

Marcuse on Repressive & Liberating Tolerance

As a practicing educator Marcuse often returns to the dynamics of teaching and learning in his work, particularly the tendency to embrace diverse curricular perspectives in the name of democracy. In one of the essays that is most unsettling to adult education he argues that an all-embracing tolerance of diverse views always ends up legitimizing an unfair status quo. Marcuse's students observe that in their observation of him it became clear that "the essential element of Marcuse's teaching is that knowledge is partisan" (Leiss, Ober and Sherover, 1967, p. 425). In their judgment he repeatedly emphasized "the role of the philosopher in challenging the beliefs and assumptions of ordinary life and indeed in abolishing the entire structure of established existence" (ibid.). This was done in a serious but not solemn way; "in informal lectures and informal discussions his teaching is generally spiced with irony and humor directed at the sacred cows of the Establishment ... a characteristic of those who are truly serious" (ibid.). Marcuse's explicit partisanship is at odds with contemporary humanistic adult education sensibilities which emphasize the facilitator presenting students with an array of viewpoints and letting them make up their own minds. Marcuse's charismatic presence was also at odds with adult education's dislike of the cult of the personality. Angela Davis describes how "when Marcuse walked onto the platform, situated at the lowest level of the hall, his presence dominated everything. There was something imposing about him which evoked total silence and attention when he appeared, without his having to pronounce a single word. The students had a rare respect for him" (David, 1974, p. 134). The seriousness, even solemnity of his presence, seems light years away from the kind of dialogic interplay urged on adult educators by luminaries such as Lindeman, Freire and Horton.

Marcuse certainly thought of education as a serious activity. To him "the struggle for a free and critical education becomes a vital part in the larger struggle for change" (1969, p. 61). He quotes the German activist Rudi Dutschke's idea of a long march through institutions, of activists "working against the established institutions while working in them" (1972, p. 55). Learning is central to this march as change agents learn how to program computers, to develop socially critical instructional materials that connect with learners of different levels, and to use the mass media as educational tools. Sometimes these agents are able to establish alternative educational systems – open schools, free universities, and so on. At other times they work within existing schools and colleges to help students recognize technological domination and its reproduction.

One of the chief inhibitors to developing this recognition in learners is teachers' willingness to run discussions, and develop curricula, in which a variety of perspectives are present. On the face of it this hardly seems like a problem. Indeed, a broadening of curriculum to include radical ideas seems an important and obvious part of building a critical practice of adult education. In one of his most famous essays, however, Marcuse (1965a) argues that such tolerance is often repressive, not liberating. The central thesis of his essay – that "what is proclaimed and practiced as tolerance today, is in many of its most effective manifestations serving the cause of oppression" (p. 81) – extends the concept of hegemony and has important implications for the practice of adult education. When they experience repressive tolerance, adults mistakenly believe they live in an open

society characterized by freedom of speech and expression. In such a society adult learners assume they can freely choose to plan and conduct learning projects that spring from their innermost desires.

Repressive Tolerance

Repressive tolerance is the tolerance, in the name of impartiality, fairness or even-handedness, of intolerable ideologies and practices, and the consequent marginalization of efforts for democratic social change. It is a tolerance for just enough challenge to the system to convince people that they live in a truly open society, while still maintaining structural inequity. This kind of tolerance of diversity functions as a kind of pressure cooker letting off enough steam to prevent the whole pot of boiling over. When repressive tolerance is in place the apparent acceptance of all viewpoints only serves to reinforce an unfair status quo. This is because “tolerance is extended to policies, conditions and modes of behavior which should not be tolerated because they are impeding, if not destroying, the chances of creating an existence without fear and misery” (p. 82). In a society in which a small number of people hold a disproportionate amount of wealth and power, and in which ideological obfuscation ensures the reproduction of the system, tolerance only serves to reinforce the status quo. In Marcuse’s words, “the conditions of tolerance are ‘loaded’ ... determined and defined by the institutionalized inequality ... i.e. by the class structure of society” (p. 85). When “false consciousness has become the general consciousness” (p. 110) tolerance ensures that alternative, oppositional perspectives are rendered ineffectual. When we have a “passive toleration of entrenched and established attitudes and ideas even if their damaging effect on man and nature is evident” (p. 85) then the apparently benign “ideology of tolerance ... in reality, favors and fortifies the conservation of the status quo of inequality and discrimination” (p. 123).

How does repressive tolerance work? Essentially, repressive tolerance is hegemonic, a taken for granted notion embedded in the ideology of democracy. Corporations and media perpetuate the idea of tolerance as democratic fairness, thereby creating a social mentality which accepts that things are organized for the good of all. But what counts as truth is pre-defined by these institutions so that avenues of opposition are subtly closed off. Marcuse argues that “under the rule of monopolistic media – themselves mere instruments of economic and political power – a mentality is created for which right and wrong, true and false are predefined wherever they affect the vital interests of the society” (p. 95). Language – in contemporary terms, discursive practices and relations – is controlled to maintain oppression; “the meaning of words is rigidly stabilized ... the avenues of entrance are closed to the meaning of words and ideas other than the established one” (p. 96).

Repressive tolerance masks its repression behind the façade of open, even-handedness. Alternative ideas are not banned. Critical texts are published and critical messages circulated. The defenders of the status quo can point to the existence of dissenting voices (such as Marcuse’s) as evidence of the open society we inhabit, and the active tolerance of a wide spectrum of ideologies. But the framing of meaning accomplished by

hegemony is all. Sometimes the meaning of radical texts is diluted by the fact the texts themselves are hard to get, or incredibly expensive. More likely the radical meanings are neutered because they are framed as the expressions of obviously weird minority opinion. As Marcuse writes; “other words can be spoken and heard, other ideas can be expressed, but, at the massive scale of the conservative majority ... they are immediately ‘evaluated’ (i.e. automatically understood) in terms of the public language – a language which determined ‘a prior’ the direction in which the thought process moves. Thus the process of reflection ends where it started: in the given conditions and relations” (p. 96). Like Fromm, Marcuse cites Orwell’s analysis of language in illustrating how words are used to mean their opposite. For example, the meaning of peace is redefined so that “preparing for war *is* working for peace” (p. 96). Supporters of the 2003 unilateral American invasion of Iraq frequently used this formulation.

A crucial component of repressive tolerance is the meta-narrative of democratic tolerance. This narrative is ideologically embedded in the way adult educators sometimes think of democratic discussion, where the intent is to honor and respect each learner’s voice. But the implicit assumption that all contributions to a discussion carry equal weight can easily lead to a flattening of conversation. A discussion leader’s concern to dignify each adult’s personhood can result in a refusal to point out the ideologically skewed nature of particular contributions, let alone saying someone is wrong. In Marcuse’s view, the ideology of democratic tolerance in adult discussion groups means that “the stupid opinion is treated with the same respect as the intelligent one, the misinformed may talk as long as the informed, and propaganda rides along with falsehood. This pure tolerance of sense and nonsense is justified by the democratic argument that nobody, neither group nor individual, is in possession of the truth and capable of defining what is right and wrong, good and bad” (p. 94). As we saw earlier, the explanation for this is people’s unfamiliarity with abstract, conceptual thought. False concreteness means that discussion participants are unable to think in terms of universal moral imperatives, reverting instead to a position in which any idea or practice is right or wrong depending on the circumstance.

Under repressive tolerance the airing of a radical perspective as one among many possible viewpoints on a situation, always works to the detriment of that perspective since, as was argued earlier, participants are disposed to skepticism or hostility regarding new ideas because of their formative ideological conditioning. Thus “persuasion through discussion and the equal presentation of opposites (even where it is really equal) easily lose their liberating force as factors of understanding and learning; they are far more likely to strengthen the established thesis and to repel the alternatives” (p. 97). In a contemporary analysis of the discourse of multicultural inclusion San Juan Jr (2003) adopts a Marcusean posture by arguing that such discourse (and its related practices of celebrating diversity) only serve to affirm the legitimacy of the capitalist status quo. Heretically (at least to many adult educators) Marcuse even suggests that with some people discussion is a waste of time. In his view “there are in fact large groups in the population with whom discussion is hopeless” (1970, p. 102) owing to the rigidity of their opinions. So the best thing to do, in Marcuse’s opinion, is avoid talking to them.

The only way to make democracy a reality, in Marcuse's view, is to have its participants in full possession of all relevant information. He argues that "the democratic argument implies a necessary condition, namely that the people must be capable of deliberating and choosing on the basis of knowledge, that they must have access to authentic information, and that, on this basis, their evaluation must be the result of autonomous thought" (p. 95). In stressing the necessity of adult autonomous thought Marcuse takes us right to the idea of self-direction, but a politicized interpretation of that idea that avoids collapsing into the self-indulgent reiteration of familiar ideas. For him self-direction exists when individuals are "freed from the repressive requirements of a struggle for existence in the interest of domination" (p. 105) and able to choose where best to exercise their creativity. In exhibiting the capacity to think autonomously, people are thus demonstrating their maturity. Marcuse quotes J.S. Mill's argument that democracy only works if those involved are "human beings in the maturity of their faculty ... capable of being improved by free and equal discussion" (p. 86).

Breaking Repressive Tolerance – Liberating Tolerance

A crucial step toward autonomous thinking is to smash the myths of objectivity and impartiality that allow false consciousness to become mainstream consciousness. Marcuse believes that we must "break the established universe of meaning (and the practice enclosed within this universe)" (p. 98) so that people are "freed from the prevailing indoctrination (which is no longer recognized as indoctrination)" (p. 99). In a society living under false consciousness people "are indoctrinated by the conditions under which they live and think and which they do not transcend" (p. 98). To help them emerge from this they need to realize that truth is manipulated, that the 'facts' "are established, mediated, by those who made them" (p. 99). They need to shed the tolerance for multiple truths, each of which is presumed to have its own integrity and internal validity, and realize instead that "there *is* an objective truth which can be discovered, ascertained only in learning and comprehending that which is and that which can be and ought to be done for the sake of improving the lot of mankind" (p. 88). This objective truth is a liberatory truth concerning the need to abolish the one dimensional society and it must always take precedence over a supposedly respectful, but ultimately repressive, tolerance of all viewpoints. To Marcuse "tolerance cannot be indiscriminate and equal ... it cannot protect false words and wrong deeds which demonstrate that they contradict and counteract the possibilities of liberation" (p. 88).

The key point for Marcuse is that learning to break free of one dimensional thought requires a necessary rupture with the appearance of facts and truth. This rupture "cannot be accomplished within the established framework of abstract tolerance and spurious objectivity because these are precisely the factors which precondition the mind *against* the rupture" (p. 99). Providing a smorgasbord of alternative views, traditions, and perspectives in the name of a pluralist tolerance of diversity only ensures that the radical ones are marginalized by the dominant consciousness. The only way to break with the face of spurious impartiality is to immerse adults fully and exclusively in a radically different perspective that challenges mainstream ideology and confronts the learner with "information slanted in the opposite direction" (p. 99). After all, "unless the student

learns to think in the opposite direction, he will be inclined to place the facts into the predominant framework of values” (p. 113).

This forced rupture with mainstream reality will inevitably be castigated as undemocratic censorship, a criticism Marcuse expects as the predictable response of organized repression and indoctrination. But he is firm that “the ways should not be blocked on which a subversive majority could develop, and if they are blocked by organized repression and indoctrination, their reopening may require apparently undemocratic means” (p. 100). An intolerance of certain teaching practices (Marcuse does not specify which) may also be called for if students are to develop autonomous thought. He writes that “the restoration of freedom of thought may necessitate new and rigid restrictions on teachings and practices in the educational institutions which, by their very methods and concepts, serve to enclose the mind within the established universe of discourse and behavior – thereby precluding a priori a rational evaluation of the alternatives” (pp. 100-101).

In a society characterized by repressive tolerance the dominant majority – particular corporations and the media – claim that an open marketplace for the dissemination of ideas by all exists, when in reality they exercise an ideological monopoly. To Marcuse, the free exchange of ideas is a myth since it is the White Right that has the purchasing power to buy control of the media. In such a situation the truly fair thing is to discriminate in favor of the Left, or racially grounded perspectives, and to give a preponderance of space to subtly discredited discourses such as Africentrism, feminism, queer theory, post-colonialism. Because the roar of the corporate mainstream media drowns out dissenting voices we need positive discrimination in favor of “the small and powerless minorities which struggle against the false consciousness and its beneficiaries” (Marcuse, 1965, p. 110). These should be helped because “their continued existence is more important than the preservation of abused rights and liberties which grant constitutional powers to those who oppress these minorities” (ibid.). Hence, “the exercise of civil rights by those who don’t have them presupposes the withdrawal of civil rights from those who prevent their exercise” (ibid.). This is a kind of community sponsored intellectual affirmative action in favor of leftist perspectives; “withdrawal of tolerance from regressive movements, and discriminating tolerance in favor of progressive tendencies would be tantamount to the ‘official’ promotion of subversion” (p. 107).

So, for Marcuse, the end of a democratic access to objective truth justifies the means of censoring dominant, mainstream ideas and discriminating in favor of outlawed knowledges. Realizing the objective of tolerance calls “for intolerance toward prevailing policies, attitudes, opinions, and the extension of tolerance to policies, attitudes, and opinions which are outlawed or suppressed” (p. 81). Although early in the essay he states that “censorship of art and literature is regressive under all circumstances” (p. 89), twenty one pages later, in outlining the necessary steps to stop the development of false consciousness, he argues that such efforts “must begin with stopping the words and images which feed this consciousness. To be sure this is censorship, even precensorship, but openly directed against the more or less hidden censorship that permeates the free

media” (p. 111). Not only should words and images (literature and art) be censored, we also need to censor the right of speech and assembly. In an argument preceding contemporary ‘hate speech’ policies, Marcuse stated that it was important to stop privileged groups preaching hateful intolerance, but using the umbrella of tolerance of diversity as cover. A full and proper consideration of disallowed ideas can only happen by “the withdrawal of toleration of speech and assembly from groups and movements which promote aggressive policies, armament, chauvinism, discrimination on the grounds of race and religion, or which oppose the extension of public services, social security, medical care” (p. 100).

As can be imagined, Marcuse’s vigorous assertion of the need to censor conservative viewpoints proved highly contentious and was responsible for much of the notoriety mentioned at the beginning of the chapter. But he points out that his own life has suffered the consequences of repressive tolerance. He writes that “if the Nazi movement had not been tolerated once it revealed its character, which was quite early, if it had not enjoyed the benefits of that democracy, then we probably would not have experienced the horrors of the Second World War and some other horrors as well” (Marcuse, 1970, p. 99). For him the example of Nazi Germany provides a powerful illustration of “an unequivocal position according to which we can say: here are moments that should not be tolerated if an improvement and pacification of human life is to be attained” (ibid.).