Part I

From New to Post
Ben Agger

Marcuse in Postmodernity

Much has been written about the relationship between critical theory and postmodern theory. My view is that the most critical elements of postmodern theory both parallel and enrich themes from the Frankfurt School. A Left postmodern theory gives political form to many of the more abstract Frankfurt formulations of the critique of domination. But the relationship between postmodern and critical theory is not reciprocal: Critical theory gives postmodern theory much more than postmodern theory affords critical theory, notably in the way in which critical theory politicizes and historicizes Foucault, Derrida, and Baudrillard. Postmodern theory typically positions itself against the transformational project of critical theory, rejecting "metanarratives" of the Marxist philosophy of history out of hand. Here I suggest that Marcuse demonstrates the possibility of a postmodern version of critical theory as well as a critical theory of postmodernity. In particular, this postmodern version of critical theory issues in programs of critical cultural studies and a political sociology of new social movements. Although Marcuse certainly shared many aspects of Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of domination and Adorno's aesthetic theory, in crucial ways Marcuse anticipates certain postmodern themes that must be taken seriously by a third-generation critical theory seeking to rejoin issues of practice. Marcuse anticipates postmodern theory's concerns with the lifeworld, discourse, and the body. He did not theorize postmodernity explicitly. But his differences with Adorno help illuminate shortcomings in Adorno's negative dialectics, which remains a suggestive treatment of late capitalism but not a nuanced empirical reading of transformational opportunities.

This is not to say that postmodern theory is somehow "more" political than Adorno. Baudrillard, Lyotard, Foucault, and Derrida provide no transformational philosophy of history, regressing behind the dialectical stance of critical theory. I am only suggesting that a Marcusean version of critical theory, learning from but transcending Adorno's negative dialectics, closely parallels a postmodern critical theory in terms of its attention
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to the politics of the lifeworld, discourse, and the body. In fact, I argue
that greater attention to the texts and texture of Marcuse's critical theory
obviates the labored engagement with postmodern theory so abundant
today. Why Marcuse is neglected on the theoretical Left, thus forcing the
engagement with postmodernism, remains an interesting question. I
think the answer involves the periodization of Marcuse as a 1960s social
and cultural critic, missing his more generic contributions to critical the­
ory formulated in the turbulent context of the New Left.

My argument is that a Marcusean critical theory can shed light on post­
modern capitalism. Marcuse's concerns with the lifeworld, discourse,
and the body track the displacement of politics and power into hereto­
fore nonpolitical venues in late capitalism. In my Fast Capitalism I dis­
cuss these processes of displacement, suggesting a programmatic agenda
for critical theory in postmodernity. My own postmodern version of criti­
cal theory stems in large measure from my own grounding in Marcuse,
which animates my concerns with the lifeworld, discourse, and the body.
In The Discourse of Domination I reconstruct the genealogy of my ar­
gument for a Marcusean critical theory that closely parallels various post­
modern themes.

Beyond the “End” of Ideology

A critical theory relevant to the 1990s needs to address the displacement
and depoliticization of politics without sacrificing totalization and ideol­
ogy critique. Contrary to the theories of Bell and Lyotard, ideology has
not disappeared. Ideology still reinforces domination, although now its
simulations are difficult to read as texts. Where Marx originally de­
bunked religion and bourgeois economic theory as falsifying representa­
tions of the world, today the crisis of representation, well understood by
many postmodernists, makes that ideology-critical debunking posture
problematic. Indeed, the revival of a Marcusean critical theory issues in a
version of cultural studies that seeks and destroys ideology in the variety
of venues into which it has been displaced. Thus, critical theorists would
apply Marcuse's programmatic critique of ideology developed in One-Di­
imensional Man in actual readings of ideologized quotidian discourses
and practices that constitute one-dimensionality. For example, Miller's
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book on television represents this cultural critique at its best, moving back and forth between the theoretical apparatus of critical theory and its concrete deconstruction of a televiual "reality."16

Although, as I noted before, postmodern theory lacks a progressive philosophy of history, it usefully draws attention to lifeworld-grounded discourse and practices that both constitute and transact power through the various language games of the quotidian. Foucault and Baudrillard in particular suggest programs of critical cultural studies that fulfill the promise of the Frankfurt School's cultural theory, which, with a few exceptions, was never sufficiently rooted in everyday life. Books like Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* and Baudrillard's *Simulations*, although they lack a Leftist teleology, are better grounded than Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* and his *Philosophy of Modern Music* and thus articulate strategies of critique and resistance arising from the lifeworld.

I have discussed the lifeworld grounding of critical theory elsewhere,17 drawing on the legacies of phenomenological Marxism,18 feminist theory, and Marcuse's critical theory. Postmodernists read the popular closely, identifying and deconstructing texts of power, which do not replace modernist ideologies but displace them into everyday life in ways that make them difficult to engage critically. Postmodern discourse and practice at their best afford critical theory a discourse-theoretic anchoring in the lifeworld. In his discussion of "the closing of the universe of discourse" in *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse comes very close to this discursive underpinning and the agenda of cultural studies that it supports.19

A discourse-theoretic version of critical theory helps debunk postmodern forms of ideology in late capitalism. Alone among the original Frankfurt theorists, Marcuse understood the need for such an underpinning in order to connect what he calls "sensibility" prefiguratively to new types of social and economic organization characteristic of a better society.20 This attempt to bridge subjectivity and intersubjectivity originally flowed from his Freudian reconstruction of historical materialism in *Eros and Civilization*. The Freud book anchors *One-Dimensional Man* and *An Essay on Liberation*, both of which stress the politics of subjectivity.21 *An Essay on Liberation* comes closest of all his works to an actual cultural-studies agenda, demonstrating ways in which cultural activities had clear political resonances during the 1960s.

By 1972, the year of publication of *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 29
Marcuse had already put distance between himself and the student movement, which he deemed overly irrationalist and insufficiently theoretical. Nevertheless, his engagement with the New Left and counterculture in the 1969 book indicates his proximity to a postmodern cultural-studies agenda of the kind that follows consistently from a lifeworld-grounded version of critical theory emphasizing the displacement and depoliticization of politics in the society of the spectacle. Although the old and new Rights\textsuperscript{22} savage Marcuse for the aid and comfort he gave the student movement, blaming him for extraparliamentary sins ranging from the Black Panthers to political correctness on college campuses, Marcuse theorized the cultural politics of the 1960s. Although this did not lead to a full-blown reformulation of critical theory, it is clear in hindsight that Marcuse matched Foucault's, Derrida's, and Baudrillard's acute understanding of the politics of discourse in an age of simulations, while improving on their postmodern aversion to politicizing and mobilizing narratives of radical social change. Marcuse was postmodern before his time in his attention to the lifeworld politics of discourse, culture, and sexuality. Unlike postmodernists and Adorno, he embraced the Great Refusal and thus preserved the possibility of societal transformation.

Although Marcuse's last book, \textit{The Aesthetic Dimension}, closely resembled Adorno's own \textit{Aesthetic Theory} in its apparent rejection of organized politics and new social movements, Marcuse deployed Freud to suggest the "promise of happiness" augured by art as a guide to social reconstruction.\textsuperscript{23} Unlike Horkheimer and Adorno, who abandon politics, and better than Habermas, who endorses the politically vague notion of ideal speech, Marcuse suggests the concept of the \textit{new sensibility}: a political, social, cultural, and sexual subject capable of transforming his or her lifeworld in the here and now.\textsuperscript{24} The new sensibility refuses to postpone liberation to a distant future time, recognizing that the long road to socialism is inevitably littered with broken bodies.

This version of the new sensibility resembles feminist conceptions of the politics of the personal, albeit within the totalizing framework of historical materialism. Unlike Marcuse and his Frankfurt colleagues, many postmodern feminists reject the totalizing notion of grand narratives or philosophies of history. Indeed, postmodern and feminist theory combine to rebut "male Marxism."\textsuperscript{25} To be sure, Marcuse's feminism was not explicit enough, requiring a fuller articulation of feminist theory with
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critical theory. But I think it is clear that his concept of the new sensibility, arising from his Freudian-Marxist groundwork in *Eros and Civilization*, is highly compatible with the critique of male supremacy and heterosexism in its prefigurative transformation of the immediate social relations of one's lifeworld.

Perhaps the major difference between Marcuse and postmodernists lies in the very concept of subjectivity itself. Derrida and Foucault abandon the notion of the subject as an archaic residual from Western philosophical logocentrism, arguing that the subject is positioned by language and thus loses a great deal of transformational efficacy. Although Marcuse, like Adorno, recognizes that subjectivity has become politicized in an era of total administration, he holds out hope that the subject can liberate itself from what he calls "false needs" in *One-Dimensional Man*. This notion of false needs earns the wrath of postmodernists who insist on the relativity of needs as well as of language. But in fact Marcuse does not construct a definitive list of needs reflecting his own modernist-European cultural sensibility. He indicates that needs are false when they are imposed from above (and self-imposed unnecessarily). Needs dictated by reason, ever his Hegelian-Marxist standard of validity, are by definition true. Marcuse follows early Marx in making clear that he anticipates great diversity in the patterns of nonalienated needs (as Marcuse's student, William Leiss, elaborates in *The Limits to Satisfaction*).

Marcuse holds onto the distinction between true and false needs, risking condemnation by postmodern relativists. He retains a regulative notion of the free and rational subject in order to suggest the possibility and necessity of lifeworld-grounded social change, rejecting both Adorno's unnuanced negative dialectics and totalizing eschatologies that leave no room for volition, hence liberty. One can retain a postmodern notion of subjectivity if one stresses the discursive capacities of the person who not only receives texts but, in the process of reading, strongly rewrites them; this provides a model for a normative notion of democratic public discourse.

Marcuse, Nietzsche, Deconstruction

If postmodern capitalism is characterized by the dispersal of ideologizing texts directly into the sense and sentience of the quotidian lives people
lead—e.g., via advertising—one needs to ground resistance in people's literary competencies. Derrida's central claim is that every reading is a writing, a version of the text that is inseparable from a noumenal notion of the "text itself." Indeed, there are no "texts themselves" for postmodernism but only versions, including readings. A postmodern version of critical theory, which addresses the narrativization of domination in late capitalism, is consistent with Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*, *One-Dimensional Man*, and *An Essay on Liberation*. But Marcuse does not develop this version of critical theory explicitly. For his part, Habermas rejects the conservative tendencies of postmodernism in "Modernity versus Postmodernity” and *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. And Habermas's own reconstruction of historical materialism in the two volumes of *The Theory of Communicative Action* restricts subjective agency to dialogue, failing to expand that category to include a variety of literary and discursive activities absolutely essential in order to transform late capitalism. That is why Habermas's utopian concept of the ideal speech situation sounds like warmed-over John Stuart Mill and not a strong version of critical theory in its own right. Although I basically agree with Habermas's critique of postmodernism's frequent neoconservatism, I do not think that his communication-theoretic reformulation of critical theory goes far enough. Rather, it duplicates the reformism of his earlier *Knowledge and Human Interests* in which he introduces a neo-Kantian bifurcation of technical and self-reflective/communicative modes of action.

I have already sided with Marcuse's version of science and technology against Habermas's critique of his alleged "heritage of mysticism." Central to Marcuse's *Essay on Liberation* is a vision of a new science and technology, which Marcuse derives from a Marxist reading of Nietzsche. This raises the Nietzsche question, as I called it in *Decline of Discourse*. Nietzsche is the basis for both Marcuse's version of critical theory and Derridean deconstruction, which suggests multiple Nietzschean personalities. Inasmuch as there is no singular Nietzsche but only versions, I would observe that individual stances on the Nietzsche question suggest quite different political inflections. The prophetic Nietzsche of gay science helps Marcuse articulate the new sensibility's emancipatory relationship to concepts and nature, whereas Nietzsche's notion of language as a prison house animates Derrida's postpolitical relativism.
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I endorse the prophetic, emancipatory reading of Nietzsche begun by Marcuse in *Eros and Civilization*. There can be a radical Nietzsche, just as there can be a radical concept of postmodernity that stands not for disillusionment and venality but for the fulfillment of what Marx called pre-history in a regime of true needs, happy science, and democratic public discourse. Postmodernism can elaborate positive notions of needs, science, and discourse, especially when it links a radicalizing reading of Nietzsche to the Marxist critique of domination—something utterly foreign to postmodernists who either condemn politics (Lyotard) or simply ignore it (Derrida’s famous claim that “the text has no outside”).

It is very important to understand that texts are nucleic communities through which power is transacted. Although the world is not all text, all texts are worlds, modes of social being. Nietzsche helps us seek out power in surprising places, which is precisely Foucault’s important contribution to understanding criminality and sexuality as political and literary institutions. Unfortunately, unlike Marcuse, Foucault has no utopian concept of politics, even though his critique of the disciplinary society reads remarkably like Marcuse’s analysis of total administration in *One-Dimensional Man*. Foucault is trendier than Marcuse these days for reasons that have more to do with cultural and intellectual real-estate value than with intrinsic theoretical merit. For that matter, the playful frissons of new French theory are much more fashionable than the architectonic constructions of German critical theory. Barthes and Baudrillard overtake Habermas in this context largely because they can be read casually, even cited authoritatively, without sustained analysis or exegesis. Critical theory declines when it exacts too high a price from readers, who are accustomed to facile engagements with texts. Hence, Foucault’s excurses on discipline replace Marcuse’s analysis of domination.

In the process, we lose Marcuse’s vivid critique and utopian imagination. *One-Dimensional Man* echoes what Marcuse calls “the chance of the alternatives,” leaving open the door of radical social change. Contemporary postmodernists cynically disdain the political, endorsing ironism as sufficient social theory. Even Jameson’s *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* eschews systematic social theory in favor of an immanent critique of postmodernism. But pastiches do not replace political and social theory, even if constructed with Jameson’s considerable literary skill. Today “theory” is all the rage on university
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campuses, especially in the humanities. But what passes for critical theory is only an engagement with the possibilities of literary and cultural readings and not also a systematic approach to social theory, which is dismissed as naively modernist in its narrative pretensions. Where humanities people study Adorno and Marcuse, aesthetic and cultural readings are divorced from substantive analyses of domination and thus lose their critical edge.

Literary theory flourishes, but political critique declines. That is precisely what is wrong with postmodernism, for which Marcuse is a remedy of sorts. The revival here of Marcuse is not intended to relive the sixties, which have long since been commodified. But we could remember the sixties as the last, best time when personal and public transformations not only overlapped but fed into one another. For example, extremely interesting things happened in the year 1968, ranging from political assassinations and the May movement (which in a sense catalyzed poststructuralism and postmodernism) to the Tet Offensive, which might be seen as the dawn of postmodernity. I do not glorify those times, especially since the sixties are now a consumer durable, whether tie-dyed T-shirts worn to Grateful Dead concerts or the reissue of Beatles' music on compact disc. But some of us who came of age politically during the sixties did so in large measure through Marcuse, who introduced us to the Frankfurt School, from which we learned so much. Marcuse helped theorize the lives we led, which were genuinely "years of hope," as Gitlin described them. Only in that context could Breines dedicate a Marcuse reader to both Adorno and Ho Chi Minh.

In my Cultural Studies as Critical Theory, I trace the Frankfurt roots of cultural studies back to the 1960s, when the New Left realized that "the whole world was watching" and thus began to understand the screens of power for what they are. This agenda of cultural studies is virtually impossible without Marcuse, who connected the analysis and critique of false needs to a critical theory of mass media and popular culture. In this regard he extended Horkheimer and Adorno's analysis of what they called the culture industry in Dialectic of Enlightenment. Although Horkheimer and Adorno recognized the tremendous import of the culture industry, they did not devote much attention to close analyses of cultural production and reception. The Frankfurt theorists disdained the popular as a site of stupefaction in late capitalism.
Marcuse's own One-Dimensional Man reiterates the section in Dialectic of Enlightenment on the culture industry. And yet Marcuse engaged the popular in more sympathetic terms because, I believe, he recognized that mass culture is not monolithic but heterogeneous. His Essay on Liberation amplifies the transformational potential of the counterculture, a force that was either ignored or condemned by Horkheimer and Adorno, both of whom felt threatened by the more extravagant expressions of youth culture. I am not saying that Marcuse celebrated drugs and rock music as politically authentic. Rather, he recognized fissures in the edifice of mainstream mass culture which could be pried open still further. That the counterculture and New Left failed to presage serious transformations of American society, as Marcuse acknowledged in Counterrevolution and Revolt, does not discredit his openness to cultural counterhegemony.

Cultural studies is scarcely possible without some commitment to the heterogeneity and relative autonomy of culture (which Bakhtin calls polyvocality.) The Birmingham School emphasizes differences between class cultures in the United Kingdom. Ryan and Kellner, in their important Camera Politica, an exemplary document of a Frankfurt-oriented cultural studies, suggest that mainstream Hollywood movies are not devoid of critical insights. Feminist cultural studies emphasize the critical possibilities available to feminist cultural producers and consumers. A Left cultural studies requires the assumption of autonomous or semiautonomous subjects capable of reading and writing strongly—exactly the same assumption animating Derridean deconstruction, albeit without deconstruction's aversion to political narratives.

Marcuse in America

Unlike almost all of his Frankfurt colleagues (Leo Lowenthal excepted), Marcuse remained in the United States after the Second World War ended, taking up teaching positions at Brandeis and then University of California–San Diego. Marcuse wrote for Americans, although he did not necessarily “write down.” He was stylistically less dense than Adorno, and he engaged with the popular in ways that set him apart from his erstwhile Frankfurt colleagues. Moreover, Marcuse was politically ac-
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tive in the New Left, although the notion that he was somehow its "guru" is farfetched, especially inasmuch as few New Leftists yet comprehended *One-Dimensional Man* as a contribution to the corpus of Marcuse's critical theory. If there was a New Left guru, it was C. Wright Mills, whose work on power elites was central to the original Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society (SDS). Although Mills is claimed by American sociologists for his critique of Parsons and in that context is even transmogrified into a neo-Weberian, Mills's *Marxists* indicates his affiliation to the tradition of Western Marxism. Mills described himself as a "plain Marxist." He also inaugurated the term *postmodernity*. Interesting work remains to be done on the complementarity between Mills and Marcuse.

Marcuse's engagement with America both reflected and produced his engagement with the transformational opportunities available in the lifeworld, including culture. Although I am not attempting a reductive sociology of knowledge, it is clear that Marcuse was less mandarin than Adorno, whom he otherwise closely resembled in his basic theoretical orientation. I would argue that Marcuse, in books such as *Reason and Revolution* and especially *One-Dimensional Man*, accepted Horkheimer and Adorno's basic critique of the Enlightenment, which grounded Adorno's later *Negative Dialectics*. Marcuse broke away from Adorno in his involvement in 1960s new social movements, which had a valuable, if unfulfilled, prefigurative potential. Marcuse's sympathy with new social movements anticipates Habermas's later use of them as vehicles of his notion of communicative rationality and counterhegemonic consensus formation.

As I said at the outset, a Marcusean theoretical agenda today would have two foci: critical cultural studies and work on social movements, largely from the perspective of political sociology. These research applications would embody Marcuse's perspective regarding, on the one hand, the relative autonomy of the lifeworld (through their concrete studies of cultural production, reception, and resistance), and, on the other, movement formation and mobilization. This sort of work is already under way, albeit frequently without a Marcusean imprimatur. The best antidote to Adorno's depressive negative dialectics and to postmodern theory's utter abandonment of the political is, as I have indicated, a differentiated concept of the lifeworld, from which all sorts of cultural and
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political projects spring. In many respects, this antidote retains and at the same time transcends Adorno's and Foucault's close attention to the micropolitics of discipline and domination. A Marcusean critical theory applied in the venues of mass culture and social movements analysis is less dogmatic than Adorno and Foucault were concerning the cooptability of critical and radical projects. This is not to say that Marcuse was blissfully unaware of the blockages to various radical projects. Even cursory readings of One-Dimensional Man, Counterrevolution and Revolt, and The Aesthetic Dimension indicate the extent of Marcuse's skepticism about heroic refusals or resistances in late capitalism.

We need to retrieve Marcuse's contribution to a critical theory with practical intent. Although I admire Habermas's reformulation of historical materialism for its ambitious scope, I have sided with Marcuse's utopianism about new science and technology. Today there is a minor Habermas industry, attesting to Habermas's skill at legitimating critical theory in the academy. But Habermas ignores the body, discourse, and gender, among other things. He has failed to learn from postmodernism and feminism. His neo-Kantianization of critical theory regresses behind Marcuse, Adorno, and Horkheimer, as I and others have duly noted. Indeed, in some respects, Habermas is closer to Weber than to Marx. And we are in the midst of a Weber renaissance, first in the personage of Giddens and now in Bourdieu, who is the latest Continental theoretical “find.” The best medicine against Weber remains Marcuse's magisterial 1964 lecture on “Industrialization and Capitalism in the Work of Max Weber.” Weber's own ambivalence about rationalization resembles the postmodernist aversion to the philosophy of history, which attains global dimensions in the celebration of the putative end of communism.

Whether or not the Marcuseanization of critical theory’s agenda of cultural studies and political sociology of new social movements requires fresh Marcuse scholarship is somewhat beside the point. This collection of essays aims to revitalize Marcuse, albeit without necessarily academicizing him. The challenge for Marcuseans is not to canonize him but to use his inspiration in order to explore questions of discourse and practice somehow off-limits to negative dialectics and communication theory, not to mention orthodox Marxism. Postmodernism asks important questions about the discursive nature of the disciplinary society, even if postmodernism cannot provide dynamic political answers, given its antipathy to
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politics and power. I am simply suggesting that by returning to Marcuse, we can engage these postmodern problems of discourse and domination in non-cynical, mobilizing ways, thus diminishing the momentum of post-Marxism. That is reason enough to reread Marcuse.

Notes

4. See, for example, Jean-Francois Lyotard, The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
18. Enzo Paci, The Function of the Sciences and the Meaning of Man (Evan-
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19. Marcuse, One-Dimensional Man, 84-120.
32. Jürgen Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests (Boston: Beacon Press, 1971).
34. Habermas, Knowledge and Human Interests, 32-33.


