One-Dimensional Human Beings: 
Revisiting Marcuse’s ‘New’ Proletariat

Written by Dr. Walter A. Jensen, Ph.D. 
Western Michigan University
Submitted to the Michigan Sociological Review for publication, May 2015

In the never ending campaign for the United States Presidency and the control of Congress, the ‘right’ has leveled the claim, yet again, that the ‘left’ is engaging in class warfare (Ackerman & Alstott 2011; Kohn 2011; Moyers 2013; Schmookler, 2014; Burnett 2014a, 2014b). However, in reality, the ‘right’ engages in so much class warfare that it is as common as the air we breathe. This fact compels us to ask, ‘how did this happen?’ In the One-dimensional man: Studies in the ideology of advanced industrial society (1964), Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) continued the Frankfurt School’s critique of capitalism, its commodification of human existence, and the class antagonism it fosters and perpetuates. As a Marxist / Heideggerian / orthodox Freudian / philosopher, Marcuse explained and labeled a new variety of proletariat and indirectly addresses why so many U.S. citizens think of themselves as “temporarily embarrassed capitalist(s)” (Steinbeck 1960). In short, Marcuse exposes the proliferation — in the U.S. as well as in the Soviet Union model of communism — of the one-dimensional human beings and the ‘positive thinking’ that keeps them oppressed and needlessly exploited.

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 (i.e., anyone who collects a pay check) or the lumpenproletariat (i.e., those who work outside the employer/employee bourgeois economic construct) of the last 150 years (Tucker 1978: 469-500; Marx 2004:75). In short, Marcuse argued that a large portion of the proletariat has had a change in character. Please note, I am not using the word proletariat as philosophical /
consciousness distinctions but as sociological category, which is unconcerned whether the ‘working class stiff’ knows he or she is a member of the proletariat class. In chapter two, in the subsection “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 1991:24). First, Marcuse argued, “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 into two main sub-classes: the white-collar, who, Marcuse argued, 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 bourgeoisie (Marcuse 1991:29). And finally, factor four, “The new technological work-world thus enforces a weakening of the negative position of the working class: the latter [the working class] no longer appears to be the living contradiction to the established society” (Marcuse 1991:31; brackets added for clarification). To put it more succinctly, the white collar subclass is not suffering in the same sense as the old proletariat.

Before addressing these four factors individually, it must be understood that all of these ‘factors of transformation’ are grounded in the move from a ‘industrial society,’ (i.e., 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,’ (i.e., 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 the corporation’s labor costs, material cost,