

# HERBERT MARCUSE AND AMERICA'S CULTURAL REVOLUTION

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Herbert Marcuse is often judged by the imagined political consequences of his work rather than its real intellectual contributions. Self-styled progressives and radicals of various stripes blame Marcuse for excesses and mistakes of the New Left, marginalizing the traditional working class and undermining support for the welfare state by showing it to be integral to an acquiescent, administered society. In the 1960s and 70s, the Right simply dismissed him as a communist, sometimes with the harsh criticism of death threats. Since then, he has been forgotten by many.

In this context, perhaps the most surprising and interesting recent account of the significance of Marcuse comes from Christopher F. Rufo. His best-selling book *America's Cultural Revolution* presents Marcuse as a spectacularly successful agent of cultural and social transformation. He launched the cultural revolution and inspired the New Left, Black radicals, and a range of others to carry it forward. The book not only opens with Marcuse; its central narrative is that “the critical theory of society conquered institution after institution,” bringing the far Left to power and producing America’s current crisis (Rufo 2023, 272). Its subtitle is “How the Radical Left Conquered Everything.”

Rufo’s book begins and ends with a call for counter-revolution – drawn in part from what he sees as Marcuse’s playbook for the cultural revolution itself. In this essay, I explore both what Rufo sees as the American cultural revolution and why he places Marcuse at its center. I ask what makes sense and what does not in his reading of Marcuse and in his diagnosis of the recent trends in American society that make him call for counter-revolution.

## I

A right-wing American journalist, ideologue, and agitator, Rufo has played a key role in making “critical race theory” the ideological focus for attacks on alleged radicalism, anti-White bias, and even communism in America’s public schools. As an advisor to Governor Ron DeSantis, he helped shape a sharp attack on Florida’s universities and interventions to ban programs and courses because of their putative left-wing bias (Goldberg 2023). He now sits on the board of the New College of Florida after helping to purge its objectionably radical faculty and driving many students to transfer.

It is surprising that Rufo sees Marcuse as so central to modern American cultural change, but it is telling. “Today,” he says,

America is living inside Marcuse’s revolution. During the fever pitch of the late 1960s, Marcuse posited four key strategies for the radical Left: the revolt of the affluent white intelligentsia, the radicalization of the black “ghetto population,” the capture of public institutions, and the cultural repression of the opposition.

(Rufo 2023, 11)

This is what Rufo contends actually happened and what the Right – or all right-thinking Americans – now must fight back against. His agenda is mostly restorationist, reinscribing old values where Marcuse’s followers uprooted them: “his descendants – all of them lesser minds than their master – have proved that the destruction of the old values is not automatically followed by the creation of new ones” (Rufo 2023, 273). Rufo presents the ‘old values’ very selectively, and as though they were always consensually honored rather than often controversial or problematic.

Rufo sees Marcuse – rather shockingly – as the key (albeit perhaps unwitting and even unwilling) protagonist in the rise of elite domination and social engineering. He also presents Marcuse as central to the rise of the New Left globally, the turn of the Weather Underground and some others to violence, its takeover of the universities, and its legacy of identity politics. By the end of the book, Marcuse appears as an unrepentant partisan of violent revolution but also an intellectual who is disappointed that his followers so often failed to grasp his deeper ideas. Rufo thinks that unlike Marcuse’s followers, he sees the deeper meaning, and those ideas can help him lead a new cultural revolution – in reverse.

Rufo is not an intellectual and not especially careful with the sources of ideas, matters of background, context, causal influence, or nuances of conceptual interpretation. His account of Marcuse, thus, says next to nothing about Kant, mentions Horkheimer only twice without ever describing his work or the meaning of critical theory for the Frankfurt School, and never mentions Nietzsche or Freud (or, for that matter, other influential post-war critical thinkers influenced by psychoanalysis from Erich Fromm to Marcuse’s friend Norman O. Brown). He notes that Marcuse wrote a book on Hegel while studying under the future Nazi Martin Heidegger but does not examine either Hegel’s ideas or Heidegger’s and how they influenced Marcuse’s.<sup>1</sup> *Reason and Revolution* is not cited. C. Wright Mills makes no appearance.

But let us not get lost in pedantry. Rufo is not up for tenure. We should ask not just whether his book makes sense to us as history but why it makes sense to him and so many others as ideology. He is worth considering because he is one of the most influential opinion shapers on the Right of American politics. It matters that he sees ideas, even philosophical ideas, as crucial. Even if his reading of Marcuse is not deep, it is significant that he wants to appear to have read deeply. One of the ironies of current cultural politics is that while academics are apt to sneer at what they imagine is the anti-intellectualism of the populist Right, many on the Right are eager to claim to have ‘done their research’ and to present themselves as intellectuals. This is true even of basically ‘publicistic’ figures like Rufo and of large numbers of participants in online discussions. Few actually pursue much scholarship, though some do.<sup>2</sup> We may ask whether those of us who often have done deeper reading and research have done a very effective job of making our ideas matter to broader publics and whether we have done as well as we should have in keeping students alert to the complexity

of ideas and the importance of critical thought. Too often the Left has bought into rather simplistic histories of its own, though there is now a wave of seeking deeper and more critical historical understandings.

With considerable success, today's resurgent Right has claimed the spirit of rebellion associated with 1960s student radicals. It has brought carnival and ludic performance into its events, presented a transgressive style, and adopted the trope of revolution. In 1960s protests, the student Left mobilized sex, drugs, and rock and roll against the Vietnam War and right-wing businessmen in gray suits.<sup>3</sup> Something of the same spirit and style helped animate successors like ACT UP in the late 1980s and 1990s. Pointed political intervention mingled with counter-cultural stylistic creativity. Now, the Right is punk, the Left is puritan. Today, the Make America Great Again (MAGA) Right and international analogues claim the mantles of fun and mayhem (though often mixed with more aggression) and portray the Left as boringly repressive. The Right offers humor and irony, the Left is too often prosaic and accusatory.

Perhaps I exaggerate. The Right is certainly also accusatory and too often prosaic. Specifically in the US, as Donald Trump simultaneously runs for president and fights multiple legal battles, his rallies have taken on an increasing resemblance to prayer meetings in which congregants affirm loyalty. And of course there is still music supporting Leftist politics today. Knitting 'pussy hats' for the 2017 Women's March, displaying big flowers at rallies against fossil fuel, furling rainbow flags, and bringing giant puppets on marches can all be fun. Far-flung appearances of masked Mr. Anonymous can be entertaining. There is aesthetic flair to the red-robed figures in Extinction Rebellion protests (though not a politics of joy). But much of this is recent, not current. Today's self-representation is commonly serious, somber, and often sad. Of course issues like climate disaster, racism, and possible genocide do not obviously invite humor. But neither opposing disaster nor canceling evil in itself celebrates life.

Arguably, the transgressive style of today's Right is more a parasitical appropriation of tropes from earlier movements than a new wave of cultural creativity. If so, this itself is not altogether new; the 1960s' Left and counterculture borrowed from previous flowerings of Bohemian culture, as Jim Morrison borrowed from Rimbaud and Kurt Weil.

And in the 1920s and 30s, fascists mobilized transgressive styles, spectacles, and Eros. To be sure, there was an element of what Marcuse would later call repressive desublimation in the decadence of Weimar Berlin. Nazis claimed to be the party of nature – both human and environmental – against the depredations of conventional culture and capitalism (and against the 'unnatural' character of their enemies). Today's Right sometimes echoes this as well. In Europe especially, ecofascism has spread for more than a decade.<sup>4</sup> In the US, MAGA rallies may be largely suburban but deploy images of the rural. Gun culture embraces a relationship to nature through hunting. Above all – and prominent for Rufo – defending traditional sexual binaries and heterosexism amounts to defending nature. Against Marcuse and others who think human nature is malleable, Rufo says the counter-revolution must restore "the boundaries of human nature" (Rufo 2023, 280).

Rufo takes hold of Marcuse to claim ideas and spirit from the 1960s while reversing their political associations. His title is a pun. "America's cultural revolution" is at once what he denounces Marcuse for starting and the counter-revolution he proposes to launch, based in part on Marcuse's ideas. Building on the Tea Party and other more tentative starts, Donald Trump and the MAGA Right have launched a massive protest movement. He is the standard-bearer and the exciting public performer fronting for Rufo and others in the band trying to drive a long march through the institutions.

## II

How does Rufo say critical theory took over? First, Marcuse rode the 1960s wave of mass rebellion and counterculture to a position of leadership (even if he modestly denied this). With the failure of mass rebellion, Marcuse joined Rudi Dutschke in calling for a “long march through the institutions”:

The radicals had learned bare-knuckled politics in student protests, guerrilla factions, and underground bomb factories. It was only a matter of time before they asserted dominance over faculty meetings and academic conferences. . . . Today, Marcuse and Dutschke’s long march through the universities has reached its conclusion. The American university is now a “counter-institution” driven by the ideology of the New Left and the critical theories.

*(Rufo 2023, 42–43; see Marcuse 1972, esp. 55–56)*

The readiness of university administrators to resort to police repression against protestors challenging the invasion of Gaza in 2024 suggests the limits of this view. Marcuse’s third wife Erica Sherover-Marcuse is ascribed a surprisingly prominent role. She is presented as a crucial pioneer of consciousness-raising groups and the designer of “the prototype for university DEI programs nationwide” (Rufo 2023, 46; and chapter 3, generally). The first is, of course, misleading about the history of feminism. Rufo never mentions Carol Hanisch, New York Radical Women, or any other feminists; moreover, Sherover-Marcuse’s ‘pioneering’ is dated to the 1970s, well after the consciousness-raising movement had begun. Of course, it was consistent with a broader critical theoretical view of how reflection on the conditions of life might advance recognition of contradictions and possibilities. Rufo overstates Sherover-Marcuse’s role in order to strengthen the sense of causal link, almost conspiracy.

But it is her second alleged role that is really crucial to him: “In little more than a decade,” he says, “she had developed the entire theoretical and linguistic framework for the DEI industry writ large” (Rufo 2023, 47). The rise of the diversity, equity, and inclusion industry is Rufo’s primary evidence that critical theory has taken over the universities, starting from the most elite. But this is at once older and newer than Sherover-Marcuse’s contributions. The agenda of justice and inclusion for Blacks, women, and those without property is at least as old as the US Constitution’s exclusion of these categories of Americans from full citizenship. It shaped civil rights, feminist, labor, and, indeed, populist movements. Affirmative action was ordered by President Johnson in 1965, beginning the formulation and enforcement of new legal and bureaucratic rules. But the prominence of the DEI industry – training programs, consultants, and specialized jobs and career tracks deployed to implement formal bureaucratic mandates – is much more recent. It is mainly in the last decade that this became ubiquitous in universities and corporations. Its spread reflects sincere convictions that change is needed, recognition that resistance is widespread, the more surprising belief that the industry’s methods will be effective in advancing shared goals, and also more cynical defense against costly lawsuits.<sup>5</sup>

The link is clearer, though still overstated, when Rufo uses Angela Davis to suggest the centrality of Marcuse to Black radicalism. Each time Rufo tendentiously attributes causal importance to Marcuse, of course, he implicitly reduces the agency of others – like feminists or Black intellectuals and activists. Rufo describes Davis as simply putting “Marcuse’s theories into practice” (Rufo 2023, 73). He really was her teacher and friend, but she was

not his robot or Black clone. In any case, Rufo says, "Despite her appeals to Kant and Hegel, the real ideology of Angela Davis was simple: total war against American society" (Rufo 2023, 90). Eldridge Cleaver is described as "echoing Marcuse's conclusions" when he argues that the industrial working classes have become "the House Niggers of Capitalism" (ibid.: 92; citing Cleaver's "On Lumpen Ideology, from *Black Scholar* 4 (1972), no. 3, p. 4).

In Rufo's telling, Davis was key to establishing Black Studies in universities. "Davis devised a new formula that transformed the movement's violent impulses into a comprehensive academic theory" (Rufo 2023, 108).<sup>6</sup> Rufo's account of the Black Power movement has few other protagonists. Stokely Carmichael is mentioned in passing and credited with creating the concept of 'institutional racism' (Rufo 2023, 110). "The radicals," Rufo says, "wanted to realize Marcuse's utopia" (Rufo 2023, 112). Rufo then leaps from the 1970s to Black Lives Matter. Davis is the new movement's "lodestar": "The theory and praxis of Black Lives Matter is a basic recapitulation of the Angela Davis oeuvre" (Rufo 2023, 114). "Just as Marcuse and the critical theorists traded the word 'revolution' for the more benign 'liberation,' the new radicals have wrapped black liberation ideology in the vocabulary of euphemism and social science" (Rufo 2023, 117).

It is not just Black Studies that offends and frightens Rufo, of course, but a much wider project of cultural transformation, liberation, social justice, and perhaps even revolution. He sees public schools as a crucial battleground and has worked to convince followers that, though the Leftist takeover is nearly complete, a counter-revolution is possible. Of course, it will need to reach beyond the schools. "According to employee political donations, Google and Facebook are more liberal than the University of California, Berkeley, and the University of Michigan; the consulting firms Deloitte, Accenture, KPMG, PwC, and Ernst & Young are more liberal than the departments of the federal government; and the employees of Disney, Nike, Starbucks, and Capital One are more progressive than the teachers and administrators of the public schools" (Rufo 2023, 62). But for Rufo, schools are crucial to how this revolution against proper American culture came about.

Where Angela Davis connected Marcuse to Black radicalism, Rufo sees Paulo Freire and Henry Giroux as the key links between Marcuse and critical pedagogy. The relationship is less direct, more a matter of broad intellectual descent and shared analyses. According to Rufo, Freire and his American disciples echoed "Marcuse's redefinition of the proletariat" – that in place of the old working class, a new two-part proletariat could exercise revolutionary agency: Black militants together with a young middle-class intelligentsia (Rufo 2023, 172). Of course, Marcuse did not so much redefine the proletariat as assert that radical subjectivity had a much wider range of sources than only class.<sup>7</sup>

Rufo recognizes that new generations transformed Freire's critical pedagogy – now Abolitionist for some, de-colonizing for others. He presents Derrick Bell as crucial. Steeped in Freire and Gramsci, he is presented as both a beneficiary of the racial revolution and a key new leader. Empowered and secure by virtue of his positions first at NYU and then at Harvard, Bell could lash out in radical pessimism and racial rage and at the same time launch a respectable academic school of thought: critical race theory. Rufo quotes Kimberlé Crenshaw "in a nod to Marcuse": "We discovered ourselves to be critical theorists who did race, and we were racial justice advocates who did critical theory." The critical race theorists, he says, "sought to reprise the old dialectical unity of Herbert Marcuse and Angela Davis" (Rufo 2023, 234).<sup>8</sup>

For Rufo,

critical race theory has become the *überdiscipline* of the critical theories. It has harnessed the essential frame of Marcuse's critical theory, absorbed the strategy of Angela Davis's critical praxis, merged with the application of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, and combined them all into a formidable, if largely invisible, political movement, which has moved from the margins to the center of American power.

(Rufo 2023, 249–250)

Rufo says the law professors also launched a “regime of speech suppression.” He sees this as descended from Marcuse, even if it was not quite what he had in mind when he called for

withdrawal of tolerance from regressive movements before they can become active; intolerance even toward thought, opinion, and word, and finally, intolerance in the opposite direction, that is, toward the self-styled conservatives, to the political Right – these anti-democratic notions respond to the actual development of the democratic society which has destroyed the basis for universal tolerance.

(this is Rufo quoting from Marcuse 1969)<sup>9</sup>

### III

So, Rufo suggests, the tendencies Marcuse unleashed have produced a new “society of total administration” (Rufo 2023, 270). Society has become one-dimensional again. “The New Left was never able to transcend, in Marx's phrase, the ‘abominable machine of class rule’ – they simply replaced the management” (Rufo 2023, 273).

There is a sleight of hand here. It is true that the New Left was not able to transcend class rule, but neither was it able to change the management. It is true that CEOs of new California tech companies pioneered a stylistic change that owed much to the 1960s – but mainly to the counterculture, not the New Left. This resulted in wearing t-shirts, turtlenecks, and jeans rather than suits, a certain amount of drug use, and indulgence in science-fiction fantasies of technological utopias and dystopias. But it did not put women or Blacks or actual Leftists in charge. Rufo never looks at the powerful, the wealthy, or the dominant class as such. Rather, he focuses on university professors and educators, key exemplars of what Pierre Bourdieu (1984) called “the dominated fraction of the dominant class.” Those he sees as heirs of Marcuse were more effective in changing the composition of the professoriate than those dominating in worlds of wealth and power.

In higher education, Rufo says, “The new regime is a synthesis of Marcuse's critical theory, which he supported, and one-dimensional society, which he opposed” (Rufo 2023, 54). Rufo does not consider that it is also a product of the ridiculous amount of inequality in the US higher education system, or that this reflects radical inequality in wealth and the instrumentalization of inequality in higher education simultaneously to reproduce the widely social inequality and to distribute unequal life chances.

The Left and Right each claim egalitarianism and the working class today, but they mean different things. Large parts of the Left want greater material equality – and propose to redistribute wealth, narrow income gaps, and provide public services on a more egalitarian basis. But this is new, part of a resurgence of socialism and social democracy. It is accompanied



by a renewal of Left engagement with organized labor. Between the 1970s and the 2008 financial crisis, however, and for some time after, as inequality on all these dimensions grew to extremes not seen in a hundred years, most of the so-called Left was really just liberal and focused more on equality of legal and cultural recognition and more diverse access to elite institutions, especially universities. Thus, it happened that more Black men and women were admitted to Harvard at the same time that dramatically more Black men and women were incarcerated.<sup>10</sup> The liberal pseudo-Left mostly ignored the working class and occasionally looked down on it because it seemed full of racism, sexism, homophobia, and similar vices.

The MAGA Right partially includes – and centrally celebrates – a working class angry about its troubled economic fortunes and perceived lack of respect. This does not mean that every Trump-supporting worker is impoverished. It does mean that the American working class suffered enormous loss of relative economic and social standing and respect and often outright displacement during the years of deindustrialization. The Left did try to fight this, but the liberal political class was not very interested (partly because it had its own problems and partly because inflating housing prices and retirement savings buffered those problems). Supporters of the MAGA movement are by no means all working class, though many in the middle class identify with workers both culturally and in a sense of displacement and unfair disadvantage (despite what objective analysts might say is their relative privilege).

Steered partly by Rufo, the Right focuses its egalitarianism on complaints that efforts to help minorities have hurt the (mostly White, male-dominated, heteronormative) majority. His crusade against DEI is always implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, a claim that this is a source of materially harmful reverse discrimination. He sees White men as its principal victims, and with them the traditional nuclear family.

Rufo's focus on education is, in part, an imitation of how he thinks the followers of Marcuse waged their cultural revolution. Now, as part of the leadership of the New College of Florida, he advances "the first public university in America to begin rolling back the encroachment of gender ideology and queer theory on its academic offerings." He would like to reduce the proportion of women. Having so many more women than men, he told Michelle Goldberg of the *New York Times*, turned New College into "what many have called a social justice ghetto." He favors "rebalancing the ratio of students" and has emphasized recruiting student-athletes to add more men (Goldberg 2023).

The reasons education changed and America changed are far more powerful and more complex than a series of conspiracies among Left intellectuals. Transformation of the economy was basic. Industry lost its leading position as agriculture had before. Technology played an ever-greater role. So did the media and cultural industries. And so did large corporations with international connections, layers upon layers of executives with MBAs, and growing reliance on financial markets in which institutions played a bigger role than individuals. The 'organized capitalism' of the postwar boom could not in fact contain the contradictions; these produced recurrent crises starting with the 1970s' combination of wars in Vietnam and then Palestine and Israel, end of the gold standard, ascendancy of petro-capitalism, accelerating financialization, and stagflation.

Rufo sees the liberal take-over of higher education mirrored in relations between professional educators and parents in public schools. He calls for decentralization, more local autonomy, and opportunity for localities and groups to be different. So did many in the 1960s, of course, though this is not an echo Rufo acknowledges.

What actually happened from the 1970s was consolidation of school districts that increased school size and separated schools from communities at least as much as

court-ordered immigration had in the years before. Schools and even school boards were increasingly politicized, not least in debates over how to teach reading, but also over questions of discipline, race, and the assessment of performance. These controversies drove growth in private schools. Private options fueled tax revolt, and inadequate resources for public schools drove still more privatization and use of quasi-private but publicly funded options like charter schools. Though advanced degrees were increasingly required for teachers and especially administrators, the process of professionalization was limited by relatively low compensation and status compared to business. But the professionals did increasingly see themselves as carrying ‘advanced’ ideas that needed to be implemented even in the face of parental resistance. Rufo focuses on issues of race and sexuality and how American history should be taught. These came in a package with increased emphasis on college preparation and competitive admissions, rapid transformation in what students needed to learn, and increased state monitoring of exam performance and other abstract indicators.

I hope it is evident that Rufo is not a reliable source, but neither is he all wrong. DEI bureaucracies are hardly instances of totalitarian rule, but they do convert diversity, equity, and inclusion from looser goals into administratively mandated and monitored practices. Requiring staff to complete training programs and job candidates to offer ‘diversity statements’ are now standard practices (though there is little evidence they are effective in durably reducing inequality or marginalization). Statistics are collected, and rules are written and rewritten. Attempted solutions to failures of diversity, equity, and inclusion are changed by the ways they are embedded in institutions and inevitably in instrumental rationality as well as personal expression.

Identity politics is not always practiced with dialectical attention to the historicity and complexity of identities. It has brought valuable advances. But a politics of recognition pursued in elite settings has often detracted from a more egalitarian politics of redistribution (Fraser 1995). In something of the same vein, a contemporary socialist charges Marcuse with “*overvaluation* of subjective radicalism and an *undervaluation* of objective transformation” (Cohan 2021).

Harkening back to the Frankfurt School’s disappointment in the working-class support for Nazism rather than social revolution, Rufo asserts, “The left-wing ideologues framed their revolution in terms of the social sciences because, they believed, it would legitimize elite management of society – and freeze out the ‘antirevolutionary’ working classes, which had, since Marcuse’s time, opposed their rule” (Rufo 2023, 54). This is not fair to Horkheimer and Adorno, and it is emphatically not true of Marcuse.

Rufo blames a conspiracy for the marginalization of the working class between the 1960s and the financial crisis, pointing to the simultaneous growth of an educated professional and managerial elite. He pays little attention to transformation of the economy and therefore the labor force. But the working class *was* marginalized, and that elite *did* grow. Far too often, members of the elite claimed (or assumed) their privilege was justified by individual success in academic and economic competitions (the illusions of meritocracy) and added insult to injury by looking down on those whose lives were damaged by the same forces that brought academic chances, high salaries, nice houses, and foreign travel to the elite.<sup>11</sup>

Among the factors a more serious and balanced account would need to consider are the dramatic financialization of the economy; intensified globalization based both on that financialization and on new technologies of control, communications, and logistics;



attendant deindustrialization with loss not only of jobs but communities and social support systems; new extremes of inequality not just among individuals but between rural and small town America and the country's richer metropolitan areas; reorganization of work and economic opportunity to favor those with elite higher education and under-reward those with non-elite degrees, let alone none; massive increase in imprisonment, especially of the poor and racial minorities; the rise of new structures of corporate power, especially in industries linked to new technologies; massive asset inflation favoring those who already owned property, not least in housing but also in stock markets; and a 'neoliberal' ideological shift emphasizing ruthless pursuit of shareholder value, excusing market failures, and encouraging governments to fail – not least in fair tax collection.

All this happened very fast and with far too little investment in support for those forced to adapt to new circumstances they did not choose. Neither Marcuse nor the New Left chose these changes. But it must be admitted even by those who do not buy conspiracy theories from Rufo or the far Right that some from the New Left and many from the broader 'liberal establishment' did benefit. Student radicals came largely from relatively elite universities and their degrees opened opportunities in the shifting economy. They came from middle- and upper-class families that owned houses and other assets that buffered the more general hollowing out of the middle of America's class structure. They worked at least for much of their lives in relative security in corporate and government offices, universities, and health care. Only more recently has there begun to be a shakeout bringing greater precarity to many in the next generations and proletarianization to once more independent jobs – like, say, doctors.

#### IV

Rufo opens and closes his book with an explicit call for counter-revolution. He identifies this with the current right wing of so-called populists and self-declared patriots led in the US by Donald Trump. He offers a predictable catalog of new liberties that have undermined necessary order and authority: race, sex, gender identity, and disability are prominent. He sees calls for social justice as efforts to subvert meritocracy and take away what hard-working Americans have earned. Even more, he sees new valuations of difference and projects of personal change as assaults on human nature.

The counter-revolution must begin at that exact point: to reestablish the basic human desires, to redraw the boundaries of human nature, and to rebuild the structures for the fulfillment of human meaning, which cannot be engineered by the critical theories and must go "beyond politics" into the realm of ethics, myth, and metaphysics.

*(Rufo 2023, 279)*

Here, Rufo echoes tropes common on the extreme Right. These include an appeal to human nature (including especially binary sexual distinction and heterosexism), to hierarchical authority, and to a realm beyond politics which somewhat amorphously provides space for traditional religion and more recent mythopoesis from the celebration of Tolkien made prominent by the Italian Right to the often-violent worlds of many computer games.

But, Rufo also says, "the deepest conflict in the United States is not along the axis of class, race, or identity, but along the managerial axis that pits elite institutions against the common citizen" (Rufo 2023, 281). Selective universities are Rufo's prime example of the

elite institutions he thinks oppose the common citizen. And indeed, all selectivity is at the same time exclusion. As the proportion of Americans attending universities grew, the system was organized by hierarchical distinctions – in chances of admission, in prestige, and in the future careers of students. Costs (and accordingly student debt) escalated as much to fund universities' competition with each other for rankings as to improve education. The inequality grew more extreme and the rungs on the ladder further apart. From early childhood, middle- and upper-class parents and schools in well-off suburbs pushed children to acquire the credentials that would land them places in the top tier. There were very good schools in the second and third tiers too, but there was and is a big difference between all those relatively selective schools and the others that are attended by most American students. And of course conditions for faculty vary along the same hierarchy, and while the correlation is not perfect, so do the relatively elite backgrounds of faculty.

From the 1970s, while there was ever-more intensive competition for places in selective universities, there was also an effort to make admission more inclusive – at least in terms of certain identities. There were to be more places for women, Blacks, Latinos, Asians, and other historically under-represented groups (but not the working class). This was not really a pursuit of equality. It was an attempt to secure fairness (by some definitions) in who would get elite education. This is part of why the 'E' in DEI is for 'equity' instead of equality. It was a gain to give minorities a better chance at Stanford and Berkeley, Harvard and Michigan. But, to be blunt, this was an attempt by the elite to become more diverse without giving up their exclusivity, internal networks, and distinction from the rest of society. There could have been an effort to create a more egalitarian system of higher education, to create more very good universities rather than a few incredibly elite ones, to flatten the hierarchy. But there was not.

In short, Rufo's explanation is problematic, but there is a real tension between elitism and inclusion in American higher education. Rufo has not resolved the tension. He deploys the same rhetoric as his liberal enemies, speaking frequently of the need to restore free speech, meritocracy, and academic excellence. But since he has been on the board of New College, whole subjects and lines of academic work have been banned and each entering class has had weaker SAT scores and other academic credentials (Goldberg 2023).

Rufo's attack on the New Left is, in part, that it brought too much destruction and disruption and too little actual improvement. Sometimes he writes as though he is intentionally on the same course. "In historical terms, the counter-revolution can be understood as a restoration of the revolution of 1776 over and against the revolution of 1968. Its ambition is not to assume control over the centralized bureaucratic apparatus, but to smash it" (Rufo 2023, 280). With Rufo on its board, New College has set out to attract new, more right-wing, more White, and more male students. Presumably they are there for education, not just to make a political point. They must hope that Rufo and his colleagues do not really intend to smash the institution, though they have done damage, but to make it work better.

This raises a basic question for revolutionaries, one as relevant for Marcuse and radicals of the 1960s as contemporary reactionaries like Rufo: are things really so bad that existing institutions must all be smashed rather than reformed? Revolutions are risky. Historical examples reveal not only violence – sometimes staggering violence – but outcomes typically very different from what the revolutionaries sought. Marx had argued that revolution was necessary not only because history demanded it or to realize utopian ideals, but because the lives of workers would be miserable – and brief – without it. As Marcuse recognized in the

1960s, workers have more to lose than their chains – even if they potentially have a lot to gain. Even beyond the working class, those for whom current conditions are problematic nonetheless often have investments in trying to hold their current lives together, provide for their children, and cope with aging parents and loss.

Rufo's agenda for counter-revolution is largely restorationist. He references 1776 though most proposals from the Right are less in keeping with the radicalism of the Declaration of Independence and more with the conservative agenda that embedded a range of compromises in the US Constitution. However much he (and other rebels) rhetorically evoke the US founding and the Constitutional purity of 'originalism,' the America they want to restore is not that of early independence. They want to put things back as they were in an imagined 1950s (or very early 1960s – one with Corvettes but not the counterculture). That's why it is so evocative to criticize the 1960s and the followers of Herbert Marcuse. But Make America Great Again is not a historically specific slogan. It is a highly contextual complaint. Rufo and MAGA advocates today are heirs of the restorationists who founded the Ku Klux Klan and other organizations after the Civil War and in the early 1900s erected so many of the statues of slave-owning Civil War heroes that have recently been toppled, famously in Charlottesville. But the restoration they seek is of a more recent golden age.

Golden ages are as hard to restore as utopias are to achieve. There are commonly down-sides to each that are forgotten in praising their virtues, but the alternative is not necessarily treating the present as necessary. Both golden ages and utopian ideals can inform imagination of better possibilities and motivate justified struggles.

## V

Rufo holds up a distorted mirror to critical theory. Rufo wrongly says "the critical theories operate by pure negation" (Rufo 2023, 273) and wrongly accuses Marcuse and followers of nihilism (*ibid.*, xi, 5, 98). In part, Rufo confuses the core idea of negativity with the mere practice of condemnation. He is a specialist in oppositions – taking sides in political battles and culture wars. Mere opposition is not the same as dialectical reasoning – whether practiced from the Left or the Right.

When Marx (1843) called for "the ruthless criticism of everything existing," he did not mean nihilistic condemnation of everything. He meant examining the conditions that made existing reality possible, contradictions in these and ways in which they might change, and reasons why some changes (though not all) might be good. It was not to assert any dogma, Marx went on, but rather "to try to help the dogmatics to clarify to themselves the meaning of their own positions." Like Marx, Marcuse insisted that negativity is about possibility, the historicity of human existence and society, and, thus, the capacity to reach beyond the limits of what exists now. Critical theory must be the product of open thinking about a world that tries to close down our sense of possibility and the actual possibilities of life.

Negativity is not just saying "no" and still less is it nihilism. What Marcuse and the Frankfurt School meant by this term is (a) seeing and thinking beyond the illusion that existing reality is timeless and necessary rather than a moment in history and (b) recognizing that current reality is unstable because it is shaped by opposing forces. Negativity is thus crucial to identifying openings to change in place of the ostensible completeness and certainty of apparent reality. While much orthodox Marxism asserted that the working out of these contradictions would follow deterministic patterns, Marcuse and his Frankfurt colleagues suggested there were different possible futures. Negativity is not one-directional.

Different possibilities for change can be perceived and pursued, though these are not equally probable. Like other Frankfurt theorists, Marcuse became pessimistic about the chances for a working-class revolution. But he retained hope for emancipatory change based on other sources for negativity. Art could help people see beyond mere positivity. Even frustrations and boredom might make people seek something more than existing society seemed to offer. Groups that suffered injustice and exclusion were disposed to see limits to existing order. None of these was in itself a replacement for the working class as Marx imagined it to be – both the source of critical perspective and the agent of revolutionary transformation. But any recognition of the possibility of emancipatory change could inform struggle. This suggested that struggle and social change could go in different directions; outcomes were not determined.

It required strength of character, Marcuse thought, to persevere in critical thought in the face of either outright repression or the somewhat indirect repression of a society committed to positive thinking. But critical thought was crucial and it required an openness to unpredictable possibilities (precisely what authoritarian personalities lacked). It also required dissent and openness to argument. This is important to evaluating Marcuse's famous warning against thinking that liberal tolerance could be sufficient to protect dissent in a society where education and culture were heavily biased in favor of existing power structures and against liberation. He has been read – not only by Rufo, but also by many on the Puritanical Left – as saying it is good to be intolerant towards those with whom one disagrees. This is, at the very least, an oversimplification.

With colleagues, Marcuse (1969) joined in a controversial “critique of pure tolerance.” Tolerance had long been a core value for liberalism. It was initially most important in arguments against religious fanaticism and state-imposed religious orthodoxy. These were extended to include tolerance for political dissent, ethnic differences, and diverse lifestyle choices. Tolerance became a defining tenet of liberalism, widely defended in bills of rights and bound up with other liberal values like individualism and private property. Marcuse and colleagues did not question whether tolerance in general was a good thing. They argued that it should not be made an absolute. They criticized *pure* tolerance.

Of course, pure tolerance had seldom been practiced. Even where religious diversity and freedom of conscience were respected, there were questions about what counted as a legitimate religion entitled to tolerance or other privileges. The right to free speech was held to demand tolerance for controversial political or intellectual arguments but not for shouting fire in a crowded theater and often not for hate speech or calling for revolution. There were always limits, and a key question was who was able to impose the limits. When the limits were defined by the state, law, and majority culture, they typically worked to protect the status quo – and legitimate intolerance toward those who would challenge it. Accordingly, it might be necessary for those who wanted to see more progress – or justice or liberation – to question the norm of pure tolerance.

Marcuse sought not simply to pit one intolerance at another, but to protect space for difference and dissent. Such free spaces – universities, the press – had been protected (to a degree) by bourgeois and republican understandings of rights and public virtue. They were protected not only from state intrusion and direct repression, but also from reduction to mere market pressures. These old protections were eroding. So, Marcuse argued the Left would have to fight to secure space for dissent and critical reason. This could require temporary and tactical intolerance to secure openness – not to secure victory and closure.

What Marcuse saw in the second half of the 20th century was not a new capacity for state censorship or other repression. Rather, it was actually a reduction in need for such measures. Consumer capitalism circulated dominant ideas extremely well, often in the form of entertainment. Affirmative culture backed by the culture industries managed not so much to silence as to neutralize or trivialize dissent. Commercialized trivialization of radical ideas and images was widespread. At the end of the 1960s, for example, the idea of 'revolution' was banalized both by overuse in intellectual discussions and by deployment as part of advertising campaigns – as for example the Beatles song used by Nike. Examples abound in social media today. Free speech and openness to dissent do not require, for example, allowing false messages to be boosted a million times by the hidden use of bots or AI.

In response to repressive tolerance, Marcuse suggested it might sometimes be necessary for progressives to practice progressive intolerance. The concept has been controversial and often abused. This was not simply a call to shout down the other side. This is a very crude and limited form of argument that does not make analyses deeper or more subtle. Tactics like 'deplatforming' need to be practiced with care and caution. There is no obligation for universities to provide platforms for proponents of any political position. It is not unreasonable to say that neo-Nazis and the leaders of the Ku Klux Klan should not be invited to speak. But prohibitions, even of the genuinely pernicious, are not intellectual arguments and should not very often be chosen in place of intellectual arguments. Among other things, they presume a worrying level of certainty about what is right or wrong, good or bad, tolerable or too dangerous. This may be reproduced as dogma to be asserted without adequate analysis or argument.

Such tactics also risk reducing any conflict to mere confrontation of material forces – and these are not circumstances in which the subaltern or critical often win. As Chris Rufo and the state of Florida make clear, deplatforming is a tactic easily embraced by the Right – with backing from state power. Progressives might think twice about whether the university has already been so debased and dominated by power and markets that it is no longer worth defending its protected space of academic freedom.

This is not just an issue about free speech and debate. It surfaces also when self-declared progressives think in terms of falsely positive categories – say of race, gender, or sexuality – rather than attending critically to the internal complexity of each 'identity,' the ways they are brought to the fore by social contradictions, and the reasons their meaning and salience recurrently changes. As 'identity politics' grew more prominent in the wake of the 1960s, two meanings contended. One is that people have irreducibly basic identities and these are the bases of politics. The other was that all identities are forged in politics – either the exercise of power or its contestation, directly or through culture and a variety of institutions. Collective identities are not simply given by nature. Nor should categories of identity automatically be taken as fixed wholes. The first meaning can be powerful in politics, but it can also limit and distort. It is especially problematic when linked to assertions of (or search for) authenticity grounded in an ostensible past or self-evident nature. The second meaning reveals both more complex processes of historical construction, often shaped by contradictions, and an element of freedom, a place for transformative reimagining.

Discussions of intersectionality have emphasized that identities are plural and interconnected. But too often they become arithmetical – adding up multiple categories of identity or oppression. This is not inevitable. As Patricia Hill Collins (2019) has argued, intersectionality can be critical theory, an examination of the dialectical tensions in all efforts to

fix identity. It is important not to reify any category of identity, or treat it as a falsely solid whole or simple unity.

Post-1970s' identity politics is often blamed for marginalizing the working class – both by Rufo and by many on the Left. But it is worth reminding ourselves that identification of a class and with a class come about through a creative politics of identity, not automatically. Class is no more a simple positive identity than is race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, or any other. Think of the long struggles to forge class identity among workers in different crafts, on farms and in factories, of different races, native and immigrant and so forth.

To their credit, when Marcuse and colleagues in the Frankfurt School studied the disappointing tendency of workers toward acquiescence in authoritarianism, they emphasized that some workers rebelled while others remained loyal to authority, and it was necessary not just to generalize but to ask what explained the differences and the internal conflicts experienced by many (see Smith 1998). Workers were indeed oppressed, but they did not all develop the consciousness some Marxists and others expected on the basis of that 'stand-point.' They were also (or mostly) German, but did not all conform to the expectations of nationalists either.

We need to be at least as subtle and likely more so when we analyze beliefs and loyalties we find problematic today on the basis of ascribed identities. Baffled as to why any reasonable person would remain loyal to Donald Trump in 2024, for example, too many either posit the absence of reason or rely on ambiguous notions of who the Trumpists are. White, perhaps (but not always). Male (more often than not, but not always). Rural or small town (more often than the US population as a whole, but actually not most Trump supporters). And so forth. We do the same with 'populism.' This misses two points. First, those various identities need to be understood in complex dialectical relations to each other, to those we think are not typical of Trumpists or populists, and to our very contradictory country (and world). Second, we need to see the 'politics of identity' as a process invoking, shaping, and reconstituting identities not reliant on fixed and stable meaningful categories. We should treat 'populism' more as a politics, a process of working on peoplehood, than as a political position determined by economic or social conditions. Marcuse would, I think, tell us that it wasn't this a hundred years ago and isn't today.

Chris Rufo and Donald Trump decry identity politics because they identify it with those they make into symbolic enemies. But both practice identity politics when they evoke (and sometimes 'dog-whistle' to) caricatured but meaningful identities among their supporters, audiences, and readers. And there are not only dog whistles but also much more explicit appeals to American nationality, maleness, 'straight' sexuality, and specific politically shaped ways of manifesting each.

There is no getting away from categorical identities in the organization of large-scale social life. But we can be careful and nuanced, and we can resist relying too much on positive accounts of such identities. Practices like articulating statements of 'positionality' are occasions to be reflective about identities, encouraging reflexivity, and following the methodological norm of symmetry – applying to ourselves the categories we take as objective with regard to others and thinking about their significance. These are helpful as devices for foregrounding these issues, and much more helpful when approached with critical attention to the limits and potential routinization of the categories involved. But too often they are routinized, unreflective, repetitions of categories of identity treated as positive, more or less fixed and transparent, wholes. For example, we foreground certain 'positions' more than others. Race, gender, sexuality, and class dominate in typical American deployment, with



nation usually left implicit. But this reflects a view of the world and a location in it, and it marginalizes other significant identities or orientations to speech and action (not all of which are so easily conceptualized as positions).

Thinking about Marcuse's 'positionality' is helpful and, as always, a reminder to attend to complexity. We can pretty confidently say 'White cis male and middle class.' But should we not also say Jew and German? Secular Jew, raised in Berlin in an upper-middle-class environment – not on a shtetl or in a ghetto or in a small town with few other Jews, secular or religious? Largely assimilated to and formed in a German identity but driven out by the contradictions in German political development? A son rejecting his father's bourgeois identity and life for alliance with the cause of revolution (Jeffries 2016)? Very highly educated yet on the margins of academia? An immigrant to America? A refugee who grew up in a society that, in many ways, no longer existed by the time he left? Old? Marcuse was 66 when *One-Dimensional Man* was published, however popular he became among students in their teens and 20s. Is being a Marxist a strong enough identity to count as a 'position'? It certainly shaped not just what he wrote and said but also how his work was received. How about 'sometime member of the Frankfurt School'?

Historical context is important, too. The young Marcuse was shaped not just by being White, German, Jewish, upper-middle-class, and male but by being each of these things in the early 20th century, before, during, and after WWI (see the Foreword to this book). The meaning of each category would change during his life, in some cases radically. And he would change what some of them meant for him – that is, both to him about himself and to others considering his case. Likewise, Marcuse became, in significant ways, American. He spoke English well, but with an accent and all his life spoke German that was "both eloquent and, when he wanted, very colloquial" (Peter Marcuse 2004, 249). But at first, his social world was shared mainly with other émigrés. This changed, his son reports, when Marcuse moved to Washington, DC, to work for the US government in the war against fascism. This was a choice – not one made by Horkheimer and Adorno, for example, but made at the same time by Herbert's close friend Franz Neumann as well as Leo Lowenthal, Otto Kirchheimer, and Friedrich Pollock. But, in addition to the choice, there were new social conditions in DC: more American friends, a son in an American public school, a wife now working in an entirely American environment; material conditions from media to street signs and housing; political conditions as Marcuse got involved in civil rights and similar issues.

Marcuse appreciated the importance of reflecting on how both personal experience and social position influenced what people saw in the world and analyzed in their theories. He saw that those oppressed or marginalized saw the world in different ways from those with privilege, and indeed, that privilege came in different forms. He resisted both essentialism and reductionism. He emphasized the human capacity to remake what is given by history and material conditions. He insisted on approaching categories critically. He was, above all, attentive to contradictions that shape both thought and reality – and which limit the extent to which categories are internally consistent and stable.

Marcuse's lifelong engagement with aesthetic theories brings out the extent to which he kept looking for sources of insight, perspective, freedom, and perception beyond the containers of conventional thought. These could certainly involve identity and be influenced by social positions without being reduced to them. Likewise, Marcuse's critique of affirmative culture focuses not on a simple error that might be reversed but on the pervasive limits of positivity and the challenge of moving beyond them. I won't belabor the point. Marcuse sought

to understand the complexities of capitalism and modern society. He was attentive to different positions that shaped people's relationships and perceptions of each. But he was always concerned with ways in which people might emancipate themselves from restricted vision.

This differentiates Marcuse from Christopher Rufo. For, in the end, Rufo's pitch is positional. A number of fixed identities are basic. Some, like gender (he would say 'sex'), sexuality, and race, are in his view matters of nature. Others, like class and nation, are social, but given legitimacy by history. There are fixed trade-offs between winners and losers when people in some positions get a better deal from social change. Marcuse, at his best, encourages us to attend to complexity in a way Rufo does not. History is made by a range of forces Rufo does not even consider. Human action matters, but the chains of causality are complex, not simplistic conspiracies. Still more basically, Marcuse calls our attention to the historical contradictions and specific social conditions that call forth our identities and shape our lives but also give us chances to change our lives. There is no Marcusean master plan. But there is a lot of Marcusean help to try to learn to think for ourselves, both individually and together.

### Notes

- 1 Rufo implies that Marcuse's book *Hegel's Ontology and the Theory of Historicity* was successfully accepted as his *Habilitation*. In fact, Heidegger did not approve it (and may have refused it without reading it). This ended Marcuse's hopes for an academic career, which in turn led to his affiliation with the Frankfurt School as an employee of the Institute for Social Research.
- 2 There is a long and intellectually serious conservative tradition – from Edmund Burke through Russell Kirk in America, Michael Oakeshot and Roger Scruton in the UK. There is also a theoretically deep tradition of Catholic social thought on both Left and Right (and calling these terms into question). There are important thinkers in each tradition today and some are also active in current political controversies. But to a very large extent, the currently dominant political Right is not actually interested in conservatism – either as an intellectual tradition or a political program. It is more interested in disruption and power and quite willing to accept widespread destruction rather than try to 'conserve' any existing social order (other than perhaps racial and gender privilege and national belonging). Of course the two groups connect and overlap. But like Rufo, members of this Right are keen to accuse political enemies, but much slower than actual conservatives to analyze deeper threats like neoliberalism, finance-dominated capitalism, or even secularism.
- 3 Marcuse (1972) saw this as an assertion of the pleasure principle against the stifling demands of conventional culture and the performance principle. It may sometimes have involved too much direct expression for his taste, not enough sublimation. He worried that poorly steered desublimation could detract from struggle and bolster repression.
- 4 For helpful recent perspectives on transnational patterns in the political styles and cultural appropriations of the extreme Right, see Forti (2024) and Popartan and Ungereanu (2024).
- 5 Research has not found that diversity training brought diversity (see, for example, Dobbin and Kalev 2022) or that anti-prejudice programs actually reduced prejudice (Paluck et al. 2021). Material inequality has not been reduced. Movements for more equal recognition – both legal and cultural – have had effects, though it is not clear the tools of the DEI industry played a significant role. Lawsuits proliferate partly because bad behavior persists.
- 6 Rufo partially follows Fabio Rojas (2010), but Rojas should not be blamed for extreme oversimplification.
- 7 Passages in Marcuse's *Essay on Liberation* emphasize Marcuse's hope that radical youth and Black activists would jump start class struggle. Along with art and other sources, they might contribute to the formation of a new and different radical subjectivity. But Marcuse, who always claimed that in the end he was an orthodox Marxist, was consistent in asserting the fullness of revolutionary transformation could not take place without the working class.
- 8 Implying she had no other sources, Rufo reports that Crenshaw drew the concept of intersectionality from Angela Davis' (1981) *Women, Race & Class*. He complains about the "multisyllabic

- Latinate term” which gave the concept “the perception of intellectual heft” (237). But his main point is that intersectional analysis of oppression amounts to blaming affluent, able-bodied, heterosexual, White males for all oppression and marginalization. He also asserts that Crenshaw sees those suffering intersectional oppression to be the “new revolutionary Subject, far beyond Marx’s white male proletariat and Marcuse’s white-students-and-black-ghetto coalition” (238).
- 9 Though Rufo does not acknowledge it, Marcuse makes clear that his goal is not doing away with tolerance, but “creating the conditions under which tolerance can again become a liberating and humanizing force” (ibid., 111).
  - 10 Rufo does note that Angela Davis continued to fight against mass incarceration, though more to stress her accusations of racism and mock the Abolition movement. For a fuller view, see Davis (2024).
  - 11 For more on these issues and those listed in the next paragraph, see Calhoun et al. (2022, esp. chs 2–4).

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