

Marcuse and Education Today

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Unlike other significant contributors to political theory, such as Karl Marx, C. Wright Mills, and W.E.B. Du Bois, the critiques of Herbert Marcuse remain trapped in the 1960s era of radicalism with his work referenced by few today. Although scholarship evaluating post-industrial societies largely neglects Marcuse's claims, many of his notions appear more relevant than ever. Particularly, Marcuse's concerns involving the one-dimensionality of education, which neglects critical thinking, increases scholastic standardization, and condemns individuality, encompass the reality of American education today. Granted that Marcuse, a professor himself, participated in various demonstrations with student movements throughout the sixties, modern critiques of education require his expertise in the field. Additionally, given that the student movement slowly disintegrated throughout the seventies and eighties with a majority of the students' demands unaddressed, Marcuse's apprehensions never lost their credibility over the years. Therefore, an evaluation of the current educational system in America through the lens of Marcuse proves crucial.

First and foremost, Marcuse illustrates the one-dimensional quality of the school system by criticizing positivism as the dominant teaching mode in modern American education. As a consequence of this "happy consciousness," people genuinely believe that the Capitalist system fulfills their vital needs and thus, fail to engage in negative or critical thinking about the system (Marcuse, 1964 p. 84). Ultimately, this lack of critical thinking leads to the reproduction of the status quo within the school system and the embracement of only one mode of thinking. Moreover, Marcuse values the concept of *Bildung*, which incorporates educating the whole individual by including historical, cultural, and social learning (Kellner, 2008). Accordingly, the happy conscious excludes these factors and instead focuses on seemingly objective facts. As a

result, education successfully represses alternatives viewpoints that strive for the betterment of humanity through the promotion of positive thinking.

For Marcuse, a paradox occurs: critical and/or negative thinking yields positive benefits for society. Above all, critical thinking emphasizes negating social contradictions that hinder change within the system, and facilitates an individual's ability to consider alternatives to the status quo (Kellner, 2008). Under this claim, critical thinking enables revolutionary ideals and serves as a method of transcending one-dimensional thought. Hence, Marcuse (1964) acknowledges the potential for education to serve as a liberating force against the system. With that said, America's current educational system inhibits this possibility. In effect, education diminishes the ability to think critically about or to express alternatives to the current way of life (Aronson, 2014). Some examples include: amplified focus on research papers instead of critical analyses, the common projection that majoring in liberal arts will cause employment struggles after graduation, increased use of technologies, such as scantrons as opposed to essay based questions, and a greater emphasis on standardized test score for college and postgraduate school entry.

Consequently, Marcuse argues for a return to critical thinking, especially in the universities. However, integrating critical thinking into curricula borders on impossible in today's educational system. The government perpetuates one-dimensional thinking by initiating policies, such as Common Core State Standards in 2009, which encourage the standardization of the information being taught and the methods for teaching. For example, themes are taught by reading multiple texts and comparing general themes, but students do not necessarily read all of the text to determine these themes (Stevens, 2003). Therefore, students cannot dig deeper into the text because they may only read one or two paragraphs. Additionally, Common Core is non-

fiction oriented and requires that by high school 75-80% of texts read must be non-fiction (Stevens, 2003). Students for a Democratic Society pushed for universities to enable critical thinking by calling for the inclusion of individual creativity in their Port Huron Statement (1962). In spite of these demands, the current American school system continues to flush out arenas that promote imaginative thinking. Policies, funding, and the media endorse STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) programs while eliminating already lacking resources from the humanities and art departments. Subsequently, the quest to produce “socially useful knowledge” undermines the legitimacy of subjects that facilitate individuality and deter from one-dimensional thought (Kellner, Lewis, & Pierce, 2009). What’s more, scholars discredit research that includes normative claims that promote change maintaining that they are biased. Meanwhile, they endorse empirical evidence even in subjects such as the humanities, where objectifying information is difficult if not impossible (Kellner, Lewis, & Pierce, 2009). Prominent in Marcuse’s time, the validation of STEM knowledge as the only socially useful knowledge endures.

Not to mention, the current state of the English language itself denies a person the ability to think about concepts critically. Neoliberalism as the hegemonic discourse, “Has pervasive effects on ways of thought and political-economic discourse to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way we interpret, live in, and understand the world” (Harvey, 2006 p. 145). Specifically, one-dimensional speech affects both teachers and students alike. According to Marcuse (1964; 2015), the reality of modern language, especially that which is taught in school, is that facts are preferred to concepts. Marcuse provides the example of denoting a girl as beautiful instead of the general idea of beauty in *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). Marcuse (1964) makes the distinction that people define facts so as to best fit a word’s

desired use; whereas, concepts allow an individual to think abstractly about a word given the context. Problematically, confining words to facts promotes a systematic mode of language that becomes a formula. In regards to education today, the obstacle still encompasses who gets to determine facts and how they are defined as words. According to Stevens (2003), the federal government plays the fundamental role in defining words and ideology and profoundly contributes to these definitions. From a Marcusean standpoint, students should not be learning and memorizing definitions, as is so common today; students should be taught to think abstractly about words and determine their own individual perceptions about a word's use. That is to say, the educational system requires an overhaul that starts with the basics of everyday language.

Historically, complaints from the student movements of the 1960s emphasized the standardized nature of education. Using Marcuse's perspectives, students sought to bring to light the fact that educational institutions have become, "Odious machines that treat students like objects" (Chafe, 2003 p. 223). Even so, the systematic standardization of education persists today. Not coincidentally, the government established the first common school curriculum after the industrial revolution – a time in which regularization spread enormously (Packard, 1984). Throughout the 21st century, this trend continued as the government passed various pieces of legislation attempting to fuse similar teaching methods among the states. The first of these acts encompasses No Child Left Behind, passed by the Bush Administration in 2001 as an attempt to provide equal education for all. This act sought to grant economic rewards for schools that performed well on standardized tests (Mooney, 2015). Through this act, tests provide the educational system with the approaches that further eliminate the means for creative thinking and promote the use of facts through multiple-choice questions. Not surprisingly, critics deemed No Child Left Behind as a failure because teachers either taught to the test, or skewed test results in

order to receive more funding (Mooney, 2015). Here, the capitalist system engulfs the educational system and prioritizes money over the quality of education. Most importantly, the act achieved the opposite goal – providing unequal access to education for all.

Additionally, the Obama Administration failed to reverse the persistent standardization of education set forth in No Child Left Behind. In 2009, the government implemented Race for the Top, a program that grants states money for reforming schools if the state adopts certain standards and assessments that supposedly help students prepare for college, and holds teachers' pay hostage if students do not make progress (Starnes, 2011). What's more, the Obama Administration attempted to continue to promote Race to the Top by initiating Common Core State Standards. Similarly to No Child Left Behind, Common Core attempts to standardize teaching methods across the nation. However, Common Core modifies the actual curricula being taught (Mooney, 2015). In order to adopt Common Core a state must implement Race to the Top (Starnes, 2011). As an effort to ensure that public schooling in every state enacts the same federal programs, which in turn teach standard information, Common Core eliminates the opportunities for regional lessons, creative thinking, and different teaching approaches. Further, Common Core focuses on what is taught as opposed to how it is taught, which is problematic because Marcuse stresses that the teaching methods are equally as important as the curriculum (Starnes, 2011). Therefore, from a Marcusean perspective, Common Core standardizes the material educators teach to the point that the mechanisms for teaching this information cannot promote critical or revolutionary perspectives.

Finally, Marcuse critiqued the empirical nature of education, which dominates literature even more so now than in his day. Empiricism, a method of writing that focuses on the conglomeration of facts to draw sound conclusions, values the operational use of terms, i.e. "to

make concepts synonymous with the corresponding set of operations” (Marcuse, 1964 p. 88). That being the case, using empirical analysis proves detrimental to education in two ways: it narrows the definition of concepts to eliminate alternate interpretations, and it discourages critical thinking by providing a solution confirmed by empirical “facts.” Accordingly, empiricism serves as a function that terminates ideology, tolerates the rise of complacency, and diminishes alternate dimensions of thought (Staughton, 1969). Correct in his assertions about the rise of empiricism, Marcuse in no way predicted the extent to which education emphasizes empiricism today. Originally a concept mainly utilized by those in STEM fields, empiricism permeated the humanities and social sciences attempting to quantify data that, by many means, simply cannot be measured (Kellner, Lewis, & Pierce, 2009). This problem exacerbates in the 21st century with many institutes of higher education introducing required courses within liberal arts majors that focus on teaching students research methods grounded in empiricism. These students are pressured to produce “socially useful knowledge” for the future through the incorporation of hard facts instead of thinking critically about the present (Kellner, Lewis, & Pierce, 2009). Under those circumstances, empiricism today still reinforces the current system through one-dimensional thinking.

Fortunately, Marcuse’s perspective on education only partially centers on critique. Optimistically, Marcuse presents many techniques to remedy the problems inherent in post-industrial education. To begin, one should acknowledge that Marcuse argued for reschooling as opposed to educational anarchy, which encourages the abolition of the entire educational system (Kellner, Lewis, & Pierce, 2009). With this intention, Marcuse highlighted that education encompasses one of the few realms within society that is capable of defeating one-dimensionality. In *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, Marcuse (1972) succinctly provides three ways

that education can serve as a revolutionary institution. First, education can allow people to learn about the world through ideology in a free and open manner instead of through a purely neoliberal lens, which would open people's minds to alternatives to the current system (Marcuse, 1972). Second, incorporating politics into education will demonstrate concepts in a manner that is applicable to real life and animate means by which students can address their frustrations (Marcuse, 1972). Third, education can encourage student participation and activism outside of the classroom by promoting opportunities and examples of students transferring knowledge to action (Marcuse, 1972). Through these means, education can transcend one-dimensionality and diminish the happy-consciousness.

Many models prominent in education today begin to satisfy some of Marcuse's suggestions. Given the circumstances, these examples appear trivial compared to the major problems that persist, but they do illustrate a gradual step towards progress. First, in 2005 College Board enhanced critical thinking by adding a writing portion to the SAT test. In the essay, students must support or reject a given theory using any writing style they choose (compare and contrast, data analysis, etc.) ("A Brief History", 2014). Integrating an essay into the SAT expands the scope of the test from merely multiple-choice questions that limit creative thinking to a written section that allows for originality and critical thinking, since the student may reject the theory. With regards to this improvement, the SAT still encompasses a standardized method of education, which Marcuse frowned upon. However, the advancement of critical thinking through the addition of the essay provides some encouragement.

Similarly, many professors at universities no longer regard socialism as negative and unpatriotic. Marcuse (1972) stressed that a political education needs to include open discussion of ideologies other than capitalism and needs to be taught through lenses other than that of the

reigning neo-liberalism. Generally, professors teaching subjects within the humanities, namely political science, sociology, philosophy and so on have been more likely to adapt this strategy than those in the fields of business, economics, and accounting (Chatterjee, & Sunaina, 2014). Clearly a triumph in comparison to the Cold War era when Marcuse wrote, the educational system built a strong foundation on the recognition of other ideologies to further dilute one-dimensional thought. However, no theories that debase wage labor and commodity dependency exist outside of the socialist critique (Jansen, 2015). In order to fully recognize the legitimacy of these criticisms, more theories must arise that support these underpinnings. Moreover, today's view of a "socialist" does not endure purely negative connotations, like in Marcuse's time; nevertheless, America's journey to a comprehensive political education will continue for years to come if new theories do not emerge. Therefore, in order to deconstruct the neo-liberal framework that ideology is taught under, a new teaching approach must develop.

Finally, the education system today promotes participation in the community in order to reinforce classroom concepts. Especially true on college campuses in the United States, professors encourage students to apply their research outside of the classroom (Chatterjee, & Sunaina, 2014). Universities advocate for students to participate through a number of means, including, but not limited to: voting, doing community service, joining clubs, attending campus and/or community events, and interacting with town legislators. Moreover, in many public schools community service is required to graduate and, these hours must be completed outside of the classroom (Stevens, 2003). While these strategies to mobilize education into the real world must continue to be implemented, it is clear that in order to reschool America more must be done to fix the overall system.

Many scholars interpreted Marcuse's critiques on education and provided a multitude of approaches that reformists can take to improve today's system. Charles Reitz (2015) provides various recommendations for integrating Marcuse's notions today. Most importantly, Reitz (2015) proposes that the educational system must exemplify the reality of the perpetuating inequality (economic, racial, and gender) in the United States. Unless the population is educated on the unequal distribution of wealth and opportunities that the prevailing system tolerates, then they will continue to fail to transcend one-dimensionality. According to Marcuse (1968 p. 35) "To create the subjective conditions for a free society, it is no longer sufficient to educate individuals to perform more or less happily the functions they are supposed to perform in this society of extend 'vocational' education to the 'masses.'" By emphasizing statistics that model the disparities and exploitations inherent in the post-industrial United States, the subjective conditions may prevail. Consequently, portraying the structural inequality of the United States encompasses a necessary step towards liberation.

On the other hand, education must also support teaching students moral obligations instead of concentrating on empirical, "objective" data. Kellner, Lewis, and Pierce (2009) provides a succinct interpretation of Marcuse's educational goals by advising that ethical development play a greater role in the curriculum. By interpreting information through a moral perspective, the intrinsically political nature of teaching prevails and allows students to prepare to challenge injustice in society (Kellner, Lewis, & Pierce, 2009). Accordingly, researchers and scholars must integrate empirical evidence with normative aspirations in order to empower mobilizing forces that will enable policy change that is in the public's interest. Furthermore, this attention needs to stop focusing on individualism and allow the consideration of greater social problems (Kellner, Lewis, & Pierce, 2009). Concentrating on the overall structure can enhance

growth in people's ability to recognize the corruption within the system. Conversely, ethical thinking may take on the form of critiquing the current political or economic system (Reitz, 2015). This approach, also known as negative thinking, may promote civil disobedience or appear undemocratic, which many view as problematic; yet, from Marcuse's perspective in order to facilitate qualitative change, education must stimulate noncompliance with the current struggles fashioned by the system (Kellner, Lewis, Pierce, 2009). In short, merging ethical development into everyday education allows the possibility of surpassing one-dimensionality.

All in all, the lack of Marcuse's presence in modern critiques of education does not reflect the fact that these claims no longer apply. It is clear that the problems that Marcuse brought to light in the 1960s still persist today. In fact, one of Marcuse's greatest concerns, the standardization of teaching and curricula, continues to dictate education across the United States. Arguably, some key factors in Marcuse's approach to reschooling, such as factoring politics into education, developed over the years. Overall, however, the incremental steps taken in the United States to reform key aspects of education expose the continued sluggish nature of qualitative change. As Marcuse points out, education encompasses one of the few realms within society that can transcend one-dimensionality. Unless some major efforts develop to amend the current educational system, the United States is no better geared towards social change than it was in the 1960s. Therefore, modern critics on education must start to appreciate Marcuse's enduring relevance and apply his knowledge in order to improve education in the United States.

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