On Marcuse
Critique, Liberation, and Reschooling in the Radical Pedagogy of Herbert Marcuse

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KEY CRITICAL THINKERS IN EDUCATION

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in the Radical Pedagogy of Herbert Marcuse

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INTRODUCTION

Philosopher, social theorist, and political activist, Herbert Marcuse gained world renown during the 1960s as a theorist of major transformations within both the structures of social production and reproduction and emergent forms of resistance to domination and repression. His theory of “one-dimensional” society provided critical perspectives on contemporary capitalist and state communist societies, while his notion of the “great refusal” won him renown as a theorist of revolutionary change and “liberation from the affluent society.” Consequently, he became one of the most influential intellectuals in the United States during the 1960s and into the 1970s. But what is Marcuse’s legacy today? While other critical theorists of his generation have gained a new level of academic cache,¹ Marcuse seems to remain a historical figure locked within the dramas of the sixties.² As such, a return to Marcuse, as Angela Davis has pointed out, seems to veer dangerously close to “nostalgia” for a past age (Marcuse, 2005).

In this book, we attempt to show that Marcuse continues to have significant relevance and importance to the contemporary situation concerning education in the advanced, industrial world. With the rise of standardization policies in the sphere of schooling, the steady progress of the “affluent society” in the sphere of western, industrialized economies, the waning of critical and dialectical thinking in the field of philosophy and the social sciences, and finally, the immediate degradation of the environment, Marcuse speaks with clarity to academics, teachers, and activists interested in understanding the complexities of “counter-revolution and revolt” occurring today in a variety of locations and across many domains.

Here we demonstrate Marcuse’s sustained concern for education as a sphere for developing radical critique and emancipatory alternatives to the fully administered society. We intend our study to show not only Marcuse’s

¹ See, for instance, Fredric Jameson’s (2000) defense of Theodor Adorno as a philosopher of postmodernism, or the renewed and invigorated interest in Walter Benjamin (Agamben, 1998; Zizek, 2001).
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relevancy, but also the urgency with which we must evaluate his life and work in light of continuities and transformations within the present system of social relations and institutions.
Herbert Marcuse was born July 19, 1898 in Berlin, Germany. The son of Carl Marcuse, a prosperous Jewish merchant, and Gertrud Kreslawsky, daughter of a wealthy German factory owner. Marcuse had a typical upper-middle class Jewish life during the first two decades of the twentieth century, in which anti-semitism was not overt in Germany. Marcuse studied in the Mommsen Gymnasium in Berlin prior to World War I and served with the German army in the war. Transferring to Berlin early in 1918, he participated in the German Revolution that drove Kaiser Wilhelm II out of Germany and established a Social Democratic government.

After demobilization, Marcuse went to Freiburg to pursue his studies and received a Ph.D. in literature in 1922 for a dissertation on *The German Artist-Novel*. After a short career as a bookseller in Berlin, Marcuse returned to Freiburg and in 1928 began studying philosophy with Martin Heidegger, then one of the most significant thinkers in Germany.

In his first published articles, written from 1928-1933 when he was studying with Heidegger in Freiburg, Marcuse developed a synthesis of phenomenology, existentialism, and Marxism, anticipating a project which decades later would be carried out by various “existential” and “phenomenological” Marxists, such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, as well as others in Eastern Europe and the United States in the post-war period. Marcuse contended that Marxist thought had deteriorated into a rigid orthodoxy and needed concrete “phenomenological” experience of contemporary social conditions to update and enliven Marxian theory, which had neglected social, cultural, and psychological factors in favor of economic and political conditions. He also believed that Marxism neglected the problem of the individual and throughout his life was concerned with personal liberation and happiness, in addition to social transformation.

Marcuse published the first major review in 1932 of Marx’s previously unprinted early work, the “Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844”, anticipating the later tendency to revise interpretations of Marxism.
from the standpoint of the works of the early Marx. Marcuse was thus one of the first to see the importance of the philosophical perspectives of the early Marx on labor, human nature, and alienation which he thought were necessary to give concrete substance to Marxism. At the same time that he was writing essays synthesizing Marxism and phenomenology, Marcuse completed a study of Hegel’s *Ontology and Theory of Historicity* (1932) which he intended as a “Habilitation” dissertation that would gain him University employment. The text stressed the importance of the categories of life and history in Hegel and contributed to the revival of interest in Hegel that was taking place in Europe.

In 1933, Marcuse joined the Institut für Sozialforschung (Institute for Social Research) in Frankfurt and became one of the most active participants in their interdisciplinary projects (see Kellner, 1989; Wiggershaus, 1994). The Institute was founded in Frankfurt, Germany, during the 1920s as the first Marxist-oriented research institute in Europe. It developed a conception of critical social theory that they contrasted with “traditional theory.” Their distinctive brand of “critical theory” combined philosophy, social theory, economics, cultural criticism, psychology, radical pedagogy, and other disciplines in an attempt to develop a theory of the present age in a dialectic of domination and emancipation. This project involved developing analyses of the new stage of state and monopoly capitalism, of the role of mass communication and culture, of the decline of the individual, of the institutions and effects of German fascism, and of the role of institutions like the corporation, state, media, and schools in the reproduction of contemporary capitalist societies. Marcuse participated in all of these projects and was one of the central and most productive members in the Institute. He deeply identified with the work of the Institute, and throughout his life was close to Max Horkheimer, T.W. Adorno, Leo Lowenthal, Franz Neumann, and its other members.

In 1934, Marcuse – a Jew and radical – and other members of the Frankfurt School fled from Nazism and emigrated to the United States. The Institute was granted offices and an academic affiliation with Columbia University, where Marcuse worked during the 1930s and early 1940s. His first major work in English, *Reason and Revolution* (1941), introduced the ideas of Hegel, Marx, and German social theory to an English-speaking audience. Marcuse demonstrated the similarities between Hegel and Marx, and argued for discontinuities between Hegel’s philosophy of the state and German fascism, placing Hegel instead in a liberal constitutional tradition politically and theoretically as a precursor of critical social theory.

In December 1942, Marcuse joined the Office of War Information as a senior analyst in the Bureau of Intelligence (Kellner, 1998). He prepared a
report that proposed ways that the mass media of the allied countries could present images of German fascism. In March 1943, Marcuse transferred to the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), working until the end of the war in the Research and Analysis Division of the Central European Branch. Marcuse and his colleagues wrote reports attempting to identify Nazi and anti-Nazi groups and individuals in Germany and drafted a “Civil Affairs Handbook” that dealt with denazification (see the texts collected in Marcuse, 1998). In September 1945, he moved over to the State Department after the dissolution of the OSS, becoming head of the Central European bureau, and remained there until 1951 when he left Government service, following the death of his first wife Sophie Wertheim Marcuse.

After working for the U.S. government for almost ten years, Marcuse returned to university life. He received a Rockefeller Foundation grant to study Soviet Marxism, lecturing on the topic at Columbia during 1952-1953 and Harvard from 1954-1955. At the same time, he was intensely studying Freud and published *Eros and Civilization* (1955), a philosophical synthesis of Marx and Freud which used Freud’s categories to provide a critique of bourgeois society and to sketch the outlines of a non-repressive society. The book was well-received and anticipated many of the values of the 1960s counterculture, helping to make Marcuse a major intellectual and political force during that turbulent decade.

In 1955, Marcuse married his second wife, Inge Werner Marcuse, the widow of his friend Franz Neumann who had died in an automobile crash the year before. In 1958, Marcuse received a tenured position at Brandeis University and the same year published a critical study of the Soviet Union (*Soviet Marxism*) which broke the taboo in his circles against speaking critically of the USSR and Soviet communism. Stressing the differences between the Marxian theory and the Soviet version of Marxism, Marcuse provided a sharp critique of Soviet bureaucracy, culture, values, and system. Yet he also distanced himself from those who believed Soviet communism to be incapable of reform and democratization, and pointed to potential “liberalizing trends” which countered the Stalinist bureaucracy and that indeed eventually materialized, leading, however, to the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s.

At Brandeis, Marcuse became one of the most popular and influential members of its faculty and spoke out frequently on public issues like the Cuban missile crisis, the war in Vietnam, and issues of local importance, as well as teaching and writing. In 1964, Marcuse published *One-Dimensional Man*, which is perhaps his most important work. In 1965, Brandeis refused to renew his teaching contract and Marcuse soon after received a position at the University of California San Diego where he remained until his
retirement in the 1970s. Throughout the 1960s, Marcuse supported demands for revolutionary change and defended the new, emerging forces of radical opposition, thus winning him the hatred of mainstream academics and conservatives as well as the respect of the new radicals. In a series of pivotal books and articles, Marcuse articulated New Left politics and critiques of capitalist societies, including “Repressive Tolerance” (1965), *An Essay on Liberation* (1969), *Five Lectures* (1970), and *Counter-revolution and Revolt* (1972). During this time, Marcuse achieved world renown as “the guru of the New Left,” giving lectures and advice to student radicals all over the world. His work was often discussed in the mass media, and he became one of the few American intellectuals to gain such attention. A charismatic teacher, Marcuse’s students began to gain academic positions and further promoted his ideas, thus contributing to his importance.

After the death of his second wife, Inge Werner Marcuse in 1974, he married his third wife, Erica Sherover Marcuse, on June 21, 1976. Following the collapse of the New Left, Marcuse focused intensely on aesthetics, and his final book, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1979), contains a defense of the emancipatory potential of art. Marcuse undertook one last trip to Germany where he lectured on topics such as the holocaust, ecology, technology and science, and the fate of the Left; he suffered a severe heart attack and died in Starnberg on July 29, 1979.

Since his death, Marcuse’s influence has waned, surpassed, perhaps, by his Institute colleagues Adorno and Benjamin and the emergence of new modes of thinking, such as those found in poststructuralist and postmodern theory. World renown during the 1960s as a theorist of revolution, it is perhaps as a philosopher and social theorist that Marcuse remains an important intellectual figure. Accordingly, in this book we focus on his relevance for the critique and reconstruction of education and present Marcuse as a theorist who attempted to develop a synthesis of philosophy, critical social theory, political activism, and radical pedagogy in specific historical conjunctures. We focus on delineating what we take to be the contributions, limitations, and enduring legacy of Marcuse’s work for the transformation of education and society.

**CHAPTER ONE SUMMARY**

Herbert Marcuse was born to a middle-class Jewish family in Berlin in 1898. As an intellectual, he lived through one of the most dramatic and important moments in Western History, fighting in World War I,
experiencing the turmoil of Weimar Germany and rise of German fascism. In 1933 he joined the influential Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt German. Only one year later, he was forced to immigrate to the United States to escape Nazi oppression. In the U.S., Marcuse worked for the United States government on a variety of studies focusing on the origin and nature of German fascism and “denazification” projects for the post-War period. Later as a professor at Brandeis University and then University of California San Diego, he gained renown across the world as the “guru” of the New Left because of his support of student activism and a variety of global protest movements. Due to his activism, Marcuse influenced radical thought and a variety of counter-cultural movements that took place during the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. There was not a more important Leftist thinker in the United States (and perhaps the world) working within this important period of recent history.

CHAPTER ONE QUESTIONS

1) What is the relationship between history and philosophy? What historical events do you think affected Marcuse’s philosophy?

2) How has your personal biography affected your beliefs and your intellectual aspirations?

3) According to Marcuse, what impact could philosophy have on combating political, social, and economic forms of oppression?
Herbert Marcuse became globally recognized as a radical critic of advanced industrial societies, capitalist and communist, in the 1960s. His book *One Dimensional Man* (1964) carried out a systematic critical analysis of methods of social control and domination generated by the economy, state, culture, and institutions such as school. In this chapter we will outline Marcuse’s critique of schooling in relation to his overall theory of one-dimensional society.

An introduction to Marcuse’s philosophy of education should be situated in relation to the German romantic philosophical term *Bildung*, which refers to the growth, development, and formation of human beings. *Bildung* aims at autonomous learning/self-formation which concerns the whole individual for the purpose of liberating the self and society (Beiser, 2004). This central ideal remains antithetical to any sense of standardization in education and instead embraces education of the body and mind against passive skill acquisition. Such a philosophic understanding of education was held throughout Marcuse’s philosophy: “Once upon a time, it was the proclaimed principle of great bourgeois philosophy that the youth ‘ought to be educated not for the present but for a better future condition of the human race, that is, for the idea of humanity.’ Now the council for Higher Education is called upon to study the ‘detailed needs’ of the established society so that the colleges know ‘what kinds of graduates to produce’” (1972, p. 27). Here Marcuse criticizes education for the status quo and defends a notion of *Bildung* associated with cultural and social transformation.

Marcuse builds his theory of education from a basic contradiction between *Bildung* as the cultivation of fully developed individuality and

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3 The German concept of *Bildung* is one that is also influenced by the ancient Greek notion of *Paideia*. *Paideia* as a concept and historical idea emphasizes the importance of education as a general cultural spirit that strives to expand and enrich humanity’s knowledge in a way that promotes growth and rational modes of life. See Werner Jaeger’s three-volume work *Paideia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1965 [1939]).
what he would famously describe as “one-dimensional man” and society. One-dimensional society is a society that lacks negativity, critique, and transformative practice. It is a society without opposition. Citing trends toward conformity, Marcuse describes one-dimensional society as creating “false” consumer needs that integrate individuals into the existing system of production and consumption via mass media, advertising, industrial management, and uncritical modes of thought. In other words, current society and culture are purely “affirmative,” legitimating the on-going existence of material poverty, injustice, and inequality (Marcuse, 1968). Thus affirmative culture is for Marcuse a conservative formation resisting any attempt to negate the social whole in the name of radical transformation. Because affirmative thought justifies the status quo, Marcuse’s philosophy of liberation can be described as largely critical and negative. According to Marcuse, negativity is a positive concept in that only through the negation of social contradictions can conformity and oppression be overcome and real freedom and individuality realized. The historical loci for negativity were located on three interlocking registers that included (a) the anthropological level (human faculties of analysis, critique, and imaginative alternatives to the present); (b) the philosophical level (critical concepts that analyze the contradictions of existing conditions); and (c) the political level (individual and social rebellion). Yet within one-dimensional society, these spaces of resistance are, for Marcuse, being eroded at an alarming rate as negativity has given way to uncritical affirmation of the existing society.

(A) ONE-DIMENSIONAL MAN

In terms of the anthropological dimension, industrial society affects every aspect of mind and body, from our intellectual faculties to our libidinal drives. At its inception, factory production had a tendency to repress pleasure. This repression created a libidinal tension between the harsh and brutal demands of work and the need for a fulfilling sensual life, or to use Marcuse’s language, a tension between the performance principle and the pleasure principle. The performance principle is a historical manifestation of Freud’s reality principle emphasizing competition for scarce resources within a society organized according to the economic performance of workers and capitalists (Marcuse, 1955, p. 44).

In early industrial society, the need to perform labor in appalling factory conditions forced the pleasure principle to be repressed resulting in a condition in which workers were alienated from their own sensual being (creating a working body over and above a body of pleasure). Child labor
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and unregulated workdays, for instance, were commonplace labor practices in industrial society. These everyday examples of life in industrial society reflect a repetitive, dulling, and mutilating mode of life that Marcuse saw advanced industrial society’s technological achievements accelerating. Such a state of alienation and misery according to Marcuse is to be lamented, yet nevertheless, it opened up a space for critique against repressive structures, which were overtly recognized as antagonistic to one’s instinctual gratification.

Now in one-dimensional society, the sensual needs of desire, pleasure, and play seem to coincide with a world of commodities that creates a new biological foundation in our sensual and instinctual structures through a more advanced form of capitalism. In other words, the pleasure principle is superficially satiated by the very society that is in fact responsible for the on-going degradation of real, vital needs. Sensuality, according to Marcuse, thus begins to loose its oppositional and liberatory quality, and the “freedom” and “sexual liberty” unleashed within the affluent society are literally “transforming the earth into hell” under the guise of happiness and heaven (Marcuse, 1955, p. xiii).

On the level of behavioral dispositions, the unhappy consciousness of negativity, alienation, and critique is replaced with a “happy consciousness” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 79) which accepts the given as an absolute and undeniable good. Happy consciousness signifies the loss of critical thought that is accompanied by a simultaneous liquidation of potential sources of opposition to established society that are available to individuals such as the media, every day language, and aesthetic representations (music, popular literature, film, music, etc.). Most popular music, for example, is not only a mode of entertainment and marketing but is also political in that it urges conformity to contemporary standards of beauty, reason, and social norms. Thus an inherent claim in Marcuse’s concept of the happy consciousness is that cultural activities and practices that cultivate the critical capacities of individuals and communities have

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4 The happy consciousness is a concept that Marcuse developed by recalibrating Hegel’s famous notion of the unhappy consciousness. In Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit the unhappy consciousness is a distinct phase of thought that develops within the odyssey of human consciousness in history where human identity is paralyzed through its own growth and education. Despite achieving a new level of knowledge of reality, the unhappy consciousness fails to achieve a greater, reconciliatory relationship with reality. Drawing on Hegel’s construct of the unhappy consciousness, Marcuse’s happy consciousness retains the same symptom of paralysis of educational striving yet with an important difference: instead of a sense of incompleteness, the happy consciousness is a pacified mode of thought that is content with its material and historical situation.
been absorbed into the totality of a hyper consumptive form of capitalism. For Marcuse, then, it is not just that consumer culture has assimilated potentially oppositional realms of culture but also that these forms of negative and critical thought have been replaced with an operationalized way of thinking and attendant sets of values: consumer attitudes and behavior, increasing conformity to market logics, and a complacency to global militarization.

Marcuse further rewrites Freud’s psychoanalytic theory by historicizing the Oedipal complex. For Freud, our basic psychological disposition is formed through our early childhood experiences with our parents. For example, young boys enter into an ambivalent relationship with their fathers, who interrupt the sensual pleasures gained from the mother (breast feeding here is key). The resulting Oedipal drama creates a certain critical perspective on the authority of the father, who is both loved and also hated. On a personal and private level, the Oedipal drama crystallizes the more general and public tensions between individual needs and the socially and economically driven performance principle. As such, the Oedipal drama develops the forms of submissiveness and rebelliousness that characterize our struggles in later life, providing a “semi-autonomous” sphere to develop resistance to one-dimensional, administered society.

Yet in advanced capitalism, the traditional role of the private Oedipal drama is replaced by direct socialization. As Marcuse writes, “The classical psychoanalytic model, in which the father and the father-dominated family was the agent of mental socialization, is being invalidated by society’s direct management of the nascent ego through the mass media, school and sport teams, gangs, etc.” (1970, p. 47). If one’s relationship to society was at one time mediated through the private sphere of the family, now the psychological development of the ego is immediately identified with the social order. The distinction between the individual and the masses becomes increasingly blurred. As such, “The multidimensional dynamic by which the individual attained and sustained his own balance between autonomy and heteronomy, freedom and repression, pleasure and pain, has given way to a one-dimensional static identification of the individual with the others and with the administered reality principle” (Marcuse, 1970, p. 47). The ego no longer has the capacity to resist social messages imposed from the outside, resulting again in the evisceration of the negative (the critical) and the production of one-dimensional thinking. Marcuse worries that the triumph of the happy consciousness produces political nihilism where “people cannot reject the system of domination without rejecting themselves, their own repressive instinctual needs and values” (1969a, p. 17). Latch-key children raised
through watching television and playing video games, the predominance of consumer culture in and through advertising (especially in school halls, cafeterias, and streamed in television programming such as Channel One) all demonstrate the on-going relevancy of Marcuse’s warnings. This brief sketch demonstrates a new psychological importance of schooling in one-dimensional society, for if psychological development is largely conditioned by public social institutions rather than the private family unit, schools become increasingly responsible for either (a) fostering one-dimensional personalities or (b) fostering critical, multidimensional human beings.

(B) ONE-DIMENSIONAL THOUGHT

Philosophically, dialectical thinking once allowed critical thinkers to generate oppositional concepts that could not be absorbed into the language of one-dimensional, normalized thought. For example, concepts like truth or justice opposed conditions of untruth and injustice. Here the tension between is and ought and particular and universal describe not so much flaws within logic but rather inherent contradictions within society as a whole. Now one-dimensional language incorporates into its very form its own opposition, again erasing the ability to think against the status quo. As Marcuse argues, thought “is purged from that ‘negative’ which loomed so large at the origins of logic and of philosophic thought – the experience of the denying, deceptive, falsifying power of the established reality. And with the elimination of this experience, the conceptual effort to sustain the tension between ‘is’ and ‘ought,’ and to subvert the established universe of discourse in the name of its own truth is likewise eliminated from all thought which is to be objective, exact, and scientific” (Marcuse, 1964, p. 140).

Without negative thought, the latent yet suppressed potential within social reality is lost and the unreason of the present becomes the standard for measuring the reasonableness of philosophic or critically reflective argument. What becomes of thought instead is a one-dimensional means-ends logic. Here the ends are taken for granted, never doubted, and never called into question. The only problem remaining is how to arrange the means to achieve these ends. Such thought is referred to by Marcuse and other members of the Frankfurt School as “instrumental thinking” or “instrumental reason”. A good example of such means-ends logic is found in the nuclear arms race where the goal of nuclear dominance is never questioned as a social good. Or, during our own political moment in history, the “war on terror” remains largely an unquestioned good whose
means are always legitimated in terms of the proposed ends of “peace” and “democracy” despite utilizing the opposites of these concepts as a means.

(C) ONE-DIMENSIONAL POLITICS

On a political level, class struggle no longer appears to be a guaranteed motor for securing a radical social transformation beyond capitalist exploitation (Marcuse, 1964). In orthodox Marxist thought, class struggle between the exploited working class (proletariat) and the exploiting capitalist class (bourgeoisie) of owners would ultimately lead to the overturning of capitalist social relations. Thus, as Marx and Engels predicted in their early analysis of capitalist society, the very motor driving capitalism would be its ultimate downfall.

Yet, throughout the twentieth century the certainty of the orthodox Marxist position was continually undermined as the working class was “pacified” by affirmative culture and one-dimensional thought. The question for Marcuse became: Who are the social actors capable of embodying emancipatory social transformation? Not only had capitalism integrated the working class, the source of potential revolutionary opposition, but they had developed new techniques of stabilization through state policies and the development of new forms of social control.

Thus Marcuse questioned two of the fundamental postulates of orthodox Marxism: the revolutionary proletariat and the inevitability of capitalist crisis. In contrast with the more extravagant demands of orthodox Marxism, Marcuse championed non-integrated forces of minorities, outsiders, and radical intelligentsia and attempted to nourish oppositional thought and behavior by promoting critical thinking and a general refusal of the aggressive and destructive form of life that advanced capitalist society promoted. Marcuse’s endless search for alternatives to the “revolutionary” working class struggle demanded engagement with a wide range of oppositional social movements including feminism, ecological activists, counter-cultural hippie love-ins and sit-ins, student protests, and “third world” liberation movements. Rather than despair over the advancement of capitalism and one-dimensional society, Marcuse was always vigilant in his belief that resistance was possible and continually developing in new configurations. It was philosophy’s job to in turn analyze the positive and negative, progressive and conservative potentials of these movements.
Positioning schooling in relation to the cultural dominant of one-dimensional society, Marcuse resolutely opposed an educational practice in which the negative is replaced with the positive, and, on the level of behavioral and psychological dispositions, the unhappy consciousness is replaced with a happy consciousness. Comparing one-dimensional schooling (as pure positivity) with *Bildung* (as the critical and reconstructive movement towards future possibility), we can more clearly outline Marcuse’s dialectical analysis of schooling.

In a 1968 lecture, Marcuse argues that in a one-dimensional society, schooling has become an increasingly contradictory institution. On the one hand, the economy of advanced industrial societies is defined by unrestricted access and development of knowledge, thus a need for a more robust general education system. Here education promises equality and freedom of information access for all social classes – a free market of ideas and new innovations. On the other hand, there is simultaneously the need to “contain knowledge and reason within the conceptual and value universe of the established society” (Marcuse, 1968c) – a society rife with sexism, classism, and racism. As such, the imperatives of the system necessarily limit the democratic potentialities of general education. This tension is resolved in the expansion of highly commodified and commercialized education (as a form of class-based schooling seen today in corporate universities such as DeVry, University of Phoenix, and other such “digital diploma mills,” or selling “education” through computer programs).

For Marcuse values associated with modern science and technology under the forces of advanced industrialization and military scientific research (values such as calculability, transparency of method, strict adherence to observable, ahistorical phenomena, efficiency, predictable outcomes, and falsifiability) have been subsumed into the cultural framework of universities and other institutes of higher learning at the expense of education’s more fundamental ethical mandate: the betterment of society in accordance with democratic values. Universities increasingly aid in military and capitalist expansion by cultivating not only intellectual property owned by the military-industrial complex but also – and perhaps most importantly of all – a one-dimensional psychological disposition. In other words, Marcuse’s critical theory of education contains an unflinching focus on the role higher education plays in obscuring and sanitizing the growing social and political consequences of a one-dimensional educational system that promotes a happy consciousness incapable of seeing the destruction, poverty, and exploitation upon which the affluent society is based.
As such, “education in sickness” (Marcuse, 1968c) is an anti-educative form of schooling concerned with market and military logic under the guise of democratic expansion. Here Marcuse’s theory of one-dimensional society can be articulated with that of Erich Fromm’s notion of a sane and insane society (Fromm, 1955). It is through education that one-dimensional thought becomes a sickness in the sense that it ceases to be simply a mode of reason and becomes indoctrination into a whole way of life incorporating the conscious, unconscious, and the body into a totalizing system of administration and domination. As education becomes increasingly important to the economy – which needs an educated class of doctors, lawyers, scientists, technicians – education’s potentially subversive side is concomitantly put in check, leading to escalating forms of institutional and individual repression. A happy consciousness is actually a sick consciousness that misrecognizes the oppression and destruction of one-dimensional society for a pleasure filled utopia.

Such a state of affairs was for Marcuse becoming more pronounced in the push and pull between the Welfare and the Warfare state in the sixties and seventies, and can be seen today in such policies as a Nation at Risk and its punitive descendent No Child Left Behind, both of which subsume the call for “equal educational opportunities” under the logic of capitalist competition and instrumental, state bureaucracy. Bipartisan policies such as these conflate the language of equality with a Cold War language of global domination through educational standards. In fact, we could argue that the tension which Marcuse felt in the late sixties and early seventies has become increasingly overcome by the rapid evisceration of the Welfare state and the preeminent rise of an absolute Warfare state in which social repression and the decline of a critical public and democratic education is even more acute then in Marcuse’s days (see Giroux, 2007). In the wake of the Reagan-Bush administrations, Marcuse would see policies such as NCLB and a “teaching for testing” philosophy as accelerating a political project interested in the elimination of the democratic potentials from public education. Thus, Marcuse becomes a starting point for theorizing trends in education that today have become intensified through one-dimensional standardization and neo-liberal approaches to social needs and public policy.

Although heavily critical of educational institutions within advanced capitalist countries, Marcuse also saw opportunities for rehabilitating schools and returning to a robust notion of Bildung. As opposed to other radical leftist thinkers of the time, Marcuse refused to abandon the notion of the democratic potential of the university or of public schooling, and instead of “deschooling” (Illich, [1970] 2002) he argued for “reschooling”
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(Marcuse, 1975; Kellner, 2007, p. 234). Indeed, students and institutions of higher learning, for Marcuse, represented agents and sites of growing refusal against one-dimensional society. Thus Marcuse, drawing on the work of German student movement leader Rudi Dutschke, argues for the “long march through the institutions: working against the established institutions while working within them” (1972, p. 55). The long march also emphasizes building counterinstitutions such as alternative media, independent schools, and free universities. Thus reschooling must happen by exerting pressures within existing public institutions to democratize education and by exerting pressures from without in the form of alternative education.

Key to understanding Marcuse’s theory of reschooling is his on-going relationship with student activist groups. For Marcuse, the three elements of the long march through the institution include nonauthoritarian pedagogy, political education, and student participation/activism (Marcuse, 1972, p. 56). Although Marcuse has been criticized by other theorists such as his friend and colleague Adorno for uncritically embracing student activism, Marcuse actually took a very dialectical view of student revolt and protest, highlighting progressive and reactionary trends within student groups. For instance, on May 1, 1966, Marcuse was sent a packet of literature on the emerging SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) Radical Education Project which contained a 28 page position paper, outlining goals and objectives, organization of study groups, “subject areas of project work” in the academic disciplines, professions, arts, international education, and social movements, as well as developing “political philosophy, ideology, and strategy” and analysis of “the American reality.” While Marcuse, in the undated response published below, indicated a willingness to work with the group, he noted the following criticism:

Much of your project seems to be based on the assumption that education in the American colleges and universities make all but impossible the development of critical thought. You write that ‘The basic education of the universities avoids the issues of fundamental conflict and gives little attention to the seminal thinkers who speak to the politics of our times’… Academic freedom is indeed one of the

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5 Here we see how Marcuse might support the Internet as a potentially powerful form of revolt against standardized education. The Internet offers multiple avenues for constructing new collective struggles against global forms of oppression as well as a source of information and knowledge that the corporate controlled media omits or distorts. Yet the Internet also, as Marcuse would no doubt warn, is a site of commercialization and corporate power (Kellner & Kahn, 2005).
few liberties both established and effectively used in this country, even more by the Left than by the Right (1966).

As the material collected in *Marcuse’s Challenges to Education* (Kellner, Lewis, Pierce, and Cho, 2008) indicates, Marcuse was deeply interested in critique and reconstruction of education and of discovering how the university could be used as a vehicle of progressive social change. His interventions in radical pedagogy demonstrate not only Marcuse’s commitment to reschooling, but also his unwavering commitment to critique. Yet we must set straight two possible misunderstandings. First, while some might argue that Marcuse over-zealously endorsed student movements and thus sided with a naïve hope in a better tomorrow, we can see from exchanges like these that Marcuse never abandoned the project of critical theory even as he advocated activist interventions. Second, although highly critical of the dominant logic of one-dimensional society, Marcuse also saw room for resistance in higher education. The goal of emphasizing one-dimensional thinking is not to deny the possibility of resistance but rather to sharpen our abilities to pinpoint progressive opposition working within yet against the system.

Marcuse’s engagement with universities was not limited to just a few large campuses and a few radical student groups. Yet another example of Marcuse’s unwavering commitment and hope in the university as a site of resistance and social change is found in a lecture he delivered to an audience at Kent State in 1976 that further illuminates his sustained involvement with higher education. Marcuse’s Kent State lecture, discovered in the Marcuse archive, is especially poignant given the deadly history of student protest and police violence that took place at this university in May 1970. In this particular lecture, given in a place where a high price was paid for student resistance to the U.S. troop escalation in Vietnam and military operations in Cambodia, Marcuse reminded the audience that great gains had been made through student protest and resistance to establishment violence and irrationality. Invoking the student and worker general strike of 1968 in Paris, massive anti-Vietnam war protest, and the civil rights movement here in the U.S., Marcuse continued to insist that higher education could be instrumental in individual and widespread cultural and social transformation.

Marcuse’s focus in the Kent State lecture aimed at revolutionizing both the subjective and objective conditions of one-dimensional society. In a context of heightened repression and increasing state violence Marcuse offered the following prescriptions for educational change:
Today, under the conditions of repressive integration, the change within individual emancipation may be the task of small education groups, political and psychological in one, practicing self-education, in and against the official education. As political education, the work would to a large extent aim at the demystification and defetishization of Marxism in theory and practice: developing the Marxian concepts in accordance with the conditions of the 20th century counterrevolution. As a psychological education, the work would be focused, not on a nice release of our Ego and Id, of our frustrations, our psyche, but on an autocritique of our psyche: learning to distinguish between needs and satisfactions which are liberating on a social scale, and those that are self-destructive, block liberation, learning to distinguish between behavior which reproduces in ourselves the Establishment (often in the guise of radicalism!), and behavior which is really emancipatory: striving for a morality of liberation which overcomes, in ourselves, the cynical and brutal morality of the Establishment. In short: internal transformation of psychological into political, of therapy into political education (Marcuse, 1976).

Marcuse’s point here is not that students should add therapy sessions to their education. What he is suggesting is for students to collectively develop practices of decolonizing the internalized objective reality of one-dimensional society. In other words, Marcuse is arguing that education needs to be politicized at the psychological core of the individual because the repressive and irrational status quo of one-dimensional society has already politicized the subject, official education being a key actor in this process. A happy, one-dimensional psychology has to be overcome through the concerted effort to critique the status quo and resist political co-optation. As such, Marcuse reminds us that liberation must remain anchored in the critical capacity to understand the progressive and conservative tendencies within schools, universities, and student movements.

CHAPTER TWO SUMMARY

In this chapter we situated Marcuse’s analysis of schooling in relation to his dialectical critique of society. In the 1960s, Marcuse argued that the major cultural, political, and social obstacle to human freedom was the rise of “one-dimensional society” that grew out of the industrial period. The problem with one-dimensional society is that it resists critique and supports conformity to a hyper-consumptive culture. Additionally, the traditional resources where critique can be developed in individuals have been co-
opted and incorporated into a system of administration that links the formation of identity with the needs and desires produced in one-dimensional society. These critical resources include instinctual needs set against exploitative labor, philosophical questioning set against technological language, and political antagonism set against political fatalism. To understand the social role of schools, we have to place them within this broader understanding of one-dimensional society. Only by connecting school life with dominant cultural, political, and psychological trends can we begin to see how schools support one-dimensional thinking and potentially act as institutions to resist such thinking. General education, in other words, can be reconfigured in a way that reflects growth away from a sick and unhealthy society towards one that begins to strive toward social, ecological, and individual health.

CHAPTER TWO QUESTIONS

1) What are the key features of a one-dimensional society? Do you agree with Marcuse that society has become one-dimensional?

2) How has your educational experience proved or disproved Marcuse’s critique of schooling as one-dimensional?

3) Drawing inspiration from Marcuse’s analysis of student resistance, how can students today fight against one-dimensional education? What about teachers?

4) What does Marcuse mean when he writes “We are again confronted with one of the most vexing aspects of advanced industrial civilization: the rational character of its irrationality” (1964, p. 9)?

5) What is a happy consciousness and do you think that it is still a psychologically dominant disposition today?

6) How do you interpret Marcuse when he argues “I have stressed the key role which universities play in the present period: they can still function as institutions for the training of counter-cadres [revolutionary groups]” (1972, p. 56). In what ways can the university play this role?