’s One-Dimensional Man. The critical notion of “structural violence” could be applied both to those benefiting from the rewards of affluent societies and to those remaining more or less systematically excluded. The former addressed processes of manipulation and alienation, while the latter pointed to the inequitable and deadly consequences of social arrangements, especially in the context of North-South relations. Galtung made a second insightful observation when considering the object side of violence. He acknowledged two senses of psychological violence in the destruction of things: “as a foreboding or threat of possible destruction of persons, and . . . as destruction of something very dear to persons referred to as consumers or owners.”

Both notions carry a sense of the perpetrator’s self-liberation from bourgeois constraints. Student protesters seeking freedom unfettered by property ties embraced an act of communication that signalled a rejection of certain values tied up with the destroyed object. Such destruction could be directed against previous acts of political communication that used certain objects or a general state of affluence to legitimise other political contents.

Neitzke and Semler on Department Store Campaigns

Members of the SDS were quite capable of arriving at their own theoretical conclusions concerning affluent society without immediate guidance from eminent philosophers. In early 1969, Peter Neitzke and Christian Semler sought to diversify the theory of political action involving department stores. Unlike Dutschke and Marcuse, the two leading members of the West Berlin SDS did not locate the revolutionary subject in a “countermilieu” or in marginalised minorities but, more conventionally, in the wage-earning masses. However, they did acknowledge the sphere of distribution as a sensible albeit secondary field of agitation.

Their text, “Warenhausaktionen” (Department Store Campaigns) identified three types of political campaigns in the distribution sector: the burning of commodities, the appropriation of vital goods by the masses, and the

59. Ibid., 187.
smashing of shop windows. They flatly rejected the first in response to the Frankfurt department store arsons. Semler and Neitzke held that “the destruction of consumer goods” was an act of “existentialist self-liberation . . . without political perspective for the masses.”60 The option of appropriation seemed more promising. On the occasion of the fiftieth anniversary of the German November Revolution—at a point when the SDS had already lost some of its ideological momentum and unity—Semler had suggested clearing out some department stores and handing out the spoils to passersby: “Today economic development has reached a point where goods can be distributed for nothing. . . . That’s propaganda of the deed.”61 This was clearly nodding to anarchist traditions. Semler and Neitzke saw the department store as a scene of political propaganda that simulated the blessings of “socialist production” and thus anticipated a socialist future: “In itself, the department store presents the social formation for the free distribution of goods.”62 However, this stage of development had not yet been reached and remained an illusion: “The concept of the department store still holds the illusion of a comprehensive promise of happiness: to be able to partake in the world of commodities.” The contradiction lay between the “realm of freedom”—Marx’s concept introduced to the Berlin students by Marcuse in 1967—simulated by advertisement and the crude realities that still severely limited the masses’ ability to fulfil their “real needs.” To bridge this seeming contradiction, capitalism “impels ceaseless and unlimited consumption.”63 This created “forced consumers” who had to pay for capitalism’s “particularisation of markets” in three ways. First, the prices of goods included the costs of advertising. Anyone who did not want to fall behind the cultural level that society had reached was thus obliged to support the “production of needs.” Second, planned obsolescence produced desire for the latest products and forced the consumer to purchase. Finally, many goods on the market were fundamentally superfluous, lying beyond the historical growth of needs.64

The SDS theoreticians went to such lengths in analysing the department store as a political stage as a consequence of the events of 18 January 1969: following a rally commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the murder of Rosa Luxemburg and Karl Liebknecht, the showcases of the KaDeWe were

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63. Ibid., 8.
64. Ibid., 9.
systematically smashed, and management reported damages of five hundred thousand deutsche marks.65 This became the prototype for countless attacks against the windows of retail institutions. Neitzke and Semler criticised such tactics: “Not accompanied by propagandistic measures, the lightning operation against the windows of KaDeWe constitutes . . . a dangerous compromise.” The smashing of windows appeared to be a cross between the other two forms of retail protest, remaining “silent about whether destruction or theft was intended.” In Neitzke and Semler’s view, “attacks against the centres of distribution” still lacked a theoretical foundation, an ideological message that could be conveyed to the masses. Clinging to their Marxist credentials, they wanted to see “the attack on the windows of a department store, which ranks highly among the love objects of West Berliners,” in the context of a larger economic and political nexus—that is, the predominance of the means of production in revolutionary theory. They were not impressed by their comrades’ praise for the smashing of windows in terms of “mobile warfare” against “rigid police tactics” and thus cautioned against the allure of easily demonstrating the impotence of the state monopoly on violence.66 Far from shying away from the use of revolutionary violence, Neitzke and Semler represent the scepticism—and perhaps cluelessness—with which activists with a more conventional Marxist background tended to see the smashing of windows.

Their approach departed from a passage in the first volume of *Das Kapital* in which Marx deals with “natural needs” such as food, clothing, heating, and housing, highlighting the relativity of “necessary needs,” which depended on historical and moral factors. With a sideswipe at Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*, Neitzke and Semler maintained insightfully that the “static, undialectical opposition of ‘false’ and ‘real’ needs has always been historically wrong.”67 The two activists sceptically concluded “that it cannot be in the interest of socialists to even create the impression that they wanted to mobilise the masses to stop consuming.” Any agitation or propaganda in the “sphere of consumption” had to educate about the character of goods in a capitalist system. Like the members of Kommune I, Neitzke and Semler were inspired by the blacks of the ghettos of Newark and Chicago, who, in the German activists’ reading, realised themselves as a revolutionary class through the looting and destruction of white-owned shops and department stores. However, Marxists did not content themselves with storming the centres of distribution but aimed for the

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“sphere of production” with the perennial goal of inciting strikes in industrial factories.68

The Radical Realm of Freedom

When Semler and Neitzke published their article on department store campaigns, Marcuse, too, had come back to Marx’s “realm of freedom” and had drawn conclusions from the experiences of the protest movement that fed back into his work, in many ways radicalising his political message. Most of the existing secondary literature has neglected the fact that Marcuse both specified and broadened his analysis of affluence, violence, and resistance in An Essay on Liberation, which emerged from his many lectures and speeches. A more comprehensive reconstruction of his line of argument is thus needed.

Marcuse was still operating on the familiar basis of a critical analysis of consumer capitalism, whose false and immoral comforts and “cruel affluence” had to be rejected in favour of a regime that “subordinates the development of productive forces and higher standards of living to the requirements of creating solidarity for the human species.”69 Poverty and misery were to be abolished and peace attained.70 Solidarity and cooperation—the liberating solidarity of many individuals who freely chose a collective—were central to this endeavour.71 Marcuse was encouraged by what he took to be a dissolution of social morality manifest in a collapse of work discipline, a refusal to comply with rules and regulations, wildcat strikes, boycotts, sabotage, and other gratuitous acts of noncompliance.72 The American ghetto riots seemed an indicator of systemic crisis, and he observed that even the United States could not indefinitely deliver its goods, “guns and butter, napalm and color TV.”73 The system could not endlessly rely on a growing “parasitic sector of the economy” based on “waste, destruction, and management.”74 Marcuse’s project was still based on the “utopian possibilities . . . inherent in the technical and technological forces.” With little attention to the detail of such a transformation, Marcuse

70. Ibid., ix–x.
71. Ibid., 88.
72. Ibid., 83.
73. Ibid., viii.
74. Ibid., 7, 82.
promised that “the rational utilization of these forces on a global scale would terminate poverty and scarcity within a very foreseeable future.”

Friedrich Engels had held out similar visions in his 1872 treatment of *The Housing Question*. Arguing against what he considered backward-looking Proudhonism, he thought that the Industrial Revolution had raised productivity to a level that for the first time in human history opened the possibility of distributing labour in a sensible way so that everyone could partake in abundant consumption and sufficient leisure to pursue science, art, and human relations and ultimately do away with class rule. In 1844, Engels had identified the overproduction crisis as a characteristic of capitalism, which made “the people starve from sheer abundance.” The remedy was a just regime of production and thus of provision, a planned economy that would curtail luxury only as far as was necessary. According to Engels, the Malthusian theory of population—that is, the idea that population growth was bound to outstrip food supply—fooled his contemporary bourgeois economists about the very real possibility of huge increases in productivity that would satisfy people’s needs. The capitalist system based on competition, its false “antithesis between production and consumption,” and the cynical ideology of the Malthusian trap had “turned man into a commodity” and “slaughtered . . . millions of men.”

What Engels did not foresee was the extraordinary increase in the number and varieties of consumer goods that capitalist societies would produce without entertaining the distributive regime he desired. In many respects, Marcuse was asking why wealthy societies—even state-socialist ones—had never fully realised Engels’s vision.

To answer this question, Marcuse developed a modernised version of Marx’s theory of alienated labour. In 1932, Marcuse had become one of the first to write a comprehensive interpretation of Marx’s *Economic-Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844); in it, Marcuse reviewed Marx’s criticism of bourgeois political economy as “a nonhuman science of an inhuman world of things and commodities.” The young Marx had sharply diagnosed a simple relation: “The devaluation of the world of men is in direct proportion to the increasing value of the world of things.” The more the worker produced, the more power-

75. Ibid., 4.
ful became “the alien world of objects.” Compared to this growing material
world, the worker and his “inner world” became poorer: “the less belongs to
him as his own . . . , the less he has to consume.” By putting his life into the
object, the worker surrendered his life to the object. The capitalist system de-
prived him of the objects he produced, which meant that the worker could not
realise himself and fell under the sway of his products, in the extreme case “to
the point of starving to death.” Under these conditions, proper consumption
was available only to the propertied minority, but this did not prevent Marx
from acknowledging the real value of material goods, which were to a certain
degree a source of freedom, but the fulfilment of human nature lay in nonali-
entrated labour. And material goods tended to remove the worker from the possi-
bility of nonalienated labour because their acquisition forced him into alien-
ated labour, which meant that freedom now occurred “in his animal
functions—eating, drinking, procreating, or at most in his dwelling and in
dressing-up.” In labour, the real human function, in contrast, “he no longer
feels himself to be anything but an animal.” Wages were an immediate conse-
quence of alienated labour, and they did not hold the key to the more funda-
mental problem, increased wages remained “payment for the slave, and would
not win either for the worker or for labor their human status and dignity.”

In 1848, Marx and Engels observed that certain conditions were required
for labour to “continue its slavish existence.” However, from their contempo-
rary bourgeoisie’s apparent inability to guarantee even minimum living stan-
dards, they inferred crisis. At least for highly developed societies, this proved
wrong, and Marx, Engels, and their followers came to project the introduction
of a socialist regime of production and provision into an ever more distant and
theoretical postrevolutionary future. The situation Marcuse was facing was that
either Marx and Engels’s analysis had been falsified by highly industrialised
societies producing goods that finally did provide human status and dignity to
the workers, or it had to be shown that Marx was still right, that increases in
wages were inherently related to violence, and that the wage earners of late
capitalism had still much more to win than material abundance.

The material level of the new society that Marcuse envisioned “could be

79. Karl Marx, “Ökonomisch-philosophische Manuskripte (Zweite Wiedergabe)” (1844), in
MEGA section 1, 2: 363–75 (English trans., http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/
manuscripts/labour.htm [accessed 20 June 2011]).

80. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, Manifest der kommunistischen Partei (1848), MEW, 4:473
(English trans., http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/ch01.
h tm#007 [accessed 21 June 2011]).
considerably lower than that of advanced capitalist productivity.”

The root of the problem was the creation of false needs, which also occurred when one simply followed the old socialist maxim of “each according to his needs.” The historical development of socialism had fatefuly led to a deflection from its original goals. This phenomenon resulted from the competitive coexistence with the West since the Russian Revolution and the ill-advised acceptance of the American standard of living as a model. This false policy was perhaps best summed up by Nikita Khrushchev’s famous 1959 formula, “Catch up and overtake.” Marcuse objected not to “the rapid improvement of the material conditions” but to “the model guiding their improvement.”

That the allure of goods had structurally replaced more open forms of violent conquest was again deeply rooted in Marxist thought. Marx and Engels pointed out in the Communist Manifesto that cheap commodities were the “heavy artillery” of the bourgeoisie that battered down all Chinese walls: “It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilisation into their midst.” This proved a clear-sighted analysis given the adoption of Western consumer standards by state-socialist societies. Ultimately, the commodity artillery would batter down not the Chinese wall but the Berlin Wall, which sought to separate two regimes of provision while permitting some commodities to diffuse through.

In Marcuse’s ideal world, individuals were to be protected from the destructive implications of their needs—that is, aggressive competition up to the point of the nuclear arms race—so that they could satisfy those needs without hurting themselves. People had to be freed from the second nature that the “so-called consumer economy” had created by tying them “libidinally and aggressively to the commodity form.” This dependence even held the danger of humankind’s destruction. The task was to “abolish [man’s] existence as a consumer consuming himself in buying and selling.”

This did not mean that automobiles, television sets, or household gadgets were repressive as such. The unfortunate constellation was that people had become dependent on these goods for their own actualisation. People had to buy their own existence on the market, only to realise capital’s profits. The system of “voluntary servitude” was unprecedented in its “capacity to produce

82. Ibid., vii.
83. Ibid., 87.
84. Marx and Engels, Manifest der kommunistischen Partei, MEW, 4:466.
long-range contentment and satisfaction.” This led to the paradoxical situation that capitalist production relations were simultaneously responsible for servitude and toil and for greater happiness and fun, but the latter obscured the fact that capitalism was still based on “the private appropriation of surplus value . . . and its realization in the corporate interest.”86 The bridging of the consumer gap was only illusory. Labour being increasingly based on mental, rather than physical energy did not change its debilitating qualities. Marcuse characterised the simultaneity of happiness and suffering with Hobbes’s famous description of the state of nature: “a civilized bellum omnium contra omnes.” Within this battle, Marcuse branded the “needs of the middle classes,” shared by the majority of organized labour, as counterrevolutionary. At the same time, capitalist culture had not yet reached every house or hut: the system had its limits and produced a glaring contrast between the privileged and the exploited and thus the radicalization of the latter.87

Ultimately, Marcuse adopted a pose that could easily be seen as patronizing by those whom he wanted to liberate from an atmosphere of aggressive and competitive toil that “compels the vast majority of the population to ‘earn’ their living in stupid, inhuman, and unnecessary jobs.”88 Nonnecessary consumption was transgressing on the “realm of freedom.”89 Two possibilities existed: “the extension of the realm of necessity to the realm of freedom”—the American model of progress—or “the possible extension of the realm of freedom, to the realm of necessity,” as suggested by the members of the protest movement, who sought to determine their own necessities, values, and aspirations. The simultaneity of the two possibilities expressed “the basic contradictions of capitalism at the stage of competitive technical progress.” The American model meant that an ever-increasing number of commodities and luxuries had to be bought to attain “at least a modicum of freedom within the framework of capitalist society.” Marcuse crucially included the defence industry in these luxuries. While large sectors of poverty and misery persisted, those who enjoyed the so-called luxuries had to pay the price of an intensified dependence on the ruling powers.90

If only social energies were withdrawn from weapons production, material accumulation, and the expansion of state authority, technology could sup-

86. Ibid., 12–13.
87. Ibid., 13–16.
88. Ibid., 62.
89. Ibid., 20, 50.
90. Marcuse, “Realm of Freedom.”
port human leisure, not competitive toil.\textsuperscript{91} Marcuse envisioned an unprecedented type of revolution occurring at a high level of material development that would enable “man to conquer scarcity and poverty.”\textsuperscript{92} In a way, Marcuse sought to halt historical development as it had worked for centuries. Man was to survey what he had achieved at the cost of “hecatombs of victims” and conclude “that it is enough, and that it is time to enjoy what he has and what can be reproduced and refined with a minimum of alienated labor.” This step would not abandon “technical devices which alleviate and protect life” and free “human energy and time.” People were to be emancipated from the dictates of the commodity market: “Freedom from the rule of merchandise over man is a precondition of freedom.”\textsuperscript{93}

The fact that in principle, societal wealth did allow for universal liberation and happiness was in Marcuse’s view systematically veiled by the reduced consciousness of late capitalism. The constellation amounted to a veritable perception disorder. Competitive performances; standardised fun; symbols of status, prestige, and power; and advertised virility and commercialised beauty killed the possibility of perceiving the alternative: “freedom without exploitation.”\textsuperscript{94} This position was drawing on György Lukács’ \textit{History and Class Consciousness} (1923), which translated Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism into a concept of reification leading to a false consciousness, a “veil” that prevented the true realisation of class consciousness.\textsuperscript{95} In accordance with Lukács’s veil of “fetishistic illusions enveloping all phenomena in capitalist society”\textsuperscript{96}—which also informed Guy Debord’s idea of the spectacle—Marcuse was ever more pessimistic about the classical revolutionary agent, the working classes, who seemed to be satiated with consumer goods. What was needed was the “development of consciousness which would remove the ideological and technological veil that hides the terrible features of the affluent society.”\textsuperscript{97} The realisation of liberation would at least initially be the task of a minority.\textsuperscript{98} Because the opposition was directed against a well-functioning and prosperous society, it became unpopular and isolated from the masses. He hoped that revolutionary forces would emerge from radical politics by “active minorities.” This assigned the part of the revolutionary subject to “potential

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{91} Marcuse, \textit{Essay on Liberation}, 89–90.
\item \textsuperscript{92} Ibid., 19.
\item \textsuperscript{93} Ibid., 90–91.
\item \textsuperscript{94} Ibid., 17.
\item \textsuperscript{95} Lukács, \textit{History and Class Consciousness}, 86.
\item \textsuperscript{96} Ibid., 14.
\item \textsuperscript{97} Marcuse, \textit{Essay on Liberation}, 61.
\item \textsuperscript{98} Ibid., 88–89.
\end{itemize}
catalysts of rebellion,” to the political campaigning of those students and minorities who were not yet integrated into the general economic process and thus had only limited means of engaging in consumption-based upward social mobility.99

On the topic of violence, An Essay on Liberation made some trenchant epistemological observations. In established discourse, the term violence was not applied to the actions of the police and the military. The “bad” word was reserved for those who disturbed the established order, usually regardless of their motivations and goals.100 Once one applied the concept of violence to the acts of military and police, the distinction between legitimate and illegitimate violence became questionable. If “legitimate violence” included “wholesale burning, poisoning, bombing,” Marcuse argued that the actions of the radical opposition could hardly be characterised with the same concept. The “unlawful acts committed by the rebels in the ghettos, on the campuses, on the city streets” seemed to fall into a wholly different category from “the deeds perpetrated by the forces of order in Vietnam, in Bolivia, in Indonesia, in Guatemala.” Disrupting the business of a supermarket or the flow of traffic seemed a legitimate protest “against the far more efficient disruption of the business of life of untold numbers of human beings by the armed forces of law and order.” Such protest touched on a vital nerve of the existing order, which legitimised itself via its “functioning”—the absence of war, unrest, and economic crisis—and the protection of property, trade, and commerce while seeking to suppress the protesters’ attempts to point out the omnipresence of violence.101 Marcuse fully acknowledged that human associations needed enforceable law and order. To a degree, it was normal that society tried to protect itself against “the victims of its well-being,” but doing so had to be measured in terms of the legitimate.102 And here Marcuse held the revolutionary conviction that the established order had already invalidated its own law via the abuse of its power in seeking to uphold a violent and repressive society.103

The explicit analytical combination of violence and affluence made Marcuse’s denunciation of consumer society more forceful: “This society is obscene in producing and indecently exposing a stifling abundance of wares

99. Ibid., 51, 79.
100. Ibid., 72.
101. Ibid., 51, 67, 77.
102. Ibid., 77–78. Marcuse’s attempts to differentiate among forms of violence and to tie them to legitimacy are lost on Wheatland, who thinks that Marcuse sought “to legitimate all acts of opposition” via demonising the system (Frankfurt School, 329).
while depriving its victims abroad of the necessities of life; obscene in stuffing itself and its garbage cans while poisoning and burning the scarce foodstuffs in the fields of its aggression.” The Marxist concept of imperialism now featured more prominently. Rejecting one-sided tiers-mondism, Marcuse stated unequivocally that revolutionary change in advanced capitalist countries had to take the lead in a process that would create the preconditions for the liberation and development of the Third World. Marcuse nodded to Frantz Fanon in invoking “the wretched of the earth” fighting the “affluent monster.” And Marcuse left no doubt as to which side he supported, declaring that “working according to the rules and methods of democratic legality appears as surrender to the prevailing power structure.” The opposition was directed against the social system as a whole and could thus not remain legal and lawful. In some respects, this offered a blank cheque to those who wished to legitimise their illegal revolutionary acts, since practically all manifestations of the social and political system—violent or not—could be read as evidence of its repressive nature.

In December 1970, Austrian American psychoanalyst Friedrich Hacker asked Marcuse explicitly whether he believed that in their contemporary world perceptions of injustice and expectations of change would suffice to create a revolutionary situation with good prospects. Marcuse replied that it was difficult to tell since “the general affluence also represented true satisfaction and not only substitution.” He still emphasised that the ruling powers took caution to keep the ruled in a state of inanity and pseudo-information via the mass media, but the capitalists’ profit rate ultimately would fall. He unequivocally rejected acts that sought to trigger a revolution in a situation that was not ripe. Doing so would unnecessarily create martyrs. Conversely, he criticised double standards that tended to forget the people whom the powerful had sacrificed in the interests of preserving their rule while becoming overly sensitive about the violence of a revolutionary regime that was seriously fighting to eradicate misery and exploitation. That said, he rejected “futile acts of violence,” even those motivated by the highest idealism, because they only played into the hands of the ruling powers. He pointed to the crucial historical difference between terror wielded by those who already occupied power (the Jacobins, Hitler, Stalin) and the individual terror of the “noblest anarchists,” which evaporated.

104. Ibid., 7–8.
105. Ibid., 81.
106. Ibid., 7.
107. Ibid., 64–66.
108. Marcuse, “Das dritte Gespräch.”
Marcuse further radicalised his position in *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (1972), which resulted from his numerous speeches and lectures. He now envisioned nothing less than the revolutionary overthrow of the United States and its allies. The opening passage stated that the counterrevolution “in its extreme manifestations . . . practices the horrors of the Nazi regime.”\(^{109}\) Brutal force was “about to exterminate . . . desperate resistance movements.” Marcuse castigated American society as “an institution of violence, terminating in Asia the genocide which began with the liquidation of the American Indians.”\(^{110}\) In another passage, he likened the equipment of the American police to that of the SS. In response to the May 1970 Kent State shootings, he wrote bluntly, “Fascism will not save capitalism: it is itself the terroristic organization of the capitalistic contradictions.” Despite this rather drastic rhetoric, which ever more explicitly amalgamated Nazi Germany with the contemporary state apparatus, Marcuse clearly stated that Nixon’s United States was not a fascist regime. However, its economic and technological resources gave it an even greater potential for totalitarian organisation than Hitler’s Germany.\(^{111}\)

The better part of the book, which Marcuse had discussed with his friend André Gorz, was still dedicated to the familiar but subversive question, “Can one not make a living without that stupid, exhausting, endless, labor—living with less waste, fewer gadgets and plastic but with more time and more freedom?”\(^{112}\) Human labour must cease to produce commodities in accordance with the “law of value” and instead embrace the “law of freedom” and produce for human needs. Without the competition with capitalist progress, socialism could eliminate alienated labour “while renouncing the wasteful and enslaving conveniences of the capitalist consumer society.” Marcuse promised a lot, an “environment which would no longer perpetuate violence, ugliness, ignorance, and brutality.” The philosopher rejoiced that consumer society might become capitalism’s gravedigger. He even predicted that “the first truly world-historical revolution”\(^{113}\) would still happen in the twentieth century.\(^{114}\) As symptoms of the impending collapse, he cited declining real wages, inflation, unemploy-
ment, and the international monetary crisis after the termination of the Bretton Woods system.\textsuperscript{115}

Marcuse now clearly assigned the part of creating a new civilisation to a new consciousness—encompassing moral, psychological, aesthetic, and intellectual faculties—that would no longer be a matter of privilege but would constitute a radically different \textit{counter-consciousness} capable of changing prevalent values and aspirations. “Consumer society” was ultimately a misnomer because it meant a society systematically organised in the interests of those who controlled \textit{production}. The impulses of the coming revolution would be precisely the needs that arose when basic needs were satisfied. They would transcend both “state capitalist and state socialist society.”\textsuperscript{116} Marcuse had clearly left the notion of a one-dimensional society behind and now addressed two types of needs: consumer needs and transcending needs.\textsuperscript{117} Society’s failure to realise the former would give rise to the latter.

Marcuse now treated the question of the revolutionary subject more explicitly and extensively. He conceived of an “integral idea of socialism” that was to function as a guide for the radical left, which had to overcome the fact that relatively high living standards and the existing power structure made people apathetic if not hostile to socialism. Those who did not belong to suppressed minorities did indeed benefit from society’s richness and usually disliked rebellion because it called into question the necessity and value of their performance and prosperity.\textsuperscript{118} The rebels seemed to “permit themselves what the people have to forego and repress.”\textsuperscript{119} Large parts of the working class had become part of bourgeois society, and the revival of radical socialism was left to small minority groups of middle-class origin.\textsuperscript{120} He explicitly acknowledged communes as cells and laboratories “for testing autonomous, nonalienated relationships,” but more generally, he also mentioned those who did not vote and did not pay taxes, those in prisons and jails.\textsuperscript{121} Ultimately, the revolutionary subject remained rather diffuse—those men and women who were capable of tearing aside the Lukácsian veil to develop “their own needs, to build, in solidarity, their own world.”\textsuperscript{122} Beyond this revolutionary nucleus, there was allegedly already an apolitical and spontaneous awareness that the “fetishism of the

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{115} Ibid., 23.
\item \textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 18, 23, 30–32.
\item \textsuperscript{117} Ibid., 16–19. See Kellner, “Critical Theory,” 71.
\item \textsuperscript{118} Marcuse, \textit{Counterrevolution and Revolt}, 3–4, 14.
\item \textsuperscript{119} Ibid., 130.
\item \textsuperscript{120} Ibid., 5.
\item \textsuperscript{121} Ibid., 46, 50.
\item \textsuperscript{122} Ibid., 131.
\end{itemize}
commodity world is wearing thin.” Ultimately, this constellation would extend the potential mass base for a revolution. The experience of exploitation accompanied by a high standard of living—“the reality behind the façade of consumer society”—now appeared as the unifying force integrating a potentially vast revolutionary subject.123 It was no longer the hermetic and static society of One-Dimensional Man but the drawbacks of consumer society that now seemed to promise a united front.

Marcuse was quite prepared to fend off criticism that the integration of the working class only referred to the sphere of consumption and thus did not change their proletarian status. He very consciously focused on consumption because it was part of humans’ social existence and thus determined consciousness and influenced behaviour: “To exclude the sphere of consumption . . . from the structural analysis offends the principle of dialectical materialism.”124 Marcuse explained again why the revolution he envisioned had not yet taken place. The integration of libertarian subcultures into expanding commodity markets was a factor.125 More important, power itself had undergone a metamorphosis: “The ideology retreats from the superstructure . . . and becomes incorporated in the goods and services of the consumer society.”126 Weber’s “inner-worldly asceticism” had been replaced by “Keynesianism with a vengeance.”127 Competitive consumption made the rule of capital extend into all dimensions of work and leisure. Resonant of Bourdieu and Passeron’s concept of symbolic violence and its influence on people’s habitus, Marcuse underlined the idea that the “steered satisfaction of material needs” reproduced the system’s values and ideology,128 coupled with “a political, military, and police apparatus of terrifying efficiency.”129 Both internal expansion of the market and external imperialism were responsible for “the victims of the prosperitas Americana.”130 Marcuse quoted an early version of the pamphlet Consumption: Domestic Imperialism by radical activist David Gilbert, who had joined the Weather Underground in 1969.131 Explicitly referring to a present

123. Ibid., 15–16, 21.
124. Ibid., 6.
125. Ibid., 12.
126. Ibid., 84–85.
127. Ibid., 22.
129. Marcuse, Counterrevolution and Revolt, 7.
130. Ibid., 19–20.
131. Ibid., 14; Gilbert, Consumption.
“revolt against the ‘consumer society,’” Marcuse’s tone became ever more radical: the revolution was necessary because the system could survive only via the “global destruction of resources, of nature, of human life.” He now emphasised that the rebellion had politicised two areas of human life that had hitherto been deemed largely apolitical: the realm of nonmaterial needs and the realm of nature.

Commenting on Delacroix’s famous painting La Liberté guidant le peuple and highlighting the role of women in the coming revolution, Marcuse declared, “She has a rifle in her hand—for the end of violence is still to be fought for.” He reinforced his opinion that “this society strives to impose the principle of nonviolence on the opposition while daily perfecting its own ‘legitimate’ violence.” As a result, counterviolence was “bound to cost dearly, in lives and liberties.” However, he also warned in no uncertain terms that action directed at vague, general, or intangible targets was senseless and even played into the hands of the establishment: radical mass action had to be “self-limiting.” When these lines of caution were written, the German Red Army Faction (RAF)—for whom Marcuse and especially *Counterrevolution and Revolt* became rather important—had already embarked on a militant offensive that most contemporary observers perceived as unlimited violence. However, the concept of self-limiting counterviolence remained a cornerstone of the political thought and internal debates of the radical left.

In 1975, Marcuse gave his opinion on the RAF’s attempt to free some of its members from prison by occupying the West German embassy in Stockholm, an endeavour that ended in disaster with the murder of two embassy personnel and the death of two hostage takers after the accidental detonation of their explosives. When a German television journalist accused Marcuse of being an “advocate of violence,” he countered that his considerations on the right to resist had merely sought to remind people of “one of the oldest chestnuts of Western civilisation.” As a Marxist, he disapproved of individual terror as a means of revolutionary struggle. The RAF’s Stockholm episode showed “that

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132. Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 20, 72.
133. Ibid., 7.
134. Ibid., 129.
135. Ibid., 78.
136. Ibid., 52–53.
137. Ibid., 133. Kellner argues that Marcuse abandoned the defence of revolutionary violence in *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, which allegedly articulated the political realism of a movement facing a long and difficult struggle. It seems that he was more cautious about forms of violence that would prove counterproductive, but this did not mean he denied the violent character of the revolutionary struggle he thought was imminent. See Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse*, 291, 299.
an action . . . that was subjectively meant as a political action in the interest of the revolution objectively had a counterrevolutionary function.”

Following the assassination of West German attorney general Siegfried Buback and the kidnapping of industrial leader Hanns Martin Schleyer, Marcuse again faced critical questions about his position on violent resistance. In an interview with *Die Zeit*, he denied that murder was a legitimate means of politics. As a result of the glaring disparity between the highly concentrated violence of the state apparatus and the weakness of terrorist groups isolated from the masses, any creation of insecurity or fear among the ruling class would not translate into a revolutionary factor. He characterised the situation in the Federal Republic as a “preventive counterrevolution” and argued that under these conditions, the provocation of violence would prove to be destructive for the Left. However, he did not stop at these pragmatic observations but underlined that any Marxist revolutionary morals had to be mirrored by the means that were embraced in their name: open class struggle but not insidious aggression. Marcuse sought the explanation for the terroristic tactics of clandestine groups like the RAF in the frustration these radicals experienced in the face of their isolation from the masses.

Shortly before his death in July 1979, Marcuse again emphasised the significance of a counterculture in denying the existing order its legitimacy. The breakup of repressive consumer society would not work via any imposed limitations on consumption: “Emancipation from consumer society must become a vital need of the individuals.” People were to radically transform their consciousness and instinctual drives, a process that would result in an “internal weakening of consumer society.”

This detailed analysis of Marcuse’s thought has demonstrated that he was a central figure in the transatlantic emergence and development of far-reaching critiques of consumer society in several respects. In his critical analysis, Marcuse was much more explicit than his colleagues from the Frankfurt School in addressing concrete and everyday manifestations of “repressive affluence.” Based on his reading of *Grundrisse*, he accentuated the more “utopian” ideas

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both in the early works of Marx and Engels and in *Das Kapital*. Marcuse thus deemphasised a dichotomy between an early “utopian” and a late “scientific” Marx, reinvigorating the Marxist tradition of analysing economic relations with respect to concomitant relations of violence. He wrapped this impulse in the catchy notion of a “realm of freedom,” which he at least implicitly held out as the ultimate alternative to contemporary society. His vision of a possible reduction of the social obligation to perform alienated work—if only society relinquished its desire for unnecessary commodities—was highly appealing to the rebellious youth of his time. Crucially, Marcuse developed his later work in a reciprocal exchange with the emerging protest movements, which in many respects contributed to a radicalisation of his thought.

Much of Marcuse’s political thought remains topical several decades after his death, when well-being for all is still far from being realised on a global level and one wonders why a basic income guarantee is not more seriously considered as an alternative in affluent societies. The quintessence of Marcuse’s critique of affluent society underlying his work as it unfolded might be reduced to four basic assumptions. (1) Affluent society has an inhuman, even fascist, downside. His concept of fascism was more rhetorical than analytical, allowing him increasingly to subsume various scenarios of historical and contemporary abuses of power. (2) Despite the fact that technological and material progress makes life more comfortable, it stands in the way of freedom, even if organised in a representative democracy. (3) The omnipresence of formerly critical ideas and of formerly keenly desired goods without revolutionary consequences to the distributive system amounts to a loss of consciousness. This in turn leads to an increased tolerance vis-à-vis injustice and violence occurring within and without highly developed societies. (4) A blatant mismatch exists between the highly concentrated violence of the state apparatus and the weakness of the counterviolence that the new social movements employ in an attempt to challenge the former.

Contrary to his colleagues from the Frankfurt School, Marcuse came to embrace a genuinely revolutionary perspective, actively supporting the protest movement, interpreting various moments of crisis as harbingers of system collapse, and holding out the vision of revolutionary upheaval in the very foreseeable future. Given his basic assumptions, it becomes clear why he accorded the protest movement an important role in his revolutionary worldview. Though he came up short of assigning it the role of a revolutionary subject, Marcuse saw in the diverse protest activities pioneers of and pointers to a new consciousness that would help to break up the system of repressive affluence and eventually inspire much broader sections of society. The protest impetus against the Viet-
nam War and other contexts of neoimperialism appeared to him as concrete manifestations of the downsides of affluent society. Moreover, in forging new lifestyles and forms of living together, the protest movement also developed a tangible alternative to the compulsions of material progress, which had not yet been apparent in the rather hermetic scenario of One-Dimensional Man. Finally, he conceived of his own role as a mentor to the movement, striving politically to channel its impulsive energies and seeking to avoid relapsing into commercial affirmation or succumbing to the revolutionary impatience of armed resistance.

SDS activists such as Semler and Neitzke were quite capable of arriving at their own conclusions concerning the cues that Marcuse’s work delivered. Marcuse’s work offered sufficient points of contact with other thinkers who analysed material progress critically and influenced the protest movement—Marx, Engels, and Lukács among the classics; Adorno, Horkheimer, and Debord among the contemporaries. To address the other side of the mutual attraction, the next chapter shows that the legacy of these thinkers—despite Marcuse’s unmistakable warnings against actionism and individual terror—proved an important backdrop for the unleashing of a veritable militant revolt against consumer society.