

MARCUSE AND THE NEW ACADEMICS:
A NOTE ON STYLE

by
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The sympathy and good will with which these critics treat Marcuse render any critical response seemingly malicious and bad-tempered, but it is this very atmosphere of warmth and geniality which, while distinguishing these critics from others, is in question.¹ For good cheer can cheerlessly devastate in its search for a good time; it relentlessly pursues itself, reaching for a known and tested category that soothes so as to fend off a thought that frightens. It is, translated into thought, the friendliness and openness that American tourists are famous for, that amiably discovers that all the world is the same — which it is in so far as it is brutally made so; it gleefully discovers the American drugstore in Paris or Saigon which it put there. So too do Roszak and Robinson take their pleasures with Marcuse by uncovering the banalities that are their own; the foreign and the strange are reduced to the known and the familiar. Roszak concludes that Marcuse's thought is a "pedestrian homely philosophy" agreeable to any "member of the local Kiwanis Club," and Robinson, a bit more obliquely, states: "I sometimes suspect that there is a barely repressed strain of puritanism in Marcuse's makeup . . . a fastidiousness which . . . results in a squeamish 'That's not what I meant at all!' when confronted with the untidy reality of sex."

The reductionist gets his kicks by losing nuances; he senses the intensifying tyranny of a standardized world only so as to draw sustenance to aid it. Dialectical thought is not so much rejected as never encountered: the reified and the abstract make thought unthinkable. It is not by accident that, for the same reason, Roszak and Robinson tell us that N. O. Brown is a more radical thinker than Marcuse. Marcuse, writes Roszak, is "more cautious;" he "pulls up short . . . where Brown goes off the deep end." Or Robinson: Brown "was consistently more radical than Marcuse in disallowing any distinction between legitimate and illegitimate repression (basic and surplus repression) . . ." Brown wins by ignoring distinctions; his "disallowing" gives him the higher score. Abstract consistency is the judge. The truth of the matter, in this case whether that disallowed is disallowable or whether the deep end is at the deep side, is of course not part of the matter. Allegiance to the concrete is forgotten by the academic who would rather classify than think.

Elsewhere Robinson, who somehow thinks that Marcuse is a 'monist,' is saddened that Marcuse, as opposed to Brown, "for purposes of his own argument" maintains the distinction between Eros and Thanatos; "this choice was, I think, quite uncharacteristic and perhaps inconsistent with his long established philosophical prejudices." That Marcuse lapses here — which of course in any case is no lapse — offends the sensibility desensitized long ago, recognizing only abstract logic or its abstract violation. What Marcuse pursues "for his own argument" — the particular and the concrete — is an illicit freedom to minds attuned to law and order in theory and fact.

1. These notes while confined to P. A. Robinson, *The Freudian Left*, (N. Y., 1969) and T. Roszak, *The Making of a Counter Culture*, (Garden City, 1969) are not necessarily restricted to them; others share similar styles and approaches. Cf. J. Cohn, "The Philosophy of Marcuse," *New Left Review* 57, Sept.-Oct. 1969.

The reductionist is rich only in common sense and banalities. This is most evident in Roszak if only because his book in scope and ambition is original, giving him endless opportunities to promote common sense as lost wisdom. Robinson is content with much, sometimes decent, exposition, and the banal is but tacked on. With Roszak it is the book itself. Hence the variation in style. Robinson is continually feeling, suspecting, fearing something in the first person. As if his real fear is to be left out of his neutral exposition, he appears all over. His comments are invariably identified as his own to render them original as if this were sufficient in itself. It is not; with Robinson the original confesses its poverty. The examples are innumerable. His analysis of *Reason and Revolution*: "I do think . . . In making his case for Hegel as revolutionary, Marcuse chose to ignore Hegel's theoretical debt to European conservatism." Or he writes of some of Marcuse's statements on work: "I find it difficult to imagine how work could ever be anything but work – that is sublimation – even in a nonrepressive order, and I think Marcuse was on firmer grounds . . ." Robinson's difficulty is the difficulty of common sense in the face of uncommon sense, a concept that would transcend it. (And here, in addition, Robinson is unaware that Marcuse has expounded at length on the critical concept of work.²) The result of the continual commenting is that a chatty intimacy is established in which things can be safely said that are not established. "I'm afraid, however, that Reich's effort . . . was not very successful." The fear is the friendly concern for the victim just conned; it stills any after-thoughts by adding soul and feelings to injustice. And so he tells us of Reich's death in prison: "Such was the sad but (one can't help feeling) appropriate end . . ."

Suspecting his analysis to be as thin as it is, Robinson tries to beef it up by bringing into his account Marcuse the man. His method is invariable: he takes a reading from Marcuse's thought as if it were psychological data, effortlessly obliterating the very distinction between thought and a bad reality that Marcuse works to achieve. That Marcuse uses the negative where the positive seems proper is a revelation to Robinson. "I feel that Marcuse's obviously self-conscious choice of this paradoxical vocabulary tells us a great deal about his intellectual and psychological makeup. In the most immediate sense, it reveals a rather playful quality of mind, a philosophical cleverness . . ." Or, ". . . I think it important to emphasize the extent of Marcuse's alienation from the existing intellectual and material culture. Only intense anger could have given rise to such enthusiasm for negation and death." Or, the death instinct suited "his sense of outrage and horror at the historical events he saw unfolding before him." With the very cheapest of psychology the liberal historian does his best to purge the notion of thought from thinking; to him it is exorcised mindlessly from psychological states. While depriving thought of truth, Robinson brings to it his variant of art appreciation, the reified enjoyment of an approved masterpiece. He tells us of the idea of the death instinct: "Yet, I confess that I share Marcuse's fascination with the idea; it has about it an undeniable philosophical grandness and mystery."

Roszak's style differs; his is the cheery and confident approach of a snappy college outline that is going to keep everyone awake. His cretinizing and ignorant discussion of Marx, Marcuse, and Brown to drive the point home closes with a 'fable' that reads like an entry for a breakfast cereal contest. The entire book is

2. See Marcuse's essays from the 30's "Ueber die philosophischen Grundlagen des wirtschaftswissenschaftlich Arbeitsbegriffs" reprinted in *Kultur und Gesellschaft II* (Frankfurt, 1965) and "Neue Quellen zur Grundlegung des Historischen Materialismus," reprinted in *Ideen zu einer Kritischen Theorie der Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt, 1969).

summed up in the comment that *Blow-Up* is a glossy, *Playboy*, pornographic film; for what sustains his analysis is not mind, but mechanism: where there is thought and intelligence Roszak sees banality and common sense, where there is banality and common sense, he waxes eloquent. It is not by chance that Marcuse is written off as common-place, and Paul Goodman is compared to Socrates. Roszak's enthusiasm for Goodman is that of the home-sick, home-spun philosopher who finally catches sight of home.

His knack for the reified is faultless. Soul versus intellect, the psychic versus the social, myth versus science, remain the uncomprehended blank poles of his argument. His one effort to define and distinguish progressive and regressive magic collapses into the facts; he merely lists examples, unable to penetrate them. "Compare," these examples, he tell us, and "the distinction between good and bad magic should be clear enough." And so it is not. His major concern, his critique of the madness of science, for all its justness, ends up in madness; he takes as the negation of science, myth, personality, emotion — the apolitical in general — all that which is its adjunct and prop. To the extent that he confuses the reigning instrumental reason with reason itself, and rejects both, he does his bit to prolong the former's reign. Roszak falls victim to his own categories which are not his own; they are hand-me-downs designed to perpetuate what they blindly seek to dissipate.

These gentlemen travel light. Robinson uses once the contemptuous phrase of the new academic who has learned to divest himself of thought as obsolete and bulky: "intellectual baggage." The jet-age academic equipped with a flight bag packed with categories, homilies and a toothbrush, feels at home anywhere. His persistent sympathy and good humor in the face of radical thought is a function of an unswerving reductionism that sees nothing but itself; it works to sap what hostility would preserve, a recognition of the differences which is the base of revolutionary thought and praxis.

IN DEFENSE OF REVOLUTION¹

by
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For Americans, revolutions are dangerous things. It is true that every school boy is taught that our nation was born out of a revolutionary struggle, but those who speak of revolutions today, whether they be the black leaders in the ghetto or the young intellectuals and peasants of Latin America and Asia are denounced as anti-American. We pay lip service to a kind of revolutionary tradition and yet the accepted ideology is that revolutions are just not the way to accomplish desired ends. It is true that we would almost all agree that in some situations a man must rebel against injustice, but rebellion is taken as the ultimate act of a desperate man, rather than an organized activity which can be justified by philosophers and political thinkers. And yet, philosophers and political thinkers from Plato to Camus have worried about revolutions and the rebel. What I hope to give here is some understanding of the reasons why the dominant liberal tradition

1. A version of this paper was presented to the Florida Philosophical Association, November, 1967.