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AFFLUENCE VERSUS TRANSCENDENCE

A REFLECTION ON MARCUSE'S ANALYSIS OF THE AFFLUENT SOCIETY

An inquiry into the problem of affluence poses the problem of a value judgement. It implies that affluence, that is, progress and development in an unprecedented manner, should lead to greater freedom and happiness of man, to greater possibilities for humanization and authentic human life. But in the light of the present development of the advanced industrial societies, the question may be asked: does affluence help man to attain an authentic development or does it hinder his growth as a human person. Let us examine, first, the characteristics of an affluent society and, then, its impact on the development of man.

1. The Characteristic Notes of the Affluent Society

It was in 1958 that John Kenneth Galbraith, the American Economist, published *The Affluent Society*. It has thrown light on the perils of affluence in the advanced industrial states of the western world: "Wealth is not without its advantages and the case to the contrary, although it has often been made has never proved widely persuasive. But beyond doubt, wealth is the relentless enemy of understanding. The poor man has always a precise view of the problem and its remedy: he hasn't enough and he needs more. The rich man can assume or imagine a much greater variety of ills and he will be correspondingly less certain of their remedy. Also, until he learns to live with his wealth, he will have a well-observed tendency to put it to the wrong purposes or otherwise to make himself foolish"¹. Through a clear insight into

1. J.K. Galbraith, *The Affluent Society* (Harmondsworth: Middlesex, 1968),
p. 13.

the socio-economic system of the United States Galbraith was able to give a picture of the "great and unprecedented affluence"². But a radical philosophical critique of the affluent society appeared only with the works of Herbert Marcuse³. In his *Five Lectures*, Marcuse distinguishes two types of the concept of progress which have governed modern western culture. The first is the concept of technical progress. In this view, mankind goes forward with a continuous growth of knowledge and capacities. Through knowledge, accumulated in the course of cultural development, man strives to dominate Nature. This is a kind of quantitative growth of human knowledge. Its application to the environment produced growth and affluence, satisfying man's needs. The second type of progress called the humanitarian progress points, on the contrary, towards the realization of human freedom. This qualitative concept of progress creates consciousness of freedom and its prerogatives. As the sphere of freedom expands, the sphere of slavery, oppression and suffering are reduced to a considerable extent.

The inner connection between these two kinds of progress seems to be obvious: technical progress creates the conditions for humanitarian progress. In other words, reduction of poverty and oppression presupposes a certain level of technical progress, resulting in a high degree of domination of Nature. But the question may be asked whether technical progress always brings about humanitarian progress. Marcuse says that a qualitative change can never be envisaged as an automatic one, since technical progress, though it is a precondition of freedom, never implies the realization of greater freedom. The characteristics of the affluent society show the tragic condition of human freedom. According to Mar-

2. *Ibid.*

3. Born in Berlin in 1898, Marcuse had his early education and intellectual formation in the German philosophical tradition. In 1933, the German political situation forced him to leave his native country and settle in the United States, where he taught at the universities of Columbia, Harvard, Brandeis and California. His life and teaching in an advanced industrial society made him aware of the perils of affluence. Following the example of the other members of the Frankfurt School, namely, Max Horkheimer (1895-1972) and Theodor Adorno (1902-69), Marcuse has abundantly made use of the concepts of the Critical Theory in his critique of the advanced industrial society. See T. Vellilamthadam, *Tomorrow's Society, Marcuses and Freud on Civilization*, Kottayam: Oriental Institute of Religious Studies, 1978.

cuse, affluent society is a "class society...with a high concentration of economic and political power; with an enlarged and enlarging sector of automation and co-ordination of production, distribution and communication; with private ownership in the means of production which however depends increasingly on ever more active and wide intervention by the government. It is a society in which...the material as well as cultural needs of the underlying population are satisfied on a scale large than ever before—but they are satisfied in line with the requirements and interests of the apparatus and of the powers which control the apparatus. And it is a society growing on the condition of the accelerating waste, planned obsolescence and destruction, while the substratum of the population continues to live in poverty and misery.⁴

In **One-Dimensional Man**, Marcuse enumerates the trends of the affluent society:

Concentration of the national economy on the needs of the big corporations, with the government as a stimulating, supporting, and sometimes even controlling force; hitching of this economy to a world-wide system of military alliances, monetary arrangements, technical assistance and development schemes; gradual assimilation of blue-collar and white-collar population, of leadership types in business and labour, of leisure activities and aspirations in different social classes; fostering of a pre-established harmony between scholarship and the national purpose; invasion of private household by the togetherness of public opinion; opening of the bedroom to the media of mass communication⁵.

In advanced industrial society where surplus-repression⁶ prevails, the standard of living has increased considerably, together with the increase in medical facilities, power of consumption, comfort in all sections of society, reduction of labour time and the increase of leisure.

4. H. Marcuse, "Liberation from the Affluent Society", in D. Cooper (ed) *The Dialectics of Liberation* (Harmondsworth: Penguin books, 1968) p. 180.

5. H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man. Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 19.

6. For the Marcusean Concept of Surplus-repression, see T. Vellilamthadam, *Tomorrow's Society*, Ch. II.

The affluent society has, therefore,

- 1) an abundant industrial and technical capacity;
- 2) a rising standard of living;
- 3) a high degree of concentration of economic and political power;
- 4) and an effective control and manipulation of human behaviour. Thus the industrial and technical capacity is used for destructive ends, for military and semi-military equipments, for production of luxury goods and gadgets.

2. Affluence, for or against Human Development

Marcuse argues that the affluent society, despite its incessant progress, is not becoming wholly rational; in fact, it is irrational. It controls and manipulates the individual. It restricts his behaviour and thinking. The quantitative growth of goods of consumption dissimulates men as regards their state of slavery, and thus prevents any qualitative change in the society. It is an acknowledged fact that a Soviet citizen is nourished well, and is better educated than his forefathers. But can one affirm that he is more free. Lack of freedom of expression and free initiative, and the presence of an oppressive bureaucracy give progress an inhuman quality. Marcuse thinks that the humanistic and liberalizing ideals of Marx are being betrayed by the established regime of the USSR.⁷

The paradox of the affluent society is that the individual thinks that his needs are satisfied. Yet, what actually happens is his needs are subordinated to the needs of the established society. Marcuse distinguishes false needs from true needs. The false needs are those which are "superimposed upon the individual by particular social interests."⁸ These needs perpetuate misery, aggressiveness and injustice. These needs also restrict human freedom and happiness instead of increasing them. In **Eros and Civilization**, this restriction is well described:

7. Cf. H. Marcuse *Soviet Marxism* (New York: Vintage books), 1961.

8. H. Marcuse *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 5.

The high standard of living in the domain of the great corporations is **restrictive** in a concrete sociological sense: the goods and services that the individual buy control their needs and petrify their faculties. In exchange for the commodities that enrich their life, the individuals sell not only their labour but also their free time. The better living is offset by the all-pervasive control over living. People dwell in apartment concentration—and have private automobiles with which they can no longer escape into a different world. They have huge refrigerators filled with frozen foods. They have dozens of newspapers and magazines that espouse the same ideals. They have innumerable choices, innumerable gadgets which are all of the same sort and keep them occupied and divert their attention from the real issue—which is the awareness that they could both work less and determine their own needs and satisfactions⁹.

These false needs become repressive in the sense that the satisfaction of these needs require the continuous functioning of the established society on an increased scale. This system of profitable domination manipulates the development itself:

In the contemporary era the conquest of scarcity is still confined to small areas of advanced industrial society. Their prosperity covers up the inferno inside and outside their borders, it also spreads a repressive productivity and false needs. It is repressive precisely to the degree to which it promotes the satisfaction of needs which require continuing the rat race of catching up with one's peers and with planned obsolescence enjoying freedom from using the brain, working with and for the means of 'destruction'¹⁰.

In this advanced society, the human "needs and satisfactions are permeated with the exigencies of profit and exploitation"¹¹. These needs reproduce "a life of servitude"¹². Thus affluent society succeeds in killing "in its citizens the very dispositions, the

9. H. Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization. A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), pp. 90-91.

10. H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 241.

11. H. Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 17.

12. *ibid*

organs, for...freedom without exploitation"¹³. In such a society, the individual loses his autonomy and power of thinking. He lives without the power of transcendence. It is the very capacity to transcend the immediate biological and exploitative sphere that makes human beings what they are. It is this very realm, however, that is being lost.

"To the denial of freedom, even of the possibility of freedom, corresponds the granting of liberties where they strengthen the repression. The degree to which the population is allowed to break the peace wherever there still is peace and silence, to be ugly and to uglify things, to ooze familiarity, to offend against good form is frightening. It is frightening because it expresses the lawful and even organized effort to reject the other in his own right, to prevent autonomy even in a small reserved sphere of existence. In the overdeveloped countries, an ever-larger part of the population becomes one huge captive audience—captured not by a totalitarian regime but by the liberties of the citizens whose media of amusement and elevation compel the Other to partake of their sounds, sights and smells"¹⁴. Again, "the sheer quantity of goods, services, work and recreation in the over-developed countries"¹⁵ prevents a qualitative change.

Furthermore, Marcuse analyses the impact of the affluent society on language. The Marcusean analysis of language is a penetrating one, since it shows the degradation of language in the universe of industrial societies. It is characterized by a "closed discourse", where the language is that of a total administration. Becoming strictly functional, it rejects all the non-conformist elements. The phrases are abridged, condensed and reduced to a dimension where the critical thought can have no support. "It is the word that orders and organizes, that induces people to do, to buy, and to accept"¹⁶. The word becomes cliché, destined to provoke expected reactions. This pragmatic intention obliterates the search for meaning. The political discourse is subjected to the law of efficiency, analytical propositions, stereotyped and

13. *ibid.*

14. H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, pp. 244-245.

15. *ibid.*, p. 242.

16. *ibid.*, p. 86.

ritual formula. In the USA, everything is said to be "free": "free enterprise", "free elections", "free individual". In the USSR, speech is concerned with "construction of socialism", "suppression of inimical classes", etc. Marcuse writes, "at the nodal points of the universe of public discourse, self-validating, analytical propositions appear which function like magic-ritual formulas. Hammered and re-hammered into the recipient's mind they produce the effect of enclosing it within the circle of the conditions prescribed by the formula".¹⁷

Such a language imposes images which destroy the concepts. Things are identified with functions. Concepts are reduced to operations. This anti-critical, anti-dialectical and functional language allows co-ordination and subordination. This closed language communicates decisions. In short, this kind of public discourse shuts or encloses the individual in a horizon of uniformity. Marcuse qualifies, therefore, the affluent society as a one-dimensional society in which everything is standardized and uniformized. The integration of the individual with the society is so perfect that it becomes a kind of mimesis, that is, "an immediate identification of the individual with his society and, through it, with the society as a whole".¹⁸ The individual loses his identity, his power of thinking and reasoning. Consequently, he is unable to react against the excessive social controls. Through his subjection to the social control, he loses his inner dimension. Furthermore, in the affluent society, the individual loses his power of transcendence. The transcendent dimension gifted by religion and ethics goes into oblivion. With the eclipse of transcendence, the dimension of the good and the beautiful is no more evident. The one-dimensional and technical society has absorbed and shifted the artistic and aesthetic dimension too.

3. Affluence and the Quest for Transcendence

Coming back to the earlier question, viz., to what extent is scientific and technical progress linked to the realization of freedom, the response is how clear: to think that a high degree of scientific and technical progress in itself ensures freedom is not sound. The historical examples of Germany and Russia make

17. *ibid.* p. 88

18. *ibid.* p. 10

such a view not only idealistic but also ridiculous. History shows that progress in science and technology leads to 'progress' in a totalitarian society, Marcuse does not indicate the totalitarian elements in the very technological organization of the affluent society.¹⁹

The affluent society thus became repressive. It fights against transcendence: "Validated by the accomplishments of science and technology, justified by its growing productivity, the status quo defies all transcendence".²⁰ The established society proclaims freedom and transcendence, but it militates against the effective realization of freedom. In the affluent society, the realization of freedom is a realizable and technical matter. But the freedom of man is not a technical problem. It is a philosophical problem, it is an existential problem. In other words, it is a religious problem. It is this ethical and religious dimension that is being obliterated by the totalitarian trends in the affluent society. The affluent society runs counter to the very idea of transcendence.

Such a development vis-a-vis should be viewed not on the plane of scientific, technical progress, but on the existential and religious plane. The noble relation between freedom and transcendence is not in evidence in the affluent society. Only when man feels that his "self" is lost in the midst of over-whelming scale of productivity and affluence, only then can man rise against the grip of affluence. It is only a transcendent and religious feeling which can give man this awareness. Affluence can have a positive meaning for man only when it sews to promote individual and social freedom. Only in such a free human society the question of authentic transcendence can be posed.

19. Cf. H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 2-3; H. Marcuse, *Counter-revolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), pp. 24-25.

20. H. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, p. 17.