

Hope for Our Technological Inheritance? From Substantive Critiques of Technology to Marcuse's Post-Technological Rationality

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Technology: Curse or Promise?

While it is true that for Herbert Marcuse “technology has the power and consequences Heidegger, Adorno, and Horkheimer, deplore,” it is also true that it held for him “a promise.”¹ This makes his Critical Theory unique amongst both substantivist theorists of technology in general² and his Frankfurt School contemporaries in particular. More significantly for those that are currently struggling for non-commodified modes of life, Marcuse's proposals for a “post-technological rationality,” and even a “technological rationality of art,” promise to open up contemporary life to other, non-exploitative and less instrumentalized potentialities: what Marcuse views in *One-Dimensional Man* as *pacified existence* through new forms of technological mediations.³ Indeed, while it is true for Marcuse that our technological inheritance perversely captures and alienates late-modern life within a formalized rationality of exchange, instrumentality, and control, it is also true for him that this inheritance can be redeployed under other values in order to ground a project of human liberation from our struggles against scarcity, necessity, toil, and alienation. In other words, technology does not have to be guided by the values of neoliberalism, neoconservatism, exploitation, or profit; other, more communally sensitive and environmentally sound values can also legislate technological life.

In this paper I seek to revisit Marcuse's radical, dialectical, and materialist critique of technology in light of the other, more utopian side to his critique of technological rationality. My principle aim in doing so is to begin to reclaim his vision of a “post-technological rationality”⁴ for a contemporary radical left politics. In the spirit of contributing to the overarching theme of the conference where I first presented these ideas, York University's “Strategies of Critique: What's Left? What's Right” held in April 2008, in this paper I explore the emancipating potentiality *left* for today's *left* for a more correct,

¹ Andrew Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History* (New York: Routledge, 2005), 98.

² For example: Martin Heidegger, Jacques Ellul, George Grant, Albert Borgmann, Hubert Dreyfus, etc.

³ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), 203-257.

⁴ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 238.

and just—and *right*—philosophy and politics of technology in light of our current global neoliberal enclosures. While one can argue whether or not Marcuse’s utopian impulses running through his Critical Theory could ever ultimately open us up to new pathways for a new mode of technological existence (as I will lay out in this paper, I believe it can), social and political theorists concerned with critical social transformation should not overlook the fact that Marcuse did at least step up to the task of trying to think through—however provisionally—what it would take to forge another mode of civilization from our capitalist technological inheritance. It is this consistently utopian impulse that distinguishes Marcuse from his Frankfurt School contemporaries. It is an impulse that, far from ruling out Marcuse’s Critical Theory, instead validates his negative dialectics for a radical, concrete politics of technology. In this paper I ultimately begin to consider the efficaciousness of Marcuse’s Critical Theory of technology for the struggles against the technocratic and constituted forms of power facing our own times.

Specifically, in the following pages I first very briefly present the substantivist critiques of technology exemplified by the negative side of Marcuse’s technology critique, in addition to Heidegger’s, Adorno’s and Horkheimer’s related critiques of technology (Marcuse’s main philosophical reference points on the theme). The substantivist critiques of technology expounded by Heidegger, Adorno, and Horkheimer, I will argue, while brilliant in their diagnostic force for unraveling the natural attitude of our time, tend to nevertheless lead towards resignation in our late-modern fate rather than offering concrete possibilities for the reform or transformation of the socio-technical sphere. I then explore Marcuse’s “other side” to his two-folded theory of technological rationality grounding his “ambivalence theory of technology,” laying out the more efficacious possibilities it offers us for re-valuing the technological base of advanced capitalist society within re-materialized values of love, joy, refusal, and sensuousness. I will ultimately make the argument that as a conceptual framework for diagnosing and moving beyond today’s conjuncture of free market triumphalism, Marcuse helps us fundamentally see that our technology does not have to be guided by the values of productivism, ecological domination, total control, or profit. Underscoring the continued relevance of Marcuse’s analysis for today’s radical left, I conclude the paper by presenting six key historical-conjunctural moments in Marcuse’s writings on technology that prefigure some

contemporary examples of technological liberation within the newest global social justice movements, examples that in many ways illustrate Marcusean-like re-rationalized technological re-appropriations by those struggling against global capital from below.

Towards the “Completion of the Technological Project”

For Marcuse, the struggle for another world within advanced industrialism and capitalism fundamentally requires us to think about how to eliminate painful forms of labour and the opening up of time to other and more pleasurable forms of life—free time, non-work time—by relegating necessary labour to technology, eradicating surplus labour and surplus repression, and, in turn, freeing up and reclaiming the spaces of life that Karl Marx called “disposable time,”⁵ or “the interval [of life situated] between the buying and the selling.”⁶ For Marcuse, the reappropriation of our technological inheritance for more liberating ends via more humane means would necessarily require technology’s reconciliation with both nature and human beings, which had both, under the thrall of progress and humanist-liberalist ideals, fallen perversely and irrationally under the control of its calculative and dominative logics. As Marcuse wrote in *One-Dimensional Man*: “If the completion of the technological project involves a break with the prevailing technological rationality, the break in turn depends on the continued existence of the technical base.”⁷

The key to understanding Marcuse’s two-folded critique of technological rationality is to work out how he persistently argues for the need to change the very *rationality* that guides the technological apparatus of society and its ideology of the performance principle.⁸ According to philosopher of technology Andrew Feenberg, Marcuse’s two-folded conceptualization of technology most fundamentally asks us to meditate on perhaps the two most important questions of our epoch: we must, for Marcuse, not only consider “the ontological question of what technology is making of us” (i.e., the primary concern of Heidegger, Adorno, and Horkheimer, for example), but also “ask the political question of

⁵ Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations for the Critique of Political Economy (Rough Draft)* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1973), 706.

⁶ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, Volume 1 (New York: International Publishers, 1967), 155.

⁷ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 231.

⁸ Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse*, 100.

what we can make of technology.”⁹ Beginning to explore the contemporary implications of this political question lies at the heart of this essay.

Substantivist Views of Technology

Substantivist critiques of technology extend Marx’s critiques of machinery, the factory, and the capitalist social forces of production to the entire lifeworld. Rather than only “the instruments of labour...employ[ing] the workman,” or the “machine mak[ing] use of [the worker]” instead of the worker the machine,¹⁰ today our entire lives—working life *and* leisure time—are subordinated to and employed by the capitalist technocratic imperative. For substantivists, the effects of this technocratic system is perhaps best encapsulated in a remark written by Horkheimer in his seminal 1937 essay “Traditional and Critical Theory”: “[T]he proposition that tools are prolongations of human organs can [now] be inverted to state that the organs are also prolongations of the tools.”¹¹ In advanced industrial society, for Horkheimer, this meant that, saturated as it is with the artifices of human-made things, “unconscious nature” can no longer be distinguished from “the action of man in society,” “the marks of deliberate work.”¹²

As such, substantivist theories—including the substantivist side to Marcuse’s diagnosis of technological rationality—argue that technology within late-modernity frames our values to such an extent that it “reveals” our epoch as distinguished by the fact that technology is no longer “mere instrumentality” but now “forms a culture of universal control.”¹³ Substantivists view technology as “essentially” reducing everything, and especially its very human users, to “functions and raw materials,”¹⁴ where the means (i.e., efficiency, productivity, and goal-oriented tasks) override the ends (i.e., all human values and meaning). For substantivist critiques, late-modern technological systems filter and shape reality, values, human instincts, experience, and life itself via technical mediations and calculative logics. Willfully driven and with no *telos* or objective realms of meaning

⁹ Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse*, 98.

¹⁰ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1* (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Co, 1906), 461-2.

¹¹ Max Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” in *Critical Theory: Selected Essays*, 188-243 (New York: Continuum 2002), 201.

¹² Horkheimer, “Traditional and Critical Theory,” 201.

¹³ Andrew Feenberg, *Questioning Technology* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 2-3.

¹⁴ Feenberg, *Questioning Technology*, viii.

left beyond the quantifiable—that is, framed by a humanist and situational individualism guided by what Horkheimer termed “subjective reason”¹⁵—*techno-logy* essentially “enframes”¹⁶ human beings within ordering thoughts and actions. In other words, technologies’ very logics and operational apparatuses now dominate us to the point where we have become mere cogs in the wheel of a masculinist-hued progressivist history. For Heidegger this had ontological implications, obscuring (or “concealing”) a more authentic revealing of Being. Adorno and Horkheimer took a class-based position in coming to terms with our historical fate, claiming that “[t]echnical rationality today is the rationality of domination [not necessarily due to] the internal laws of technology itself [but to its] function within the economy today.”¹⁷

There is no doubt that a large part of Marcuse’s discussions of technology, such as the first half of *Eros and Civilization* and the first two-thirds of *One-Dimensional Man*, fall within such negative, substantivist critiques of our late-modern technological order.¹⁸ After all, the negative side to Marcuse’s critique of technological rationality was inspired, in no small way, by Heidegger (his doctoral teacher), György Lukács’s theories of reification, Max Weber’s analysis of modernity’s modes of formal rationality, and Marcuse’s Frankfurt School contemporaries.¹⁹

While Marcuse would also agree that Heidegger’s notion of the “enframing” of Being or Adorno and Horkheimer’s instrumental capture of consciousness are characteristics of our modern technological destiny, for Marcuse modernity’s technocratic capture of humans and nature for instrumental ends is not as total as with Heidegger,

¹⁵ Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (New York: Continuum, 1974), 3.

¹⁶ Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, 3-35 (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1977), 19.

¹⁷ T.W. Adorno & Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 95.

¹⁸ In particular, Marcuse’s substantivist side to his Critical Theory of technology shows us how the technological rationality that permeates one-dimensional, advanced industrial societies is underpinned by a formal rationality that overrides the more objective, values-laden forms of reason distinguishing pre-industrial societies from industrial ones. Rather than being shaped by the two-dimensional and *telos*-formed logos and eros of the ancient Greeks (Marcuse’s model for the pinnacle of pre-modernist thinking in the West), reason today is framed by a “one-dimensional” rationality that stultifies and ossifies discourse and inner life within a logos of calculation, an ideology of the neutrality of machinic systems, social practices of repetition and sameness, and political systems driven by fear and tending towards total control. Moreover, Marcuse’s diagnosis shows us that, in practice, the systems and machines of control are not neutral but socially and politically inscribed in their very structures and applications.

¹⁹ Andrew Feenberg & William Leiss, *The Essential Marcuse: Selected Writings of Philosopher and Social Critic Herbert Marcuse* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2007).

Adorno, or Horkheimer. Marcuse's historically dialectic view of technology tends to ultimately retain a more hopeful view of its possibilities for cutting paths beyond our current technological condition.²⁰ For Heidegger, Adorno, and Horkheimer, whatever promise might exist for a different, non-instrumentalized relation between the modern subject and nature seemed to rest with a deeper kind of philosophical contemplation unattainable for most of us mere mortals.²¹ For these three philosophers, a reflective disposition could somehow bracket-out our age's natural attitude of instrumentalist reason and perhaps just begin to look beyond it to another kind of existence that would no longer only be about, according to Horkheimer, the "co-ordination of means and ends."²² But it is not clear with these three philosophers how more mindfulness, remembrance, negation, free-relation, contemplation or sharper phenomenological attunement could help us come to *reform* technology in order to forge a non-instrumental existence. And while perhaps our age, as Horkheimer exclaimed in *Eclipse of Reason*, "needed no added stimulus to action" for fear of yet again instrumentalizing the "promises of philosophy,"²³ the catastrophes unleashed throughout the 20th century surely require Critical Theory and the philosophy of technology to at least be involved in more sustained engagements with finding ways of transforming technologized society. Concrete reform of technical systems via thought alone remains a speculative proposition at best.

Technology Under Another Form of Rationality

In contrast to purely substantivist theories of technology, Marcuse believed our technological inheritance could be redeployed under other values rooted in another form of

²⁰ Marcuse shared Marx's and Lukács's ultimate faith in human beings' continued capacities for cooperation, organization, and resistance. As with Marx and Lukács, for Marcuse, the attempt by the capitalist to deskill and dominate workers is never total. Some form of *agency*—akin to Marx's "anthropogenesis," or "man's ability to create himself anew," as Martin Jay writes (Martin Jay, *The Dialectic Imagination: A History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), 57)—inevitably remains with human beings, even within capitalism's tendencies for unbridled self-expansion and capitalists' zealotry for the commodification of all of life.

²¹ Recall that, for Heidegger, all that one could hope for in the *Gestell* is a "free relation to technology"—learning to live within its "danger" while awaiting a new dispensation within human reflection (Heidegger, "The Question," 3-4, 25-36). Adorno and Horkheimer seem to also have had little hope in the possibility of any concrete civilizational change within advanced industrial society other than relying on a dialectically negative form of reason that *may* provision us with a capacity to achieve some sort of "remembrance of nature within the subject" by recapturing the tensions between the object's appearance and the object's potential beyond mere appearance (Adorno & Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 32).

²² Horkheimer, *Eclipse*, 5.

²³ Horkheimer, *Eclipse*, 187.

rationality in order to ground a project of human liberation from the struggles against necessity and scarcity. For Marcuse, it is not technology *per se* which is the problem but an incomplete, stunted technology cleansed of its historical and materialist roots and shaped by a dominative, operationalist, and instrumentalized rationality that falsely deems this technological base to be a deterministically evolutionary given of “progress.” For Marcuse, it is the “project” of industrialization and the logic of a society administered diffusely that guides the technical. Once applied in this system, technology embodies the politics that underlies it within its very structures; technology, unlike the artifacts and processes of the ancients, thus appears to us to have a “logic of its own independent of the goals it serves.”²⁴

At core for him was the project of freeing this apparatus from the instrumentalist rationality that shaped it and from the “performance principle” that guided it.²⁵ It had to be placed under the authority of another form of reason that would treat nature as something other than, in Heidegger’s terms, a “standing-reserve” of materials.²⁶ It had to also treat humans as something other than a disposable army of labourers used—and equally discarded—for the means for production, distribution, and capitalist accumulation. Indeed, our technological inheritance, reworked under different values, could be central for cutting a different path for modernity under a “new reality principle.”²⁷

But what can Marcuse possibly mean by a “new reality principle,” and “another form of rationality”? Marcuse’s repositioning of the technological base depended on a “higher rationality” that would ground a technologically “transcendent project.” This project was threefold: via a negative dialectic mode of thinking and alternative social practices, it sought to, at the same time: 1) unveil the current state of domination, 2) problematize and “falsify” the “established reality,” and 3) demonstrate its own higher rationality by “preserving and improving” the achievements of modern civilization for reducing the hardships of survival in the struggle for existence. This last point for Marcuse was the actual accomplishment of modern civilization. But “preserving and improving” the achievements of modern civilization also meant the “pacification of existence” from its dysfunctional, perverse capture within the current technocratic framework—what Marcuse

²⁴ Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse*, 98.

²⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1966), 156-157.

²⁶ Heidegger, “The Question,” 19.

²⁷ Marcuse, *Eros*, 223.

viewed as the catastrophe of modernity.²⁸ Most fundamentally, the new rationality required the rending of reason away from modern science's claims to value-neutrality.

By *An Essay on Liberation* in 1969, the “total automation” of work and toil, for Marcuse, could potentially free us up to create “concrete alternatives” and practices,²⁹ in a similar way that Marx proposes at the end of the *Grundrisse*: via “cooperation,” “self-determination,” and “tenderness toward each other.”³⁰ Technological processes would then be reapplied towards a “release of individual energy into a yet uncharted realm of freedom beyond necessity.”³¹

The Ambivalence of Technology

Feenberg has observed that Marcuse's more hopeful view is rooted in his view that, despite its continued and serious socio-economic flaws, our technological inheritance is open to re-valuations and reworkings because of its *inherent ambivalence*.³² Feenberg tells us that technical systems are “ambivalent” in that they are perched between a multitude of possibilities. To think of technology as ambivalent means that we recognize that it is inscribed not only with the technical codes etched into it by its designers and implementers, but that it is also always re-inscribed by and within the social contexts and everyday applications of users. Technical activities thus operate in a tension between the intended outcomes of planners and the reinterpretation of those activities in the “margins of maneuver” available to users within technical spheres.³³ In turn, these margins of maneuverability are the potential “germs of a new society.”³⁴ Technological spheres are, despite the ideology of our age, already-always a “scene of struggle” and a “social battlefield,”³⁵ where “class and power” determine “which of the ambivalent potentialities of the [technical] heritage will be realized.”³⁶ Writes Feenberg:

²⁸ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 220.

²⁹ Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 86.

³⁰ Marcuse, *Liberation*, 88-91.

³¹ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 2.

³² Feenberg, *Transforming Technology*.

³³ Feenberg, *Transforming Technology*, 84-85.

³⁴ Feenberg, *Transforming Technology*, 87.

³⁵ Feenberg, *Transforming Technology*, 15.

³⁶ Feenberg, *Transforming Technology*, 53.

The theory of ambivalence resolves the dilemma opposing political realism and utopia by identifying the raw materials of socialism among the inheritances of capitalism. It asserts the possibility of *bootstrapping* from capitalism to socialism.³⁷

The ambivalence theory of technology, which Feenberg reads from a Hegelian-Marxian-Weberian-Lukácian-Heideggerian Marcuse, is implicit throughout Marcuse's analysis of our technological condition. It is, I argue, *the key to unlocking his two-folded theory of technological rationality: its critical-diagnostic force and its efficaciousness for contemporary projects of technological reform and social change*. Philosophically, Marcuse's ambivalence theory of technology is rooted in the view that the tension within our technological condition is a class struggle (from Marx and Lukács), albeit one also informed by Heidegger's phenomenological notion that Being is disclosed to us existentially as we engrain ourselves into the world in action—that is, as “being-in-the-world.” As well, for Marcuse worldly engagement continued to reveal reality within dialectical processes that engaged the subject with the object in a movement from the given to something beyond it—the notion that all Being is a movement towards becoming (from Plato, Aristotle, and Hegel). Furthermore, the assumptions of capitalist logics, while tending to *reify* and *totalize*, are never *total*. Life remains porous; it can never be completely integrated into capitalist ends (from Weber and Lukács). As such, even technologically-mediated reality for Marcuse could still be, as it was for the ancients, open-ended, subject to change, and beyond that which is given to mere appearance; potentiality is always just beyond mere technological appearance.

In sum, the fundamental violence of modern formal reason for Marcuse is the “abstention from any judgment as to what is accidental and what essential.”³⁸ This “abstention” is at the root of late-modern technological thinking. It places a formal rationality at the service of the status quo, privileging neutrality, scientific logic, abstraction, individualism, equivalencies, and productivism while canceling out all values and modes of thought sitting outside this status quo as neurotic, utopian, or irrational.³⁹ In our technologically rationalized natural attitude, essentiality gives way to preferentiality, the sacred to the scientific, becoming to totality.

³⁷ Feenberg, *Transforming Technology*, 53 (emphasis his).

³⁸ Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse*, 87.

³⁹ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 146, 148.

Marcuse's Six Key Historical-Conjunctural Moments Prefiguring a "Post-Technological Rationality"

But how can Marcuse's transcendent project for technology actually play out? How can freedom rest with technical progress? If it is the ideology of technical progress that enframes us so completely, how can it also liberate us? *Indeed, how can we come to a technology of liberation?* Marcuse had six key historical-conjunctural responses to these questions, scattered throughout his middle writings between the mid-1950s and early-1970s.

1. A reconstituted subjectivity is foundational for the redemption of technology

The redemption of technology—i.e., a post-technological rationality of liberation—would for Marcuse begin with a reconstituted subjectivity. This subject was to be a post-Enlightenment one that overflowed working class identity and demands and struggled for desires within *and* outside of the workplace and onto the entire established society, akin to the political practices and demands of the radicalized New Left protagonists emerging on the political scene at the end of the 1960s. For Marcuse, according to Douglas Kellner, this reconstituted, re-radicalized subject also means “a bodily, erotic, gendered, social, and aestheticized subjectivity” that moves beyond the idealist-rationalist or all-knowing subject of modernity to one sensitive to other polymorphously eroticized modes of life.⁴⁰ Having affinities in ways to the diffuse, de-centered, and discursive subjectivities of poststructuralism, this reconstituted subjectivity would be immersed in a “new sensibility”—i.e., a sensualized form of reason—emerging from individuals and groups practicing a “methodical disengagement and the refusal of the Establishment aiming at a radical transvaluation of values.”⁴¹

2. Aesthetic practices

For Marcuse, as for Adorno, art and artful ways of living possessed elements of “determinate negation” whereby the aesthetic dimension offers an oppositional force to the

⁴⁰ Douglas Kellner, “Marcuse and the Quest for Radical Subjectivity.” *Dogma: Revue électronique* (2000). <http://dogma.free.fr/txt/Kellner-Marcuse01.htm> (accessed March 28, 2007).

⁴¹ Marcuse, *Liberation*, 6.

established society. With the unleashing of fantasy, “free play and even the folly of the imagination,”⁴² Marcuse believed that the passionate, sensualized, joyful, and, yes, even utopian impulses of aesthetic and erotic practices would render the ugliness of contemporary, one-dimensional existence an offense to the “life instincts.” This was Marcuse’s “aesthetic reduction,” a mode of aesthetic critique that could “peel away” the offenses to the life-instincts inherent in contemporary modes of technologized life.⁴³ In other words, aestheticized reduction would strip away the immediate contingency of objects and societal conditions that arrest and contain a fuller potential of the stuff of the world and our experience of it.⁴⁴

3. *The cultural and social practices of marginalized groups*

The cultural and social practices of marginalized groups also had oppositional (i.e., negational) power for Marcuse. Like aesthetic practices, marginal practices could also challenge the givens of the status quo and show us ways through to another world because both the aesthetic and the marginal operate on another plane of reason and imagination that place into relief the ugliness of established reality. For hints at a negation of the worst aspects of the practices of the advanced industrial system, Marcuse specifically looked to the radicalized subjectivities and practices emerging within the marginal groups of his lifetime, like *avant garde* artists, the cultural expressions emerging in the American ghetto, the new music of the 1960s, the American civil rights movement, the student protagonists of the May Events of ‘68, and the “historical advantage of the [colonized] late-comer.”⁴⁵

4. *“External revolution” emanating from capital’s inherent moments of crises*

Moreover, “external revolution”⁴⁶ —i.e., revolution affecting the metropolises from the exploited and the marginalized at the margins—could happen especially during moments where the late capitalist system started to come apart and crack due to its own propensity for *crisis*. By the mid to late 1960s, Marcuse had moved beyond his faith in a Leninist-Lukácsian vision of a vanguard party conscientizing the working class as the

⁴² Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 228.

⁴³ Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse*, 93.

⁴⁴ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 239.

⁴⁵ Marcuse, *Eros*, xviii.

⁴⁶ Marcuse, *Liberation*, 82.

“subject of the revolution” that he had advocated previously.⁴⁷ By the time he had completed writing *An Essay on Liberation* in May 1968, and especially during the immediate years after the French May Events, the catalyst for change for Marcuse that might be stimulated by such crises moments would be further driven by the cooperation and the solidarity of the dominated themselves, once they realized, out of their own practices and resistances, that crises could actually be openings for creating another world.⁴⁸

5. *Determinate negation (or immanent critique)*

If I can anachronistically use contemporary poststructuralist language, for Marcuse, the moments of crisis inherent to capitalism due to its internal contradictions could be seen as offering opportunities for an *immanent critique* or, in Critical Theoretical parlance, a *determinate negation*, of the repressive, alienating, and exploitative nature of advanced capitalist systems. While contemporary poststructuralist theorists might distance themselves from the language of dialectics and “negation,” I believe nevertheless that there are important parallels between Marcuse’s theories of crisis and poststructuralist analyses of how alternative paths toward more ethico-political modes of life emerge *immanently* within and out of crises and struggle. For contemporary poststructuralist theorists such as Simon Critchley⁴⁹ and Richard Day,⁵⁰ the actual *immanence* of the bottom-up political responses of the newest, anti-globalization social justice movements that emerged in the 1990s within and against “constituted” forms of power, and the situatedness and local-nature of these struggles today, “both [...] *intervene* against state and corporate power and *prefigure*, or [even] create, alternatives to the existing order.”⁵¹

In close affinity with poststructuralist theories of immanent social struggles and change that emerges from within the multidimensional structures of power, by the late 1960s Marcuse also believed that the socio-political alternatives being experimented with by the New Left and other social movements of the ‘60s had a two-folded *interventional*

⁴⁷ Feenberg & Leiss, *Essential Marcuse*, xxvii.

⁴⁸ Marcuse, *Liberation*, 88-91.

⁴⁹ Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance* (London: Verso, 2007).

⁵⁰ Richard Day, *Gramsci is Dead: Anarchist Currents in the Newest Social Movements* (New York: Pluto Press, 2005).

⁵¹ Day, *Gramsci is Dead*, 19.

and *prefigurative* force. By 1969, Marcuse was theorizing how struggles “from below” had the potential force to be both a determinate negation of status-quo forms of power, as well as the ability to concretely revalorize and reconstruct the technologically mediated structures of life.^{52 53} Indeed, these visions for a post-technological society are, I argue, comparable to poststructural theories of the prefigurative politics immanent to current, anti-neoliberal and alternative socio-political practices.

6. *The “contagion” of bottom-up struggle*

Such spontaneous, decentralized, and diffuse bottom-up struggle—from below or, as Marcuse termed it, the “subversive grass roots”—could stimulate a “contagion,”⁵⁴ contributing to potentially emancipative networks of post-technological movements of workers’ control, cooperatives, student revolt, and various other struggles of the marginalized.⁵⁵ Thus, “disruption at one key place,” wrote Marcuse, “can easily lead to a serious [contagious] dysfunctioning of the whole.”⁵⁶

As autonomist Marxists theorize, in partial synchrony with Marcuse while taking their cue from poststructuralist political theory, “crisis is, from the point of view of the working-class subject, a moment not of *breakdown* but of *breakthrough*.”⁵⁷ Crisis and the events they spawn, for these thinkers, as for Marcuse, are openings for the class struggle that show “other possibilities for living” while, at the same time, putting into relief the obscenity, perversity, and contradictions of capital.⁵⁸ In a similar tone to current poststructuralist and autonomist Marxist political theory, Marcuse wrote in *An Essay on Liberation* that

the strength of the moral [and]...operational values [...] is likely to wear off under *the impact of the growing contradictions within the society*. The result would be [...] resistance to work, refusal to perform, negligence, indifference—factors of

⁵² Marcuse, *Liberation*, 87.

⁵³ Herbert Marcuse, *Counter-Revolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 44-46.

⁵⁴ Marcuse, *Counter-Revolution*, 42.

⁵⁵ Marcuse, *Counter-Revolution*, 43-47.

⁵⁶ Marcuse, *Counter-Revolution*, 43.

⁵⁷ Peter Bell & Harry Cleaver, “Marx’s Theory of Crisis as Theory of Class Struggle.” *The Commoner*, 5, (2002): 1-59. <http://www.commoner.org.uk/cleaver05.pdf> (accessed December 8, 2007), 58-59 (emphasis theirs).

⁵⁸ Maurizio Lazzarato, “Struggle, Event, Media.” *RepublicArt*, May (2003). http://republicart.net/disc/representations/lazzarato01_en.htm (accessed May 3, 2006), par. 3.

*dysfunction which would hit a highly centralized and coordinated apparatus, where breakdown at one point may easily affect large sections of the whole.*⁵⁹

Out of crisis moments, then, from the margins, and through cultural practices saturated in polymorphously re-eroticized and aestheticized rationality, technological life could be re-articulated, and re-invented. Marcuse's descriptions of the possible forms that a post-technologically rationalized life could take echo many of the newest social movements' contemporary experiments with horizontalized, non-monogamic, de-individualized, re-communalized, and anti-capitalist forms of subjectivity, work processes, and social organization. Indeed, Marcuse's own words could be used to accurately describe some of the contemporary socio-political practices of the newest social movements: in Marcuse's *Counter-Revolution and Revolt*, written in 1972, we see him provisionally theorizing practices such as directly democratic social experiments⁶⁰ (as political but perhaps not necessarily economic power from below) and workers' control (as economic but perhaps not necessarily political power from below).⁶¹ From his earlier *An Essay on Liberation*, we read of his hopes for practices of "solidarity and cooperation," "autonomy," and "self-determination."⁶² And, from 1955's *Eros and Civilization*, we see evidence of how people can aspire towards the negation of the "Profit and Performance Principle" more generally⁶³ via the automization of labour and the privileging of imagination, fantasy, and play over work and toil.⁶⁴ Ultimately, for Marcuse, the "performance principle" (alienated labour) can be libidinally reconstituted into a non-surplus repressive, Eros-laden, and life-affirming reality principle where play and work would themselves be reconciled and fused under a new order not subject to "administration" by "rational routine" or the "mastery instinct."⁶⁵

Marcuse's Post-Technological Rationality in Light of Contemporary Struggles Against Neoliberal Rationality

The worldwide alter-globalization and social justice movements are providing countless examples of how alternative cultural expressions and Marcusean-like post-

⁵⁹ Marcuse, *Liberation*, 84 (emphasis mine).

⁶⁰ Marcuse, *Counter-Revolution*, 45.

⁶¹ Marcuse, *Counter-Revolution*, 43.

⁶² Marcuse, *Liberation*, 88.

⁶³ Marcuse, *Eros*, 83-90.

⁶⁴ Marcuse, *Eros*, 193.

⁶⁵ Marcuse, *Eros*, 218-219.

technological modes of life and thought can emerge from out of the myriad moments of crisis neoliberal capital is susceptible to.⁶⁶ The bottom-up responses to these crises can be seen as upholding rematerialized Marcusean values of love, joy, resistance, and direct democracy as a way of both immanently countering the neoliberal enclosures of life and, at the same time, re-inventing present social institutions from below, prefiguring and projecting the potentiality for another world. As such, the “newest social movements”⁶⁷ are beginning to offer viable alternatives to, and communal freedom from, neoliberal forms of oppression and exclusion.

Today, for example, in response to the growing commodification and hierarchialization of formal education throughout the neoliberal world, individuals and collectives are getting involved in critical readings groups and alternative, popular educational projects akin to Marcuse’s vision for the creation of “free universities”⁶⁸ to facilitate the emergence of newly radicalized forms of social actors and subjectivities.⁶⁹ These critical education initiatives encourage participants to critically pause from the hullabaloo and consumer hype of late (post)modern life in order to reflect on, seek out, create, and share—negationally, proactively, cooperatively, *and* prefiguratively—how to act on the revelations for social change that emerge out of moments of crisis and critical thought. They think from within and beyond the vantage point of our current, globalized neoliberal enclosures while, at the same time, endeavouring to create new commons via alternative spaces for community gatherings and individual contemplation outside of the enclosures of private property, the marketplace, and the profit motive. Furthermore, their collective practices are often rooted in notions of mutual aid, non-commodified interaction and exchange, cooperativism and affinity groupings, the aesthetics of community music

⁶⁶ Such crises of neoliberalism in the past decade or so have included: the Southeast Asian and Latin American financial crises of the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the US-led “war on terror” and its connections to control of energy resources and global capital, the US real estate and sub-prime mortgage crisis of 2008-9, the growing IMF-sponsored trend of privatization, the informalization and casualization of working life and workers’ resistances against these trends in Europe, etc.

⁶⁷ Day, *Gramsci is Dead*, 8.

⁶⁸ Marcuse, *Counter-Revolution*, 56.

⁶⁹ For example, see: Vancouver, B.C.’s [Critical U](#)’s community-led, non-credit course development and offerings rooted in the concept of “utopian pedagogy”; Toronto’s [Anarchist Free University](#)’s activist-oriented and non-university credit course offerings; [Toronto School of Creativity & Inquiry](#)’s event series and reading groups focused on communal projects of counter-cartography and studying concepts and practices that move beyond the neoliberal enclosures of life; or [Universidad Trashumante](#), a team of activist educators traveling in a reconfigured bus throughout Argentina’s hinterland offering critical pedagogical and community educational opportunities to marginalized communities.

initiatives and participatory art, and other modes of sociality that experiment with polymorphously erotic and non-monogamic social bonds.⁷⁰ Moreover, they are inventors of spaces for breathing, for thinking through and actually creating alternatives to—in Marcuse’s language—the surplus repressive status quo despite the intractable presence of hierarchically organized and commodified life that surrounds them. And not surprisingly they are, in the process of this thoughtful inventiveness, discovering life-affirming ways of unleashing new possibilities—more humane possibilities—for re-engaging with the world, provisioning for their needs, for satisfying their desires, and for organizing their lives in non-commercialized ways.

Other forms of contemporary re-rationalized technological modes of life that hint at Marcuse’s “transcendent project” more sensitive to the affirmation of life are: the countless actions of property takeovers and land squattings by landless and indigenous groups and overly exploited workers around the world, the autonomously based and collectively run Italian social centres, the landless peasant and worker-recuperated enterprise movements taking flight across South America,⁷¹ guerrilla and rooftop gardeners in the urban Global North, North American farmers’ markets, co-housing and intentional communities in Europe and Canada, and the global-social justice movement more broadly brought together by the World Social Forum.⁷² These movements are seeing the marginalized, the poor, the exploited, the landless, and the dispossessed reorganizing and revaluating notions of land, property, democracy, housing, work, labour processes, cultural production, and spaces for play in ways that subvert and negate the ideology of private property, technologism,

⁷⁰ For example, see: Toronto’s [Abandonment Issues](#), an initiative using local community knowledge and experience in the struggle to force city hall to expropriate abandoned buildings for the city’s homeless; New York City’s [16 Beaver Collective](#), an ongoing and emergent collective of radical artists involved in critical reading groups, innovative event-based interventions, and collaborative art experiments; Toronto’s [Entangled Territories](#), an experiment in raising awareness of and producing collective cognition towards transforming and reclaiming urban spaces from the enclosures of neoliberalism and the capitalist state; or Los Angeles’s [Critical Spatial Practices/Just Spaces](#), a traveling artist exhibition and programming endeavour looking into more “just” reclamations and reinventions of urban spaces.

⁷¹ Marcelo Vieta & Andrés Ruggeri, “The Worker-Recovered Enterprises as Workers’ Cooperatives: The Conjectures, Challenges, and Innovations of Self-Management in Argentina and Latin America,” in *Co-operatives in a Global Economy: The Challenges of Co-operation Across Borders*, edited by J.J. McMurtry & Daryl Reed, 178-225 (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009).

⁷² Other examples of these types of initiatives that come to mind include Canada’s [Ontario Coalition Against Poverty](#) and [Women Against Poverty Collective](#), Barcelona’s [Can Masdeu](#) squat, and the horizontally governed Zapatistas.

progressivism, consumerism, individualism, top-down management, coercion, and productivism in favour of communal property, cooperation, affinity, the refusal of work, democratized labour processes, mutual aid, and the respect of human beings' differences and myriad capacities beyond detail work. Further, the privileging of capitalist workplaces, consumer culture, and private spaces as the only arenas for legitimate creativity are effaced in the practices of these communally focused, cooperatively organized, and intentionally created communities.

The “irresistibility” for these newest social movements to not only reactively resist global capital and the neoliberal enclosures, but also to proactively seek out and re-invent alternative forms of technologically mediated life, can be seen as modeling Marcuse’s Nietzschean call for aspiring to a “different experience of the world”⁷³ through a “new basic experience of Being,”⁷⁴ “being-as-end-in-itself [,] as joy (*Lust*) and enjoyment.”⁷⁵ All are engrained with, Marcuse might further add, “pleasurable co-operation,” “attractive labor,” and the “release” of creative and “libidinal forces.”⁷⁶ And all lead towards, and are undergirded by, an alternative techno-*logy* of liberation rather than domination, a technological logic subordinate to local needs—i.e., subsidiarity—and historical-cultural values.

Concluding Thoughts

These newest social movements are just a few contemporary examples of how, in post-technologically rationalized moments, logos and eros, nature and human life, and our search for the reduction of toil in light of our continued needs to provision for our necessities in a world of limited resources can be immanently reconciled with our technological inheritance within our particular historical conjuncture and cultural contexts. These practices, I have been arguing, have affinities with a Marcusean ethics of caring for nature and for the other as another subject full of difference and potentiality. Furthermore, they are undergirding new rational and technological paradigms. *For these practices show us how we can both immanently (re)invent and prefigure new technological and*

⁷³ Marcuse, *Eros*, 216.

⁷⁴ Marcuse, *Eros*, 158.

⁷⁵ Marcuse, *Eros*, 121-122.

⁷⁶ Marcuse, *Eros*, 217.

organizational realities rooted in social values striving for the pacification of existence. Through such reconciliations, akin to the struggle to reconcile a new logos with a new eros, we *can* collaboratively forge a new mode of sensual and affectual life, framing society's very techniques with new means and new ends sympathetic to the affirmation of life. In other words, regardless of the continued existence of global capital and the neoliberal enclosures of life, the enframing logic of late-modern technologies of control can be—and are—contained and reappropriated by myriad groups from below as they seize the technological inheritance and override it via new values and new socialized applications, i.e., the legislation of new values.

In sum, out of Marcuse's own theoretical moves beyond his substantivist counterparts, as I mapped out earlier in this essay, it is clear that the critique of the technological rationality of advanced capitalism cannot be "mere ideological 'reflection' for then," as Feenberg writes, technological reform "would have neither technical efficacy nor truth value."⁷⁷ For Marcuse, social transformation and, indeed, even civilizational change, can be accessed via *the other side of progress* because technological progress contains within it the possibility of unleashing a "truth" to existence that "presupposes" a freedom from human toil, material necessity, exploitation, and domination.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Feenberg, *Heidegger and Marcuse*, 100.

⁷⁸ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 131-132.

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