
UNIT 9 HERBERT MARCUSE: ONE DIMENSIONAL MAN*

Structure

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9.0 OBJECTIVES

After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- Narrate the major ideas of the Frankfurt School and Critical Theory;
- Know about the life and major works of Herbert Marcuse;
- Discuss the key ideas of Marcuse with special reference to One Dimensional Man;
- Reflect upon the relevance of Marcuse's ideas in contemporary times.

9.1 INTRODUCTION

This Unit will discuss the contributions of Herbert Marcuse, one of the most significant social theorists of the 'New Left', with special reference to his famous book '*One Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*'. The book was published in the year 1964, and it had a profound impact in academic and public spheres. In fact, it established Marcuse as a new age

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'guru' for a radical rebellious young generation in the 1960s. They actively resisted and protested against the materialistic and militaristic values of Western society and promoted a 'counter-culture' that defied the conservative value system of the older generation. The predictions of Karl Marx that capitalism would eventually break under the force of its own contradictions and the 'revolution of the proletariat' would usher in a new phase of communism were not coming true. Capitalist societies of the West had become affluent and seemed to have solved the problems of hunger and want; the working-class seemed to be thoroughly integrated in it and seemed to have lost its revolutionary potential. Social control was not by force but rather by promoting 'false needs' for more and more consumption. In order to fulfill these needs, human beings would cooperate with the system, and not question or challenge it. This created 'one-dimensional' humans and a one-dimensional society that was driven and governed by consumption and a 'flattening' of discourse; where conformity and compliance were prized and dissent and disagreement frowned upon.

To understand this text better, it is very important to situate it within its historical, sociological and philosophical context. Marcuse was one of the leading scholars of the 'Frankfurt School' of social theory which comprised of Marxist-oriented scholars who were attempting to revise and refine Marx's ideas in order to better understand the realities of advanced industrial societies (both capitalist and communist) in the 20th century. The rise of Fascism and Nazism in the 1920s and 1930s in Germany and Italy proved a major challenge to these scholars.

We will discuss 'critical theory' which the Frankfurt School is associated with, and then move on to discussing the life and work of Marcuse, with special reference to the text *One Dimensional Man* (ODM).

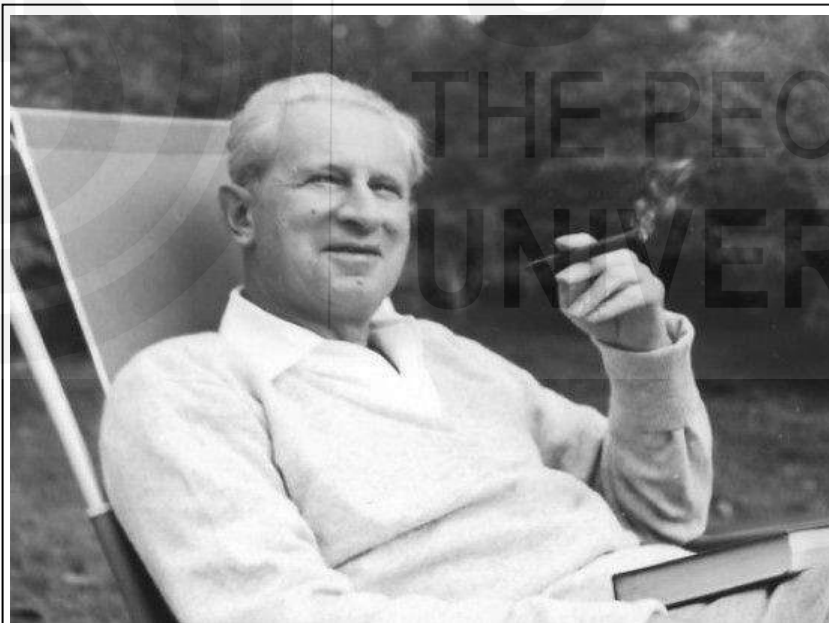
9.2 THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL AND CRITICAL THEORY

The Frankfurt School about which you have read before in a previous Unit, was involved in analysing and critiquing social processes and social relations and also the traditional concepts and theories used in social science. As mentioned earlier it aimed to take forward Marxist thought which was not adequate to understand the realities of the 20th century. Under the leadership of Max Horkheimer who took over as its Director in 1931, psychoanalytical perspectives of Sigmund Freud and Marxian materialism were integrated in order to make sense of complex social and political issues and the dynamics of working class struggles. The Frankfurt School scholars revised and reinterpreted the classical theories of Marx, Weber, Freud, Nietzsche and others. Kellner observes that they updated Marxian theory and studied how new stages of capitalism and fascism emerged. They also developed further Max Weber's ideas of rationalisation and Nietzsche's discussion on mass society and the decline of individuality.

Critical theory aims at an interdisciplinary understanding of society and social processes by highlighting interconnections between the economic, political, cultural and social realms of society. Critical theorists made important contributions towards understanding advanced capitalist societies of the West and how they enforced conformity. They studied the role of mass communication and culture, science and technology, market, commodities and consumption in the organisation of society. They observed how ‘mass society’ undermined individuality and freedom of the individual and the negative impact on collective action by the working classes and their participation in the democratic process. They could clearly visualise how the ‘culture industry’ and mass media would keep the populace in control and enforce conformity with the dominant ideology, namely, consumerist capitalism. Herbert Marcuse was probably the most popular figure of the Frankfurt School and became the inspirational figure for the students’ movement of the 1960s which protested against the American involvement in the Vietnam War. The students’ movement also rebelled against the conservative values embodied in family, church and state. Let us learn more about Marcuse’s background and his significant works.

9.3 HERBERT MARCUSE: LIFE AND TIMES

Marcuse was born in 1898 in Berlin in an upper middle class Jewish family. As a



(pic credit: wikipedia)

young man, Marcuse experienced the First World War (1914-18) and the German Revolution of 1918-1919. The German revolution was a consequence of the social tensions and economic

crisis that the German Empire experienced after it was defeated in the First World War; however, due to the infighting between the left-wing parties, it failed and could not bring in a new socio-political system. This led Marcuse towards a search to understand more about socialism and the Marxian theory of revolution (Kellner 1984: 17). After being released from military service in 1918 Marcuse went to Freiburg to pursue his studies and completed a PhD in Literature. He further pursued the study of philosophy under the influence of Martin Heidegger, one of the leading thinkers of the time. This engagement with philosophy would

continue through his lifetime. In 1933 he left Freiburg to join the Institute for Social Research which was located in Frankfurt at the time, but would shift base to North America during the period of the second World War. He was well renowned for his study of the philosophy of Hegel, and also the early works of Karl Marx. Thus Marcuse came to be highly regarded as an important new figure in German philosophy. He was involved in the interdisciplinary projects of the Institute and deeply identified with the "Critical Theory" of the Institute that we have mentioned before. He worked closely with the stalwarts of the Institute, Adorno and Horkheimer.

As a radical leftist thinker and a Jew, Nazi Germany was not safe for him. He migrated to the United States in 1934, where he lived for the rest of his life. During the 1940s, Marcuse also worked for the U.S. government in the Office of Strategic Services. Later, he joined Brandeis University. In 1941, he published his first major work in English, *Reason and Revolution*. The book explores the ideas of Hegel and Marx and their impact upon social theory. It is regarded as one of the best introductions to Hegel and Marx and the categories and methods of 'dialectical thinking'. Dialectical or negative thinking brings out the inherent contradictions of advanced industrial societies overcoming them through revolutionary practice.

In 1955, Marcuse published one of his important books: *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. The book attempts a synthesis of the ideas of Sigmund Freud, the father of psychoanalysis, and those of Karl Marx in a new and original way. The Frankfurt School used psychoanalytical concepts to understand the psyche of the working class and their reluctance to revolt against oppressive social and economic structures. Modifying Freudian ideas, Marcuse spoke of the 'performance principle' in advanced industrial societies. In order to manipulate the worker to conform to the system, the libido is restricted and the individual must internalise the 'laws' that govern the smooth functioning of the system. Individual desires must conform to those of the system. In other words, "he desires what he is supposed to desire" (Marcuse 1955: 46) Thus, human drives and creativity are channelised by the social structure in such a way that they do not live their own lives but perform the functions that society sets out for them. Marcuse called for the end of repression and creation of a society and culture which would promote freedom and happiness. As Western society had more or less solved the problems of hunger and basic human needs were taken care of, it could afford to let go its grip on the desires and creativity of individuals and allow them to freely express themselves and their feelings. His vision of liberation was very influential in the 1960s amongst the young students and activists who rebelled against the conservative values of the previous generations and promoted 'free love', freedom from repression and similar 'counter-cultural' values, as we have mentioned earlier. Marcuse wanted to return *Eros (desire)* to its proper place as equal to *Logos (reason)* as the driver of life. His radical critique of existing society and its values, and his call for a non-

repressive civilization made him acquire cult status within the New Left all over the world. At the same time he was severely criticised by both orthodox Marxists and those who supported capitalism because they considered his ideas as anarchic and leading to breakdown of society.

'*One-Dimensional Man*' (1964) one of his most widely read and acclaimed works, was a critique of both advanced capitalist and communist societies. It was a text that came to be regarded as classic of critical theory. We shall discuss some of its major themes and arguments in the next section. Marcuse continued to influence social movements and radical thinking as a public intellectual. He continued his teaching and writing and received an appointment at the University of California at La Jolla where he remained until his retirement in the 1970s. This was the most influential period in public life, during which he published many articles and gave lectures and advice to student radicals all over the world. He travelled widely and his work was often discussed in the mass media, earning him a mass appeal and limelight. His students had great regard for him and they too obtained influential academic positions and promoted his ideas in the U.S. and beyond. Scholars like Jurgen Habermas, Douglas Keller, Norman O. Brown and Angela Davis were deeply influenced by Marcuse and carried his ideas forward. Marcuse died in 1979 aged 81.

Let us now examine some of the major themes in *One Dimensional Man*. But before that, do check your progress.

Check Your Progress 1

Note: Check your answer with those given at the end of the unit.

- 1) State whether the following statements are True (T) or False (F)
 - a) Critical theorists were engaged in the study of antiquity and ancient societies
 - b) The Frankfurt School used psychoanalytical theories to better understand the psyche of the working class.
 - c) "Mass society" promoted and enhanced individual freedom, according to the Frankfurt School.
- 2) Fill in the blanks with appropriate word/s.
 - a) thinking brings out the inherent contradictions of modern industrial societies, according to the Critical theorists.
 - b) Marcuse's book *Reason and Revolution* brings out the ideas of Marx and
 - c) The Frankfurt School relocated to when Germany was ruled by the Nazis.

Some of the important ideas in the book put forward by Marcuse are:

- The decline of revolutionary potential in capitalist societies and development of new forms of social control
- The creation of 'false needs' in advanced industrial societies
- Mass media, advertising, industrial management, contemporary modes of thought that reproduce the existing system and try to eliminate opposition, critique and negativity
- A 'one dimensional' universe of thought and behaviour, in which the ability for critical thinking withers away (Kellner, 1984).

9.4.1 New Forms of Social Control

One-Dimensional Man analyses the decline of 'dialectical thinking' which is capable of understanding the contradictions within society and the forces of domination that sustain it. The person who thinks critically demands social change. One-dimensional thinking does not demand change. It does not recognise the extent to which the individual is a victim of forces of domination in society. Even those who are successful within it are oppressed by this modern industrial society because the power of consumer culture makes them lose their capacity for critical thinking and sucks them into the system. Thus they are only living a shallow existence, having no critical understanding of the way the system actually works. They live a 'one-dimensional' life of intellectual and spiritual poverty.

The first chapter of *One-Dimensional Man* begins with the following sentence:

"A comfortable, smooth, reasonable, democratic unfreedom prevails in advanced industrial civilization, a token of technical progress." (Marcuse 1964: 1)

How does this system of social control and regulation work?

- First, the system must make the citizens think that they are freer than they really are.
- Second, the system must provide the citizens with enough goods to keep them pacified.
- Third, the citizens must identify with their oppressors
- Fourth, political discourse must be put under erasure.

To give a simple example, when people from different social groups and classes watch the same films or television programmes or news channels and are constantly exposed to a certain dominant way of life or value system, they may lose the capacity to think critically about what is being shown to them. They may be lulled into forgetting the contradictions within the system and thus become victims of one-dimensional thinking that does not permit them to critically see

the total picture. In this way, they become controlled by the dominant forces in society and lose the capacity for challenging or questioning what is being fed to them by the mass media. They become one with their oppressors even without realising it.

According to Marcuse consumerism and modern "industrial society" is a form of social control. Even if the system may be described as 'democratic', it is actually a 'totalitarian' or dictatorial system, where individuals are not free. Even though they may have all the material goods and comforts, and the society may be an affluent one, the system continues to be exploitative and the mechanisms of dominance and control continue to operate. Because individuals are made to feel that they are getting all the material comforts, they are unable to mobilise against and overthrow the capitalist system. Marcuse argues that in modern consumer societies we are influenced to believe that happiness can be "bought" in the market-place. In this state of "unfreedom", consumers act irrationally by working more than they are required to in order to fulfill these new needs. In the process, they ignore the psychological as well as the environmental damage and waste caused by this desire for material items. They search for social connection through material items.

9.4.2 Growth of Consumerism and False Needs

Consumerism demands the creation of new products, disposing of old ones, and makes us work more in order to buy more and keep the economy ticking. Individuals exist to serve the system and merely become cogs in the wheel of production and consumption, losing their humanity and sociality in the bargain. The need to consume more and more is stimulated by advertising and the mass media and as we have mentioned in the previous paragraph, the idea is promoted that happiness can be bought. This is a psychologically damaging idea.

Marcuse's analysis of capitalism draws upon the Marxian idea of 'alienation'. Marx believed that capitalism was exploiting humans by separating labourers from their productive capacities, thus alienating them and making them 'objects' that served the capitalists. Marcuse argued that capitalism and industrialisation made people see themselves as extensions of the objects they produced. He wrote: "The people recognise themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment." In the present day we may add that they identify themselves with their computers, smart phones and other gadgets.

Consumer society thus makes humans the extensions of the commodities that they buy. Affluent mass technological societies, he argues, are controlled and manipulated. In societies based upon mass production and mass distribution, the individual worker has become merely a consumer of its commodities. False needs are created, which are satisfied only by the consumption of commodities. 'One-dimensional man' and 'one-dimensional society' are based upon the need for people to recognise themselves in their commodities.

The ties that bind an individual to society have changed. Social control is exerted on the individual not through force or punishment, but rather through the new needs that consumer society creates. Consumerism leads to the complete integration of the working class into the capitalist system. As a result, their potential as a revolutionary force for bringing about social change and overthrowing the system (as predicted by Marx) is lost. He claimed the modern-day workers did not rebel against the system, rather they just conformed and cooperated unquestioningly because they wanted to satisfy their needs.

9.4.3 Totally Administered Society

According to Marcuse, modern technology is by nature repressive. In the new "technological society," described by Marcuse, both labour and leisure are restructured. He describes the mechanisms through which consumer capitalism integrates individuals into its world of thought and behaviour. Rather than seeing these developments as beneficial to the individual, Marcuse sees them as a threat to human freedom and individuality in a "totally administered society". Marcuse describes the contemporary capitalist societies as totally administered societies whose economic affluence has not helped, but rather victimised the working class by creating a variety of 'false needs' that need to be continuously satisfied by the very system that created them, as discussed above.

Marcuse observes the destructive tendencies in advanced capitalism and sees irrationality in its so-called rationality. He opines that "society's prosperity and growth are based on waste and destruction, its progress fueled by exploitation and repression, while its freedom and democracy are based on manipulation" (Kellner xxx). Marcuse "sharply criticises the dehumanisation and alienation in its opulence and affluence, the slavery in its labor system, the ideology and indoctrination in its culture, the fetishism in its consumerism, and the danger and insanity in its military-industrial complex" (ibid.) Therefore, despite its achievements and technological advances, Marcuse believes that modern industrial society is fundamentally exploitative and irrational and does not promote human freedom. Kellner notes that Marcuse was one of the first critical theorists to analyse the consumer society and how consumerism, advertising, mass culture, and ideology integrate individuals into and stabilise the capitalist system. He distinguishes between true and false needs and describes how individuals can liberate themselves from the false needs to live a freer and happier life.

Individuals must understand how the system which claims to promote 'freedom' is actually not so. The social, economic and political 'freedoms' in society lose their progressive functions and become instruments of dominance that control individuals and ensure their compliance. For example, the economic freedom to sell one's labour power in the labour market makes the individual a part of an exploitative economic system. Similarly political freedom to vote for very similar candidates who will not change the system becomes meaningless. Intellectual

freedom becomes meaningless when media shapes public opinion and only promotes the dominant views and opposes dissenting voices. Thus it is only when there is freedom from the system of one-dimensional needs and satisfactions that real freedom and liberation can be achieved.

Mass consumer society makes people "blissful slaves", willingly obeying a system which keeps them entertained and distracted with consumption and the lure of the mass media. It dulls their capacity to analyse and think, and understand their real situation. An individual under capitalism is "one dimensional" as he seems to be completely devoid of the conflicts which make him multi-dimensional and capable of change. Hence Marcuse believed that people under Liberal Western capitalism are as unfree as those in totalitarian or dictatorial societies. Capitalism makes us slaves not through violence or repression, but rather through seducing us with consumer goods. Marcuse's 'One Dimensional Man' is thus a product of both consumer society and mass media, both of which work together to promote conformity and not give any space or scope for dissent or challenging the system.

9.4.4 Possibilities for Change: 'The Great Refusal'

As discussed above, Marcuse did not think that the working class could be the architects of social change, because they were completely enmeshed and integrated within the modern industrial societies and had lost their revolutionary consciousness. Marcuse therefore thought that the change could come about through an alliance between radical intellectuals and those groups not yet integrated into one-dimensional society. These groups included persons of different ethnic and racial origins who experienced oppression at the hands of the mainstream society; the unemployed and the unemployable. He believed that by inculcating radical thinking and social critique amongst those who were dispossessed or oppressed by the system, forces of domination could be challenged and overthrown. He was particularly impressed by the feminist movement which had also emerged during the 1960s and 1970s. The feminists raised radical questions about sexism and the way social institutions create and maintain discrimination based on gender.

Because of his support for new, emerging forces of radical opposition, Marcuse was most unpopular with the dominant classes who saw him a rebel against all the values of Western capitalist society. *One-Dimensional Man* was also criticised severely by the traditional Marxists who saw it as a corruption of Marxist thought. However, it had a deep influence on the 'New Left' as it articulated their growing dissatisfaction with both capitalist societies and Soviet communist societies. In the latter, Marxism had taken the form of a rigid, bureaucratic system where the dictatorial State crushed any kind of critical thinking or opposition and ruled with an iron hand. The book was also much admired by the Student Movement and anti-war movements that had emerged in the U.S.A and Europe in the 1960s and 1970s, and as mentioned earlier, made

Marcuse a popular figure and an icon. The anti-war movement, civil rights movements and students' movements in the U.S.A. were seen as the 'Great Refusal' that Marcuse had hoped for; namely, the refusal to go along with or support the capitalist state and seek a new alternative.

Check Your Progress 2

Note: i) Use the space given below for your answer.
ii) Check your answer with those given at the end of the unit.

- 1) What, according to Marcuse is 'one dimensional thinking'?
.....
.....
- 2) What is the impact of consumerism on human freedom, according to Marcuse?
.....
.....
- 3) What is a "totally administered society"?
- 4) State whether the following are True (T) or False (F)
 - a) 'One Dimensional Man' was greatly admired by traditional Marxists.
 - b) The 'New Left' was disillusioned by both capitalist and communist societies of the time.
 - c) Marcuse believed that the working class would overthrow the capitalist society and bring about social change.
 - d) Marcuse believed that people under Liberal Western capitalism are as unfree as those in totalitarian or dictatorial societies.

9.5 THE RELEVANCE OF ONE DIMENSIONAL MAN

Douglas Kellner states that One-Dimensional Man continues to be relevant because it accurately depicts the "underlying structures and tendencies of contemporary socio-economic and political development. The scientific and technological rationalities that Marcuse describes are even more powerful today with the emergence of computerisation, the proliferation of media and information, and the development of new techniques and forms of social control". Marcuse draws our attention to the contradictions of society; there is

growing productivity along with destruction; human thought, hopes and fears are subjugated to the decisions of those who hold power. Contemporary capitalist societies are able to project social stability and integration at the cost of human creativity and freedom.

Many of the themes in the book have anticipated our present day realities. The sweep of globalisation, migration, the growth of monopoly capitalism, new forms of labour organisation, changing political and international relations have made the world a much more unequal place. The environmental and ecological challenges that consumerist ways of life have created threaten the very existence of the planet. Human greed and the desire for more and more commodities has led to over-exploitation of natural resources, exploitation of poor people and destruction of habitats and livelihoods. Climate change poses a huge threat to humankind.

At the same time, huge advances in technology and science have completely changed the ways in which we live and work. The 'Information Revolution' has made digital technology almost universally available and accessible. Ways of communicating, socialising and interaction have also changed.

Marcuse wrote about the impact of advertising and mass media on making individuals one-dimensional and reducing their capacity to think critically. However, the growth of social media and internet has further intensified this trend as people fail to distinguish reality from the information that is 'fed' to them online. Fake news, rumours and gossip, unreliable information that spreads hatred and suspicion are all driven by global media corporations who manipulate users. Their nexus with political parties makes this even more dangerous. Consumers believe they are 'free' to make choices, whereas they are being manipulated to think and act in certain ways.

In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse draws attention to one-dimensional thinking, namely the uncritical and acceptance of existing structures, norms, and behaviours. He calls for the assertion of individuality and questioning of the status quo by society. Freedom and a better way of living can only come about if we challenge and oppose the exploitation, consumerism, waste and destruction that characterises advanced industrial society. In the contemporary world this diagnosis of the ills of western society are very relevant. At the same time, developing countries that have also adopted and are imitating western style development can draw lessons from his ideas.

9.6 LET US SUM UP

This Unit discussed some of the key ideas of the philosopher and sociologist Herbert Marcuse, with special reference to his influential work *One Dimensional Man* first published in 1964. The book launched an intense critique against modern industrial society, both capitalist and communist, and proclaimed that Western capitalist society was no less oppressive than totalitarian ones. The form

of social control it exercised on the populace was not one of force and repression. Rather, through technology and by encouraging and promoting consumerism, it made the working class conform and become integrated within the capitalist system and to keep working in order to fulfill the 'false needs' created by consumerism. Marcuse also explained the role of mass media in maintaining the system. He felt that the real possibility of bringing about social change lay with the radical intellectuals and the most marginalised and oppressed sections of society who were suffering at the hands of the system and were not complicit in its functioning. Marcuse's works found a receptive audience amongst the youthful rebels of the student movements, the anti-war movements and feminist movements that were challenging the status quo and conservative values of the time. Marcuse became a sort of a 'guru' of the radical groups and achieved a celebrity status amongst students and thinkers. The relevance of his ideas in the present day world are a source of reflection and discussion, with special reference to rampant consumerism, ecological destruction and the role of media and new media in shaping attitudes and behaviour.

9.7 REFERENCES

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9.8 SPECIMEN ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Check Your Progress 1

- 1) a) F
b) T
c) F
- 2) a) Dialectical
b) Hegel
c) U.S.A.

Check Your Progress 2

- 1) One-dimensional thinking is non-critical thinking that does not demand change. It does not recognise the extent to which the individual is a victim of forces of domination in society.

**Critical Thinkers of
Mass Culture**

- 2) Consumerism makes people "blissful slaves", willingly obeying a system which keeps them entertained and distracted with consumption and the lure of the mass media. It dulls their capacity to analyse and think, and understand their real situation
- 3) Marcuse describes the technologically advanced contemporary capitalist societies as totally administered societies. The working class is controlled by creating a variety of 'false needs' that need to be continuously satisfied and both labour and leisure is restructured to meet the needs of the society.
- 4) a) F
b) T
c) F
d) T



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