

The 'New' Proletariat: Marcuse's One-Dimensional Human Being

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Doctoral Candidate - Department of Sociology - Western Michigan University
<http://www.walterjensen.net>

In the *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (1964), Herbert Marcuse (July 19, 1898 - July 29, 1979) continues the Frankfurt School's critique of capitalism and its commodification of human existence. As a Marxist / Heideggerian /orthodox Freudian / philosopher, Marcuse explains and labels a new variety of proletariat *and* indirectly addresses the barriers that the 1960's proletariat must overcome in order to be revolutionary. In short, Marcuse exposes the proliferation, in the United States as well as in the Soviet model of communism, of the one-dimensional human beings and the 'positive thinking' that they advocate.

According to Marcuse, the 'one-dimensional human being' is a new particular variety of proletariat who has a *different* social / political / economic orientation or 'mind set' *than* the proletariat (a.k.a. anyone who collects a pay check) *or* the lumpenproletariat (a.k.a. those who work outside the employer/employee bourgeois economic construct) of the last 150 years (Tucker 1978, 469-500; Marx 2004, especially pg. 75). In short, Marcuse argued that a large portion of the proletariat has had a change in character. In chapter two, sub chapter "Containment of Social Change," which could be more bluntly labeled 'Why the Proletariat has become complacent,' Marcuse lists the "main factors of this transformation" (Marcuse 1919, 24). *First*, Marcuse argues, "Mechanization is increasingly reducing the quantity and intensity of physical energy expended in labor" by the proletariat (Marcuse 1991, 24). *Second*, an occupational stratification has formed and has divided the proletariat majority into two sub-classes: the white-collar, who, Marcuse argues, will become the new majority, *versus* the blue-collar, who will soon become the new minority (Marcuse 1991, 27). *Third*, due to factors one and two, based on Marx's assertion that "the ideal is nothing else than the material world reflected by the human mind, and translated into forms of thought" (Tucker 1978, 301), the growing white-collar proletariat has almost completely assimilated its attitude and consciousness to that of the bourgeois (Marcuse 1991, 29). And *finally*, "The new technological work-world thus enforces a weakening of the negative position of the working class: the latter no longer appears to be the living contradiction to the established society" (Marcuse 1991, 31).

Before addressing these four points individually, it must be understood that all of these 'factors of transformation' are grounded in the move from a 'industrial society,' a.k.a. a manufacturing based society wherein service jobs *are not* the driving force of the economy but play a supporting role, *to* a 'post-industrial society,' a.k.a. wherein service jobs *are* the driving force of the economy and manufacturing jobs play a

supporting role due to automation *and/or* the shipping of manufacturing jobs overseas in order to decrease labor costs. In 1960's, the US population was about 180 million, its labor force was about 69 million, and had about 17 million manufacturing jobs. In 2000, the US population was about 282 million, its labor force was about 140 million, and had about 20 million manufacturing jobs (see the *Statistical Abstract of the United States*; Toossi 2002, 24). Clearly one can see that the population of the US has increased by 100 million but the percentage of the labor force who are employed in manufacturing has decreased. As of 2002, in the United States, 13% of the working population has a manufacturing job, 82% have service sector jobs, and the remaining percentage going to other jobs like farming (Hagenbaugh 2002).

The *first* factor that contributed to the transformation of the old proletariat was the change in the ratio of work to leisure, meaning, the percentage of work time for the proletariat decreased while, at the same time, their leisure time increased. According to Marcuse's understanding of Marx,

“the proletarian is *primarily* the manual laborer who expends and exhausts his *physical energy* in the work process, even if he works with machines. The purchase and use of this physical energy, under sub-human conditions, for the private appropriation of surplus-value entailed the revolting inhuman aspects of exploitation; *the Marxian notion denounces the physical pain and misery of labor*” (Marcuse 1991, 24, emphasis added).

To put another way, Marcuse saw, in the years leading up to 1964, that the improvements in, what Marcuse calls the “instruments of production” (the tools, machinery, etc.) *and* the introduction of automation, *caused* the proletariat to work less hours to earn a wage that they could use to sustain life. Freed from the 12 and 10 hour work day, the 60's proletariat had more free time, per day, than their parents, grandparents, and great grandparents. Marcuse writes,

“The proletarian of the previous stages of capitalism was indeed the *beast of burden*, by the labor of his body procuring the necessities and luxuries of life [for the bourgeois] while living in filth and poverty. Thus he [or she] was the living denial of his society⁷” (Marcuse 1991, 25-26, emphasis added).

The phrase “living denial of his society” is the key to Marcuse's sociological observation and is only truly explained / understood in footnote #7 on page 26. What Marcuse is trying to show us is that the new proletariat has lost two of its essential characteristics: (#1) its physical exhaustion and (#2) its “impoverishment,” which Marcuse describes as “... the absolute need and necessity of subverting intolerable conditions of existence, and such absolute need appears in the beginnings of all revolution against the basic social institutions” (Marcuse 1991, 25-26 & footnote 7). To summarize, Marcuse's first sociological observation, the increase of leisure time and its enjoyment, caused the 60's proletariat to capitulate to the ideology of the high bourgeois in order to maintain these new ‘benefits,’ unknown to the previous generation of proletariat.

While I agree with Marcuse's sociological observation concerning how the new 'instruments of production' have increased the availability of leisure time, I take issue with what he sees as the primary characteristics of the proletariat. From my reading of Marx, the other characteristics of the proletariat are (#3) mental exhaustion, which severely hinders a proletariat from being critical, comparative, and developing his/her humanity; (#4) their inability to keep the surplus-value, which severely hinders the proletariat from owning the instruments of production, the necessary tools for cutting the 'chains of exploitation,' which, in turn, will allow the proletariat to free them themselves from the idea that 'We can only live, *if we are exploited*;' (#5) the inability to determine the direction and goals of their existence, and (#6) the inability to love and be loved in a non-exploitive, non-repressive, and non-instrumental way (Tucker 1978, 160-3, 479; Fromm 1995). To put it more sharply, Marcuse is either 'bracketing out' or deemphasizing the 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th characteristics of the proletariat in favor of characteristics 1 and 2. In addition, Marcuse makes no distinction between passive leisure activities (watching TV, movies, attending professional sporting events, and, *now*, playing video games and 'surfing the net' for porn and/or new products to buy) *and* active leisure activities (playing sports, going dancing, playing non-video games, going to family reunions, etc.). Understand, I am not arguing that Marcuse is in error when he points out that the proletariat has changed and has become more complacent, lethargic, and has capitulated to the ideology of the high bourgeois, like so many groups of 'house slaves' in human history. What I see as an error is Marcuse's emphasis that the proletariat is a '*beast of burden*' that is being worked and starved to death. This paints a distorted picture in the reader's mind of who the proletariat *is* and what they *need*. To summarize my criticism more succinctly, Marxism denounces *more* than just the physical pain and misery of labor, it also denounces the mental pain, economic injustice (e.g. the loss of the surplus-value), the lack of self-determination, and bourgeois love.

The *second* factor, according to Marcuse, that contributed to the transformation of the old proletariat was grounded in the need *created by* the new tools, machinery, *and* automation systems (Marcuse 1991, 27-29). In short, an increased need for specialists. The new technologically driven instruments of production needed skilled workers who could use the new tools, who could watch and tweak the new machinery, who could maintain the new systems of automation, who could understand and analyze the production and cost analysis data that was being generated by the new technologically driven production systems, *and*, in addition, a need for those who could manage and direct the specialists' efforts on behalf of the bourgeois. Due to all this specialization, the specialists or the white-collar proletariat was / is required to have greater and higher education than their brethren, the blue-collar proletariat. All of these circumstances caused the majority of the proletariat to fracture into two sub classes, the white-collared and blue-collared proletariat. One must never forget, a 'collar is a collar' regardless of its color because it denotes a submissive, subservient, and accepting attitude.

According to Marcuse, the *third* factor that contributed to the transformation of the old proletariat was the combined effects of factor 1 and 2, what I would call a ‘vested interest in the reign of capitalism’ (Marcuse 1991, 29-31). The increase of leisure time (and its enjoyment) *coupled* with the need for a large new class of specialists (and the required education) to run the instruments of production *created* a new mindset, one that merged ‘the ideals of the bourgeois’ with capitulation to the system. The ideals of the bourgeois can be pointedly summarized in the following two secular dogmas: (1) ‘There must be winners and losers’ and (2) from Gordon Gekko’s address to Teldar Paper’s stockholders in the 1987 movie *Wall Street* (scene 12),

“...that greed, for lack of a better word [pause] is good. Greed is right. Greed works. Greed clarifies, cuts through, and captures the essence [pause] of the evolutionary spirit. Greed, in all of its forms, greed for life, for money, for love, knowledge, has marked the upward surge of mankind, and greed [pause] you mark my words, will not only save Teldar Paper, but that other malfunctioning corporation called the USA.”

As for capitulation to the system, the second part of this new mindset, it was / is the idea that to secure greater pay, more leisure time, greater social status, and a happier life because it was better to ‘be the right hand of the devil than to be in his path of destruction.’ Marcuse writes, “The chances of promotion decline as management prefers engineers and college graduates” (Marcuse 1991, 30). Marcuse gives the reader the feeling that the blue-collar parents accepted the fact that their generation failed to overthrow the bourgeois and, because of this, they taught their children that it was / is better to side with the economic winners than with the losers. In short, the parents said, ‘My child, you should go to college so you can have a better life than us.’ As a side note, the reader should not think of this ‘vested interest in the reign of capitalism’ as part of some grand conspiracy orchestrated by the bourgeois *but* “like the sorcerer [the bourgeois] who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world [capitalism] whom he has called up by his spells” (Tucker 1978, 478). This nether world, that Marx exposes, explains, and critiques, is the cycle of production, exchange, and consumption which has taken on a life of its own that manipulates all the classes.

The forth and final factor that contributed to the transformation of the old proletariat was / is the product of this new white-collared proletariat’s mindset, *non-antagonistic thinking* or one-dimensional thinking (Marcuse 1991, 31-34). This notion is very similar to Erich Fromm’s 1955 discussion, in *The Sane Society*, of a society where blind obedience by human automatons is rewarded by corporate America and the ‘forces of the market;’ (Fromm 1990, especially 358-363). Marcuse writes,

“Domination is transfigured into administration. The capitalist bosses and owners are losing their identity as responsible agents; they are assuming the function of bureaucrats in a corporate machine. Within the vast hierarchy of executive and managerial boards extending far beyond the individual establishment into the scientific laboratory and research institute, the national government and national purpose, the tangible source of exploitation disappears

behind the facade of objective rationality. Hatred and frustration are deprived of their specific target, and the technological veil conceals the reproduction of inequality and enslavement” (Marcuse 1991, 32).

To summarize the mindset of the white-collar proletariat, ‘capitalism must live or we shall all surly die’ or, putting it another way, ‘without capitalism we will lose what freedoms we have.’ This, Marcuse argues, is the current state of affair and has, in turn, created two “prospects of containment of change,” which he has labeled the welfare and warfare states, neither of which he see as beneficial to the human race or its continued existence (Marcuse 1991, 48). In short, these “prospects of containment of change” are the social / political / economic institutions that keep the system from changing.

Given that the Warfare States needs no explanation how it creates and perpetuates a social and psychological matrix of unfreedom, suffering, and/or enslavement, allow me to use Marcuse’s own words to explain what is wrong with the Welfare State. Marcuse writes,

“...with all its rationality, the Welfare State is a state of unfreedom *because* its total administration *is* [a] systematic restriction of (a) ‘technically’ available free time; (b) the quantity and quality of goods and services ‘technically’ available for vital individual needs; [and] (c) the intelligence (conscious and unconscious) capable of comprehending and realizing the possibilities of self-determination. Late industrial society has increased *rather* than reduced the need for parasitical and alienated functions ... Advertising, public relations, indoctrination, planned obsolescence are no longer unproductive overhead costs *but* rather elements of basic production costs. In order to be effective, such production of socially necessary waste *requires* continuous rationalization – the relentless utilization of advanced techniques and science. Consequently, a rising standard of living is the almost *unavoidable by-product* of the politically manipulated industrial society, once a certain level of backwardness has been overcome. The growing productivity of labor *creates* an increasing surplus-product which ... allows an increased consumption... As long as this constellation prevails, *it reduces* the *use-value of freedom*; there is *no* reason to insist on self-determination *if* the administered life is the comfortable and even the ‘good’ life. This *is* the rational and material ground *for* the unification of opposites, *for* one-dimensional political behavior. On this ground, the transcending political forces *within* society are *arrested*, and qualitative change *appears* possible *only* as a change from *without*. Rejection of the Welfare State on behalf of abstract ideas of freedom is hardly convincing [or realistic]. The loss of the economic and political liberties which were the real achievement of the preceding two centuries may seem slight damage in a state capable of making the administered life secure and comfortable. *If* the individuals [referring to both the white and blue-collared proletariat] are satisfied to the point of happiness with the goods and services handed down to them by the administration, *why* should they insist on different institutions for a different production of different goods and services? And if the individuals are pre-conditioned so that the satisfying goods also include thoughts, feelings, aspirations, *why* should they wish to think, feel, and imagine for themselves?” (Marcuse 1991, 49-50, emphasis added and brackets added for clarification).

What Marcuse is exposing is the *reason*, not the solution (which always irritates my liberal friends), why the white and blue-collared proletariat has no need to be revolutionary. Using Marcuse’s phrasiology, the

proletariat has rejected the unhappy consciousness, which the Marcuse describes as the

“...consciousness of the divided world, the defeated possibilities, the hopes unfulfilled, and the promises betrayed. They were a rational, cognitive force, revealing a dimension of man and nature which was repressed and repelled in reality. Their truth was in the illusion evoked, in the insistence on creating a world in which the terror of life was called up and suspended – mastered by recognition” (Marcuse 1991, 61).

In short, the unhappy consciousness was rejected *in favor of* the happy consciousness, a consciousness “which facilitates acceptance of the misdeeds of this society” (Marcuse 1991, 76).

In summary and conclusion, Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man* is similar to Max Weber’s *Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905) because it attempts to explain the how and why the proletariat has rejected their quintessential mantra, ‘the negative is the positive,’ and become ‘one-dimensional’ in thought, deed, and lives by a new mantra, ‘Whatever,’ a word that expresses the attitude of “I don’t know; I don’t care; I’m not interested; I don’t believe you; Shut up!; and I am now returning to MY life unchanged by my encounter with you.”

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