

Marcuse on One Dimensional Thought

At the core of Marcuse's work is his belief that we learn our own servitude and that we have learned to love our condition of oppression. In advanced industrial society the most pernicious oppression of all is that of affluence. Lulled into stupefaction by the possession of consumer goods we believe ourselves to be living in democratic freedom, when our needs have actually been manipulated to convince us we are happy. In reality, a condition of disaffection lurks beneath the carapace of everyday life. If we could just see our alienated state clearly we would want to liberate ourselves from it. But we have learned to regard half-buried feelings of dissatisfaction as basically irrational symptoms of neurosis.

This vision of a society controlled by technological advances, consumer luxury and smoothly functioning administration is most fully laid out in *One Dimensional Man* (1964), Marcuse's most celebrated book. Before examining this vision it is important to state that Marcuse was no Luddite. He believed strongly in the power of technology to liberate people from the burdens of unnecessary toil and physical drudgery. In his opinion "all the material and intellectual forces which could be put to work for the realization of a free society are at hand" (Marcuse, 1970, p. 64). That these resources are not used for this purpose "is to be attributed to the total mobilization of existing society against its own potential for liberation" (ibid.).

At the core of his critique is that in the modern world technology has been used to create false needs – the need for stupefying work, for the consumption of consumer goods and for the maintenance of a social order that is inherently repressive. Hence, "the liberating force of technology – the instrumentalization of things – turns into a fetter of liberation, the instrumentalization of man" (1964, p. 159). We live in a society characterized by "a non-terroristic economic-technical coordination which operates through the manipulation of needs by vested interests" (p. 3). These needs (particularly the need for consumer goods) are created by the dominant capitalist order and then internalized by us until they are indistinguishable from our most basic desires, so that we define ourselves, and the attainment of a fulfilled life, in terms of these needs. To Marcuse "existing society is reproduced not only in the mind, the consciousness of men, but also in their senses; and no persuasion, no theory, no reasoning can break this prison ... until the oppressive familiarity with the given object world is broken" (1972, p. 72). An intense encounter with a work of art is one way a sense of estrangement from oppressive familiarity can be instigated, thus laying the groundwork for the development of political awareness.

In the contemporary world domination is so total and insidious that it has seeped into our synapses, into our most basic ways of apprehending reality; "the so-called consumer economy and the politics of corporate capitalism have created a second nature of man which ties him libidinally and aggressively to the commodity form" (1969, p. 11). The needs the system creates in people are "eminently stabilizing, conservative needs" (ibid.) that ensure we have a "deep rooted, 'organic' adaptation of the people to a terrible but profitably functioning society" (1969, p. 17). In this society it is hard to identify revolutionary forces, since to be dissatisfied is taken as a sign of inadequacy or

psychological disturbance. When “the administered life becomes the good life of the whole” (1964, p. 255) then “the intellectual and emotional refusal ‘to go along’ appears neurotic and impotent” (ibid. p. 9). In times of war, for example, the refusal to ‘go along’ with invasions of countries that pose no imminent threat is often portrayed as irrational and confused as well as unpatriotic.

What is the administered life? It is a life in which the urgent need to reproduce the existing order is felt at the deepest, most visceral, instinctual level. Keeping things as they are becomes a vital personal imperative. In the administered society “the coordination of the individual with his society reaches into the very layers of the mind where the very concepts are elaborated which are designed to comprehend the established reality” (1964, p. 104). Marcuse contended that “administered human beings today reproduce their own repression and eschew a rupture with the given reality” (1978, p. 71). Everything – needs, sensual experience, identity, emotions, all the subterranean dimensions of our being – serves the role of capital. The administered society turns “the entire human being – intelligence and senses – into an object of administration, geared to produce and reproduce not only the goals but also the values and the promises of the system” (1972, p. 14). How is such deep rooted psychic and sensual control established?

One dimensional thought is the most pervasive mechanism of control. One dimensional thought is instrumental thought focused on how to make the current system work better, perform more effectively. When people think this way they start to conceive of the range of possibilities open to them in life within a framework predefined by the existing order. People assume that all is for the best in society, that things are arranged the way they are for a good reason, and that the current system works for the benefit of all. In this system philosophical thought, even of an apparently critical kind, serves only to keep the system going. Hence, “the philosophic critique criticizes *within* the societal framework and stigmatizes non-positive actions as mere speculation, dreams or fantasies” (1964, p. 172). Problems of meaning and morality, such as how we should treat other people, what it means to act ethically, or how we can make sense of death, are defused of metaphysical dimensions and turned into operational difficulties to be addressed by techniques and programs. Thus, “the operational and behavioral point of view, practiced as a ‘habit of thought’ at large, becomes the view of the established universe of discourse and action, needs and aspirations” (ibid. p. 15).

When adults learn to keep their thought fixed within familiar tramlines the status quo is easily maintained. A universe of discourse is created that is “populated by self-validating hypotheses which, incessantly and monopolistically repeated, become hypnotic definitions or dictations” (ibid. p. 14). One dimensional thought is circular even when it appears divergent. Any questions we ask always bring us back to the same point where we affirm the validity of the current system. This kind of thought is endlessly repetitive, so that “self-validating, analytical propositions appear which function like magic-ritual formulas” (ibid. p. 88). Its internal organization is so tight that “transgression of the discourse beyond the closed analytical structure is incorrect or propoganda” (ibid.). Thought that protests the given order of things is effectively anaesthetized by rejecting it as irrational or simply redefining it to fit the prevailing worldview.

Crucial to the successful maintenance of one dimensional thought is the creation of false needs. These are needs “which are superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests in his repression: the needs which perpetuate evil, aggressiveness, misery and injustice. Their satisfaction ... serves to arrest the development of his ability ... to recognize the disease of the whole and grasp the chance of curing the disease. The result is euphoria in unhappiness” (1964, p. 5). Examples of such needs are the need “to behave and consume in accordance with the advertisements, to love and hate what others love and hate” (p. 5), the need “for stupefying work” (p. 7) and “for modes of relaxation which soothe and prolong this stupefaction” (p. 7). As long as adults are “kept incapable of being autonomous, indoctrinated and manipulated down to their very instincts” (p. 6) they are unable to recognize their own real needs in any meaningful sense. Any freedom of choice they experience is illusory, the deceptive liberty of “free competition at administered prices, a free press which censors itself, free choice between brands and gadgets” (p. 7).

One dimensional thought ensures its own continuance when it trains people to feel a deep need to stay within their existing frameworks of analysis. Although avoiding divergent thinking seems like an individual decision, it is in reality a massive indoctrination effort intended to stop people questioning what they see around them. The purpose of this system-preserving effort is to ensure that “the needs and the satisfactions that serve the preservation of the Establishment are shared by the underlying population” (p. 8). The apogee of the administered society is reached when everyone shares the same deep seated need to preserve the existing social order, but each believes this to be an idiosyncratic feature of their own personality. Social control is assured if “the transplanted social needs into individual needs is so effective that the difference between them seems to be purely theoretical” (p. 8).

Language has an important place in one dimensional thought. In fact, it is in language that the presence of such thought is most recognizable. In the administered society “the determining function of the social system of meaning asserts itself ... in a much more covert, unconscious, emotional manner, in the ordinary universe of discourse” (1964, p. 197). By the language we speak, and the patterns of thought we employ, we commit ourselves to maintaining the current system. Marcuse’s eloquence on this point is worth quoting at length:

“The established universe of discourse bears throughout the marks of the specific modes of domination, organization and manipulation to which the members of a society are subjected. People depend for their living on bosses and politicians and jobs and neighbors who make them speak and mean as they do ... Under these circumstances, the spoken phrase is an expression of the individual who speaks it, *and* of those who make him speak as he does, *and* of whatever tension or contradiction may interrelate them. In speaking their own language, people also speak the language of their masters, benefactors, advertisers. Thus they do not only express themselves, their own knowledge, feelings, aspirations, but also something other than themselves” (1964, p. 193).

In Marcuse's analysis there is little that is private or personal about language. Language - the prime tool we use in the most private spheres of our lives to mediate and communicate reality - has been ravaged by the consumer society. Thus, when "describing to each other our loves and hatreds, sentiments and resentments, we must use the terms of our advertisements, movies, politicians and best sellers" (1964, p. 194). If this language is comprised of terms, metaphors, phrases and sayings that confirm that all is for the best, then we are robbed of an important tool with which we can record our indignation and inspire others to change the world. When they are enclosed in language that focuses on tinkering with the system to make it work more smoothly "the people, previously the ferment of social change, have 'moved up' to become the ferment of social cohesion" (1964, p. 256).

How does language function to cement one dimensional thought? First, the system establishes certain habits of communication, patterns of talk, that close down the possibility of divergent thinking. This is the "authoritarian ritualization of discourse" (1964, p. 101) that trains people to mistake making pronouncements or sticking to the facts with the conduct of probing critical analysis. Language is imbued with a tone of certainty, and statements are uttered with a self-evident correctness, that allows "no time and no space for a discussion which would project disruptive alternatives" (ibid.). This kind of language is antithetical to dialog and discussion since "it pronounces and, by virtue of the power of the apparatus, establishes facts - it is self-validating enunciation ... it communicates decision, dictum, command" (ibid.). Can a more accurate description be imagined of the claim of the Fox News Network to provide 'fair and unbiased' coverage of the invasion of Iraq?

More specifically, contemporary language kills abstract, conceptual thought by encouraging people to equate thinking with a focus only on specific, concrete, empirical concerns. To Marcuse "the language which the man on the street actually speaks" (1964, p. 174) offers "the token of a false concreteness" (ibid.). It is a "purged language, purged ... of the means for expressing any other contents than those furnished to the individuals by their society" (ibid.). These falsely concrete contents are an almost exclusive concern with making things work better, with perfecting and improving whatever is already in place. In adult education, for example, it is the language of quality, of improved service, of ensuring that the programs we create meet as fully as possible the wants and needs (to Marcuse, false needs) that adult learners express.

An important component of false concreteness is the removal of the universal elements in conceptual thought. Concepts are, by definition, universal ideas referring to abstractions under which various particulars are subsumed. Justice, love, fairness, compassion - all these concepts have meaning above and beyond their individual referents. When the abstract dimensions of these ideas are ignored, it becomes very difficult to judge how we should act by reference to some broader ideal. Whether a person or institution is behaving justly becomes something we decide in a purely situational way, possibly by comparing the behavior we're examining to other examples within our personal horizons. The last thing we think of doing is invoking a broad, abstract notion of justice and

applying it to our little local difficulties. This is how “the methodological translation of the universal into the operational then becomes repressive reduction of thought” (1964, p. 108). For example, the public discussion of the morality of invading a country can quickly become obscured by a focus on situational imperatives such as the number of troops deployed from week to week, the exact civilian and military body count, and the amount of money spent supporting the war effort.

When abstract conceptual thought is purged from everyday language two consequences ensue. First, it becomes increasingly difficult for people to conceive of radical alternatives. A narrow focus on false concreteness inhibits the breadth of imaginative thought necessary to create alternative possibilities. Second, without abstract concepts it becomes very difficult to generate radical, external criteria that can be applied to judge the conduct of everyday affairs. In the absence of abstract concepts “the criteria for judging a given state of affairs are those offered by ... imposed by, the given state of affairs. The analysis is ‘locked’, the range of judgment is confirmed within a context ... in which their meaning, function, and development are determined” (1964, p. 115). So the prevention of abstract, conceptual thought, and the promotion of false concreteness, are important ways that education, including adult education, contribute to keeping things as they are. In Marcuse’s terms “language controls by reducing the linguistic forms and symbols of reflection, abstraction, development, contradiction; by substituting images for concepts” (1964, p. 103).

The picture Marcuse paints in *One Dimensional Man* of the administered society dominated by technology, consumerism, restricted language and falsely concrete thought processes that only confirm the correctness of the existing order, seems dismal indeed. In his view scientific management and rational production methods might have improved people’s standards of living but they have done so at a price – the destruction of nature and diminution of the soul – that people are not so much willing to pay, as completely oblivious to. The adult educator Myles Horton echoed Marcuse in his belief that the all-encompassing nature of technology meant “man is grown into this all-encompassing machine and made a mechanistic device” (Horton, 2003, p. 222). Like Horton, Marcuse’s analysis stresses the costs of technological envelopment. The administered society has extended its tentacles into the deepest recesses of the psyche to produce “the thorough assimilation of mind with facts, of thought with required behavior, of aspirations with reality” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 252). But documenting the ways in which the logic of domination infused language, thought and sensibility was only one part of Marcuse’s work. We need now to turn to another element of particular concern to adult educators; the possibility of people learning how to liberate themselves from the discourse, logic and practice of domination.