The Missing Dimension: Self-Reflexivity and the "New Sensibility"

For the real subject matter is not exhausted by its purpose, but in working the matter out; nor is the mere result attained the concrete whole itself, but the result along with the process of arriving at it.

—G. W. F. Hegel

An Essay on Liberation culminates in the claim that "the radical transformation of society implies [a] union of [a] new sensibility with a new rationality." In any socialist society worth living in, we would not only work but also feel and think in a fundamentally different way than we do under capitalism. We will never live in the new society, moreover, unless this different sensibility and different rationality somehow already inform the struggle against the old society. This insistence on both the scope and urgency of liberation remains, for me, Marcuse’s most memorable message.

Marcuse also insisted that critical theory was an essential ingredient in the “radical transformation of society.” But if radical transformation implies the union of a new sensibility and a new rationality, and if critical theory is a necessary part of radical transformation, then an authentically radical critical theory would itself have to be informed by, and contribute to, the union of a new sensibility and a new rationality. Yet Marcuse never drew the proper conclusion from his own premises. Thus he failed to ask the question: What kind of critical theory would be consistent with the union of the new sensibility and the new rationality?

Nor is this metatheoretical problem posed within contemporary (non-feminist) critical social theory. Since Marcuse’s death in 1979, critical reflection on the role of the critical theorist has been largely dominated by
the debate between Jürgen Habermas and Michel Foucault over the possibility of an emancipatory reason that is based on a common neglect of the possibility of emancipatory emotions. Yet this debate points beyond itself to the very possibility of a marriage of emancipatory reason and emancipatory passion that it would preclude. I suggest that Marcuse's vision of a union of a new sensibility and a new rationality implies a standard for emancipatory communication between critical social theorists and critical social actors that is, however, betrayed by Marcuse's explicit position on the role of the radical intellectual. By contrast, psychoanalytically self-reflexive social theory encourages a relationship between social theorists and social actors that would satisfy that implicitly Marcusean standard.

Emotional Neglect: Neither Habermas nor Foucault

Habermas's conception of an "'ideal speech situation'" in which there is "'symmetry among participants'" and "'interchangeability among dialogue roles,'" together with his conviction that communication between social theorists and social actors is emancipatory to the extent that it approximates the conditions of ideal speech, leads him to the conclusion that the distinction between social theorist and social actor is merely an unavoidable fiction that the communication between them is designed to overcome. "In a process of enlightenment," he tells us, "there can only be [equal] participants." Thus Habermas demands a democratic dialogue between the educators and the educated.

At the same time Habermas denudes this dialogue of any emotional content. The discourse designed to "enlighten" both social theorist and social actor is defined as a special form of communication that "excludes . . . all motives except the cooperative search for the truth." Only this exclusion of all noncognitive components from the communication ensures that the consensus in which it culminates is the result of no force other than the "force of the better argument." To put this the other way around, any intrusion of the emotions into the communication bespeaks the presence of power and thus necessarily invalidates the consensus in which it issues. Habermas's implicit equation of "power" and "passion"
necessarily leads to the conclusion that emancipatory communication must be as dispassionate as it is democratic.

For Foucault, Habermas’s discourse is no more democratic and no more dispassionate than any other discourse that purports to disclose a universal human truth. All “true discourses” function as “regimes of truth” that “induce regular effects of power” by virtue of the self-sacrifices they demand in the name of “Truth” and the “status [they grant to] those who are charged” with enunciating it. The will to knowledge betrays a will to power that is masked—and therefore maintained—by the very opposition between knowledge and power on which all true discourses are based. In the case of Habermas, Foucault would say, the assumption of a universally human communicative competence gives rise to the norm of an ideal speech situation founded on the opposition between “force” (power) and the “force of the better argument” (knowledge) that effectively ensures the domination of those who have been trained to make “better arguments” over those who have not. Consequently, Habermas’s true discourse incites social actors to play by the rules of a game that is rigged in favor of the social theorist.

Foucault’s deconstruction of true discourse is vulnerable, of course, to the familiar objection that his discourse claims to speak the truth about the complicity between the will to knowledge and the will to power and that it is therefore founded on the very opposition between truth and power that it purports to deconstruct. Hence his critique of the authoritarian effects of all true discourse either cancels itself out or must be modified in order to distinguish between true discourses that express, and true discourses that contest, the will to power. Either Foucault’s true discourse is as authoritarian as any other, or his discourse must be a member of a set of emancipatory discourses. But Foucault cannot distinguish between authoritarian and emancipatory discourses because he simultaneously denies Habermas’s claim that discourses can be free from desire and affirms Habermas’s equation of desire and power.

Thus the deconstruction of the Foucauldian deconstruction of Habermas’s discourse culminates in the conclusion that their common equation of desire and power must be annulled in favor of the distinction between authoritarian and emancipatory desire. Emancipatory discourses are discourses that are animated by emancipatory desires. This brings us back—
Self-Reflexivity and the "New Sensibility"

or rather forward—to Marcuse's vision of a union of a new rationality and a new sensibility.

The New Sensibility but the Old Rationality

Marcuse's synthesis of Marx and Freud in *Eros and Civilization* enabled him to claim that the alienated labor endemic to capitalist societies demands a "de-sexualization of the body" that unleashes the destructive manifestations of the death instinct, and that a resexualization of the body and a concomitant "weakening of primary aggressiveness" would be thus necessary in the disalienated socialist society of the future.9 And in *One-Dimensional Man*, his critique of scientific rationality as *Herrschaftswissen*—knowledge for the sake of domination—implied that a new form of reason would necessarily accompany this eventual ascendance of the life instincts over the death instinct.10 But it was not until the emergence of the counterculture and the publication of *An Essay on Liberation* in 1969 that he argued that this simultaneously instinctual and cognitive transformation is necessary now, that it is a prerequisite of socialist construction: "[The] causes [of domination] are economic-political, but since they have shaped the very instincts and needs, no economic and political changes will bring this historic continuum to a stop unless they are carried through by men [sic] who are physiologically and psychologically able to experience things, and each other, outside the context of violence and exploitation."11 Thus any liberation struggle worthy of that name must be "carried through" by individuals whose "nonaggressive, erotic, receptive faculties" have supplanted their "aggressiveness and guilt," individuals who are "tender, sensuous, [and] no longer ashamed of themselves" or their bodies. Revolution presupposes a "type of man [sic] who would speak a different language, have different gestures," a person who "want[s] to see, hear, feel new things in a new way."12

However necessary, the new sensibility is not sufficient for human liberation. Although the senses "have a share in producing the images of freedom . . . the most daring images of a new world, of new ways of life, are still guided by concepts, and by a logic elaborated in the development of thought."13 Reason retains an essential revolutionary role. But this will be a new form of reason that does not dominate but is "receptive" to, and
harmonizes with, the sensuous nature within us and without us. In *An Essay on Liberation*, the emphasis is on a new relationship between reason and *internal* nature that would make it possible for work to become play and thus for the opposition between technique and art to be overcome.14 Three years later in *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Marcuse realizes that this new reality principle, this “aesthetic ethos,” also implies a new relationship between reason and *external* nature, in which the recognition of nature “as a subject in its own right” would ground “the development of the scientific concepts.”15 But in both works the only offspring of the marriage of sensibility and rationality is a new science and technology, understood as a force of production.16

Marcuse does recognize, first in *An Essay on Liberation*, that “the new sensibility and the new consciousness . . . demand a new language to define and communicate the new ‘values,’” and, in *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, that “communication of the radically nonconformist, new historical goals of the revolution requires an equally nonconformist language (in the widest sense).”17 But the only “nonconformist” language he considers is the “living art” of the counterculture that purports to transcend the “divorce of the arts from reality” inherent in the traditional “aesthetic form.” This consideration culminates in a defense of this traditional form and a repudiation of the “false and oppressive notion . . . that art could become a component part of revolutionary (and prerevolutionary) praxis.”18 And so Marcuse never even poses the problem: What does the union of the new sensibility and the new rationality imply for the kind of communication that *would* become a “component part” of that praxis?

This gap is particularly glaring in light of Marcuse’s own insistence in *An Essay on Liberation* on the indispensable role of political education in the struggle for socialism. Without “critical theory” as a “guide [to] political practice,” the new sensibility can easily degenerate into a mere “withdrawal [that] creates its artificial paradises within the society from which it withdrew.” Thus by itself the new sensibility “cannot possibly be a radical and revolutionary force. It can become such a force only as the result of enlightenment, education.”19

In *Counterrevolution and Revolt* it becomes clear that the “enlightenment” he has in mind is not a union of sensibility and rationality but
rather the subordination of the former to the latter. He tells us that socialist transformation is only possible “if the rebels succeed in subjecting the new sensibility . . . to the rigorous discipline of the mind.” The subjection of the new sensibility to the “rigorous discipline of the mind” scarcely suggests a form of reason that “does not dominate, but is receptive to and harmonizes with, the sensuous nature within us.” It betrays instead a commitment to the very Herrschaftswissen that Marcuse contests.

The subjection of the rebel’s sensibility to the discipline of the mind requires, in turn and in the first instance, the subordination of her sensibility to the discipline of other minds: “Self-liberation is self-education but as such it presupposes education by others. . . . All authentic education is political education, and in a class society, political education is unthinkable without leadership. . . . The function of this leadership is to ‘translate’ spontaneous protest into organized action which has the chance to develop and transcend immediate needs and aspirations toward the radical reconstruction of society.” The task of the radical intellectual, in short, is to “translate” what the rebel feels into what the intellectual already knows, to teach her that capitalism necessarily cripples her sensibilities and that the “complete emancipation” of these sensibilities therefore requires the “radical reconstruction of society.” Thus for Marcuse political education is the enlightenment of sensuous social actors by rational social theorists. Social actors are not recognized as rational “subjects in [their] own right” but merely as objects of a process of translation in which they do not participate and over which they exercise no control. The theorist is the teacher and the actor is the student. Same as it ever was.

And it is not clear why this student would come to class. Why should the social actor “listen to reason” if she doesn’t already possess it? Unless the social actor has already begun to reflect on the question of the social origins of, and obstacles to, her new sensibility, why should she even be interested in the social theorist’s answer to this question? But if she has already begun her reflections, then any answer she may arrive at has as legitimate a claim to be heard as the answer of the theorist. Thus the voluntary nature of the participation of the social actor in the process of political education presupposes that she be recognized as an active participant in—a subject, not an object of—this process. It presupposes, in other words, that the sensuous social actor be recognized as a rational social theorist.
It also presumes that the rational social theorist has become a sensuous social actor. Recall that the individual with the new sensibility "would speak a different language" and wants to hear "new things in a new way." We should expect, then, that even the most intellectually motivated social actor will turn a deaf ear to any intellectual discourse that is not spoken in this—in her—new and different language. This means that the critical theorist will only be able to fulfill the task of "guiding" political practice in the direction of "radical reconstruction" if his guiding language is itself infused with the new sensibility. Successful political education presupposes that the educator has learned to be as "nonaggressive, erotic, and receptive" as those whom he would educate.

Thus any political education that was consistent with the commitment to the union of the new sensibility and the new rationality would have to be predicated on the mutual recognition of the sensuality of the social theorist and the rationality of the social actor.

Marcuse's failure to recognize the necessity for what might be called this new theoretical sensibility is revealed in an account of the prospects for successful political education that is at once overly idealistic and overly skeptical. He tells us, on the one hand, that "those who are educated have a commitment to use their knowledge to help men and women realize and enjoy their truly human capabilities," but, on the other, that "in a society where the unequal access to knowledge and information is part of the social structure, the distinction and the antagonism between the educators and the educated are inevitable."

The lofty moralism of his appeal to the commitment of the educators to the educated is undermined by the sober realism of his insistence on the inevitable enmity between them. And so his account reaches an impasse. The only way to avoid this impasse would be to explore what Marcuse ignores: the possibility of a new theoretical sensibility. This is the problem to which I now turn.

Psychoanalytically Self-Reflexive Social Theory

My argument is that political education informed by psychoanalytically self-reflexive social theory would both embody and contribute to the union of the new sensibility and the new rationality. All self-reflexive theory is based on the assumption that social theory is social action and that a satis-
factory theory of social action must therefore clarify the conditions of its own possibility. What is specific to psychoanalytically self-reflexive social theory is that the theorist sees social action as a struggle either to defend against or to mitigate emotional suffering and thus she understands her theory to be an intellectual expression of her own participation in that psychological struggle. Psychoanalytically self-reflexive theory is a "receptive" form of reason that seeks, not to dominate, but rather to affirm its dependence on the sensibilities of the social theorist.

This effort to find the sensuous social actor in the rational social theorist is bound to be a painful process. Transgressing the standard methodological boundary that safely separates the observer from those whom she observes inevitably evokes the very anxiety that, according to George Devereux, this boundary is designed to dispel. But this is the only way to avoid the implication that the social theorist is ruled by reason while the social actor is imprisoned by passion and hence that there "are two distinct breeds of men [sic]." By cultivating "the ingrained habit of viewing [his] own beliefs as [he] view[s] those held by others," the self-reflexive theorist not only learns more about himself but also deepens his sense of "kinship with those whom [he] studies." In clarifying the connection between his intellect and his emotions, he simultaneously contributes to the development of his emotions.

The development continues when the self-reflexive social theorist communicates this connection to (other) social actors. In speaking publicly of his personal struggle to become "tender, sensuous [and] no longer ashamed," the theorist at once carries on his struggle and seeks support for it from people who are also committed to it and therefore know just how difficult it can be. He also learns more about this struggle from those fellow sufferers who may be currently negotiating it more successfully than he. The sensibilities of the psychoanalytically self-reflexive theorist are educated by the very social actors he would educate. Thus he is in a stronger position after the public dialogue than before to renew his painful personal struggle.

In speaking publicly about her emotional development, the psychoanalytically self-reflexive social theorist also facilitates her theoretical development. The correction or modification of her hypotheses on the social origins of, and obstacles to, the new sensibilities of her interlocutors depends on their willingness to help test these hypotheses in the light of their own
experience. In welcoming their participation in this process, the social theorist recognizes that the sensuous social actors are also rational social theorists. In effect she invites them to evaluate her hypotheses in view of what they already know about the roots of, and roadblocks to, their own emotional development and thus to publicly renew a process of self-reflection that they are assumed to have already begun. Only the willingness of the social theorist to share the results of her self-reflection justifies the confidence that this invitation to self-revelation will be accepted. Unless the social theorist has disclosed her suffering (as the source of her theory), there is no reason to expect that the social actor will disclose his own. And without the disclosure of his suffering, there is no way to evaluate the hypotheses about its social origins. A public discourse on the (personal) context of the discovery of the theory is therefore essential to the (personally informed) public discourse that becomes the context of its justification.

This context of justification becomes, in turn, the context for the next theoretical discovery. If the dialogue reveals that some of the social actors have experienced a certain kind of suffering (e.g., narcissism) but not the conditions that have been hypothesized as its social origins (e.g., overprotective mothering), or that some have experienced these conditions but not that suffering, then the theorist may modify his theory of the social origins of, and obstacles to, the new sensibility. Any modification of a theory will of course entail a modification of its self-reflexive application, that is, of the theorist's account of the emotional origins of his own theory. The public dialogue serves to deepen both his understanding of others and his understanding of himself.

Everything that happens to the social theorist as a result of his participation in this dialogue also happens to the social actor. His personal-theoretical encounter with the social theorist (as well as the other social actors) simultaneously strengthens his struggle against his suffering and heightens his awareness of the social obstacles with which any such struggle must ultimately contend. Thus the social theorist makes an essential contribution to the personal and political education of the social actor. If I have emphasized here what the social theorist learns from the social actor rather more than what the social actor learns from the social theorist, it is only because the more familiar emphasis on the importance of the latter typically neglects the necessity of the former. The point I wish to underscore is that the successful (personal and) political education of the social actor depends on
Self-Reflexivity and the "New Sensibility"

the successful (personal and) political education of the social theorist. The only realistic response to the venerable political question, Who shall educate the educators?, is "the educated."

Conclusion

Everything I have argued about the relationship between the context for the justification and the context for the discovery of a psychoanalytically informed theoretical argument applies, of course, to my own psychoanalytically informed (metatheoretical) argument. If the disclosure of the personal context for the discovery of a psychoanalytic theory is essential to its public justification, my effort to justify my own metatheory demands that I reveal its emotional origins. This is a long story, all of which I hope to be able to tell at another time. Here I have space for only a small, but I believe important, part.

My case for psychoanalytically self-reflexive theory is, in effect, an argument for the political importance of the struggle to be a deeply feeling person and a deeply thinking intellectual at the same time. I do not think I would have had any reason—intellectual or emotional—to make that political argument if this struggle had not been so central to the last ten years or so of my personal life. In the course of my psychoanalytically informed psychotherapy, I learned just how much—and how well—my commitment to impersonal theoretical discourse served to defend against early and persistent emotional pain, which I needed to feel more fully in order to live with more pleasure; had I not made this discovery, I doubt that I would have been moved to make the case for overcoming the opposition between personal and theoretical communication. And now that I have learned to feel that pain more fully, I find that I have very little need—frankly, very little patience—for the impersonal theoretical discourse to which I was once so committed. What I need instead is to communicate with people who share my need for communication that is at once intimate and intellectual.

My metatheoretical argument could therefore be dismissed as a hopelessly parochial projection were it not for the fact—or at least what I take to be the fact—that so many people in our (American) society have come to feel exactly the same need. As Anthony Giddens has recently argued, "high
modernity" is increasingly a condition of generalized self-reflexivity. There are literally tens of millions of Americans in psychotherapies, psychological workshops, and self-help groups who do emotional work on themselves that is as deep as it is difficult. For these people—people who are on the road to the recovery of their early pain and the abandonment of their destructive defenses against it—the new sensibility is no abstraction but something on which they have staked their very lives. If critical theory does not speak to them, then perhaps it has nothing important to say. That, at any rate, is my interpretation of the contemporary meaning of the enduring metatheoretical message of Herbert Marcuse.

Notes

2. This distinction should not imply that social actors are not in some important sense already social theorists and that social theorists are not in an equally important sense already social actors. Of course they are. The distinction is merely drawn between those who are, and those who are not, theorists by profession. This will later become clear.
12. Ibid., 31, 23, 21, 37.
13. Ibid., 29.
16. For a consideration of the way in which Marcuse's Marxist productivism lim-
Self-Reflexivity and the "New Sensibility"

its even his most advanced positions, see Balbus, *Marxism and Domination*, chapter 7.


21. Ibid., 47 (emphasis in the original).


27. I say "may modify" because limitations in the actors' (as well as the theorists') understanding of their own experience obviously complicate the problem of determining whether that experience verifies or falsifies the hypotheses of the theorist. Additional communication—both explicit and implicit—concerning that experience can help overcome these limits, but some ambiguity will inevitably persist. Thus the theorist's decision on the fate of his hypotheses is always based on an interpretation that is open to further evaluation. This is true of any process of theoretical verification. One advantage of a specifically psychoanalytically self-reflexive process of theoretical verification, however, is that it becomes possible to challenge the emotional stake that both theorists and actors have in hanging on to their hypotheses. Thus it is far more likely than any other process to encourage theoretical innovation.