But indeed I feel at home here,—in the domain of the arts, of music;—perhaps more at home than among philosophers, sociologists, political scientists,—with whom I do not seem to share the same world, the same experience. (Marcuse 2007b, 130)

The real question may be not whether Marcuse remains relevant to our world but whether our world remains relevant to Marcuse’s. To say anything else is to deny the possibility of peace because Marcuse was above all a pacifist. In 1968, speaking to graduates of the New England Conservatory of Music, Marcuse detected an absence of pacifism in the disciplines with which he was normally associated, much less the ambient society, sensing in them all an unacceptable collaboration with a paralytic status quo. He felt more comfortable and appreciable in a music hall. Why is this?

Marcuse’s sense of “pacification” was not as straightforward as opposition to armed conflict. Indeed, in his essay “Repressive Tolerance” (Marcuse 1968) he endorsed proportionality regarding resistance to antagonistic forces, entertaining a militance in pursuit of a “pacified existence,” an ambitious reconciliation with heretofore dissonant elements. His One-Dimensional Man (1964) considered a peaceful external habitat in which nature is considered approachable and thus undeserving of continued animosity. And his Eros and Civilization (1955) considered a peaceful internal habitat that was mature enough to overcome the psychic disappointments considered insuperable by Freud. What confidence Marcuse could muster was sustained by the prolific emissions of human ingenuity. He observed, albeit with frustration and ambivalence, an enlightenment chipping away at the discrepancies between Kant’s pure and practical reason, in so doing making nature more accessible and providing more psychic resources for sublimation over repression, for life over death. So he carefully informed us of the prospect of this truly comprehensive “peace” in An Essay on Liberation (1969).

Yet the resources of peace remained excruciatingly untapped, and here is the source of Marcuse’s growing affinity for music over commentary. Radio telescopes approach apprehension of the origins of everything, including essences
beyond human sensibility, beyond space and time; yet science and technology often succumb to the pedestrian or diversionary. And our psychic aspirations remain compromised, satisfied with adjusting to rather than superseding the sources of neurosis. We remain the “serious man” of de Beauvoir’s brilliant existential taxonomy (Beauvoir 1948), captives of projects the legitimacy of which we have happily abdicated to externality.

So when Marcuse entertained extraterrestrial exploration, he necessarily consulted Schoenberg, whose atonal revolution introduced “air from other planets” (Luft von anderen Planeten), inspiring Marcuse to consider a deeper and more transcendent odyssey, one populated not with astronomers but with musicians whose exploratory medium is the quintessential engagement with “pure subjectivity, the innermost being of man, freed from all external intermediaries” (Marcuse 2007b, 131). Where “dancing after Auschwitz” was barbarism to his lifelong friend Theodor Adorno, Marcuse joined Stravinsky in considering dance barbarism’s nemesis. And because “serious music” persistently resists its confinement to the concert hall, the “serious man” remains susceptible to liberation, as we learned in The Aesthetic Dimension (1977).

Presently the disciplines from which Marcuse declared estrangement, as well as their student captives, are decidedly unmusical, as the conservatory has yet to expand its influence. So peace remains elusive, if not incomprehensible, to societal elites. Certainly the fifteen authors that participated in this project some thirty years ago were willing to consider peace negotiations, and thus its musical accompaniment. Some were reticent, others perhaps sentimental. But each brought a rare and courageous curiosity regarding the ambitious alternative considered by Herbert Marcuse, an alternative nothing more, but nothing less, than peacefulness.

If we can do everything with nature and society, if we can do everything with man and things—why can one not make them the subject-object in a pacified world, in a non-aggressive aesthetic environment? The know-how is there. (Marcuse 2007a, 121)

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References


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