

Free Speech, Democracy, and “Repressive Tolerance”

The Use of Herbert Marcuse to Justify Left Suppression of
Free Speech

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Contents

Herbert Marcuse’s Opposition to “Tolerance” 3
Marcuse’s Reasons for Rejecting Tolerance 4
Marcuse’s One-Dimensional Analysis 6
The Benefits of Free Speech and Tolerance for the Left 7
What About Fascism? 8
What Are We For? 9

There has been, recently, controversy on the Left over “free speech.” Should radical leftists and anti-fascists disrupt speeches by right-wingers? Should leftists break up such meetings, charge the stage, and smash windows? Or should the leftists limit themselves to counter-demonstrations, boycotts, protest leaflets, and, perhaps, heckling? The controversy is not so much over public events by fascists—U.S. Nazis or Klan members, for example—but over right wingers who claim to not be fascists but “conservatives” who value free speech.

In working out an approach to this issue, a number of leftist thinkers—anarchists and Marxists—have revived interest in the ideas of Herbert Marcuse (1969). In 1965 (updated 1968), Marcuse wrote an influential essay, “Repressive Tolerance” (which appeared with essays by two others in the little book, *Critique of Pure Tolerance*). Marcuse (1898—1979) was one of the most influential Left theorists of the ‘sixties and ‘seventies. A member of the Frankfurt School, he was a scholar of Marx, Hegel, and Freud. Marcuse had an enormous impact and following. Given the general ignorance and muddle of much of today’s radical thinking, it is not surprising that there has been an attempt to revive Marcuse’s ideas about free speech and the limits of “pure tolerance.”

Herbert Marcuse’s Opposition to “Tolerance”

Marcuse argued that “tolerance” of differing political views was a fine goal for a good society. But it was wrong for the Left to “tolerate” right-wingers here and now, in the current social system. He was not speaking just of intolerance toward out-and-out fascists, but towards a very wide range of views. He was not just against tolerating bad actions (such as racist physical assaults on People of Color, women, and leftists).

He called for: “Withdrawal of tolerance from regressive movements before they can become active; intolerance even toward thought, opinion and word, and finally, intolerance...toward the self-styled conservatives, the political Right...” (110; his emphasis) “Tolerance would be restricted with respect to movements of a demonstrably aggressive or destructive character (destructive of the prospects for peace, justice, and freedom for all). Such discrimination would also be applied to movements opposing the extension of social legislation to the poor, weak, disabled.” (120) This means restricting tolerance for a lot of people.

By “withdrawal of tolerance” he did not mean only opposing conservatives and those who were against “peace, justice, and freedom for all.” He did not mean only organizing against them, fighting them through literature and speeches, demonstrations and strikes, boycotts and civil disobedience—as well as physical defense against violence from the Right. He proposed to physically suppress these views which were contrary to his—to not allow them to be published or to be spoken, to be in party platforms in elections, or to be organized for in any way.

If Marcuse had his way, "...Certain things cannot be said, certain ideas cannot be expressed, certain policies cannot be proposed, certain behavior cannot be permitted..." (88) "This is censorship, even precensorship..." (111) He advocated "...apparently undemocratic means...the withdrawal of toleration of speech and assembly from groups and movements....new and rigid restrictions on teachings and practices in the educational institutions...." (100) There will have to be "extreme suspension of the right of free speech and free assembly." 109)

Who would determine what opinions were to be tolerated and which were not? "Who is qualified to make all these distinctions, identifications for the society as a whole [?]...Everyone who has learned to think rationally and autonomously...the democratic educational dictatorship of free men." (106) Although coming from the Marxist tradition, Marcuse rejected the idea of the rule of the working class (whether conceived of as democratic or a dictatorship). Instead, he raised the idea of "the dictatorship of an 'elite' over the people....a dictatorship of intellectuals....the political leadership of the intelligentsia..." (120-1) However, he pulled back; this may have been too bluntly authoritarian. Although it is the logical conclusion of his orientation, he finally rejected "a dictatorship or elite, no matter how intellectual and intelligent" in favor of "the struggle for a real democracy." (122) Which was still seen as consistent with opposition to "tolerance."

Marcuse's Reasons for Rejecting Tolerance

How did Marcuse justify this repressive strategy, which seems to contradict his goal of a free and democratic society? He argued that the Right's opinions are bad and "destructive of the prospects for peace, justice, and freedom for all." (During the reign of Franco's fascism, the Spanish Catholic Church similarly declared that "Error has no rights," to justify suppressing Protestantism.) Marcuse claimed that it was not so hard to know what was best: "the institutional and cultural changes which may help to attain the goal [of freedom] are comprehensible...they can be identified...on the basis of experience, by human reason....True and false solutions become distinguishable...." (87)

Experience contradicts this optimism. Even if we limit ourselves to the Left—to those who are for "peace, justice, and freedom for all"—opinions vary enormously about how to "attain the goal." Disagreements are many among Leftists. At times, they have led to bloody suppression, not only of the Right, but of other Leftists as well.

The libertarian-democratic tradition accepts that people are limited and fallible. The truth can never be known with absolute certainty but only approximated, to the best of human ability, at any one time. Therefore there must be free speech and opinion, letting differing views be expressed, clash with each other, and influence each other. As expressed opinions interact with actual human experience, a truer and more useful set of ideas will emerge over time.

Marcuse regards this libertarian-democratic model as an abstraction which does not fit existing capitalist society. While not the same as fascist totalitarianism, even the freest bourgeois democracy is still dominated by a minority, the capitalist class (more-or-less the “one percent” and its minions). Even the best-paid working class still works to support the capitalists out of an unpaid-for surplus, that is, is exploited. But today the working class and others put up with this exploitation and oppression without rebellion. This is partly due to massive propaganda and mis-education poured out by a “monopolistic media...the mere instruments of economic and political power...” (95) This combines with a relatively high standard of living for most of the population due to modern technology. There is a flood of consumer goods which drowns more natural desires for fulfillment. The result is “a democracy with totalitarian organization.” (97)

This is not counting the actual suppression of the Left. In Marcuse’s period, this included McCarthyite witchhunting, FBI persecution, and Klan terror in the South. More recently, there has been the non-judicial jailings of Muslims, and the destruction of Occupy encampments throughout the country by coordinated police attacks.

In Marcuse’s opinion, the workers and the rest of the population are mentally numbed by this system. They are not capable of thinking rationally and autonomously, even if they knew the facts. They are overwhelmed by life, used to taking orders in their daily jobs and satisfied with the minor pleasures of the consumer society. Politically they are used to the narrow range of opinion available in the newspapers, on radio, and in TV news, and offered by the two parties (a range from slightly-liberal to not-quite-fascist reactionary). Everyone can say what they want, but one side has the loudspeakers, which determines what everyone hears.

“The democratic argument requires a necessary condition, namely that the people must be capable of deliberating and choosing on the basis of knowledge, that they put have access to authentic information, and that, on this basis, their evaluation must be the result of autonomous thought.” (95) None of these conditions apply, he believes. Seeing the population this way, leads to Marcuse’s abandoning the working class—most of the people—and attraction to a dictatorship by an intellectual elite.

Freedom of speech and association (tolerance) are necessary aspects of capitalist representative democracy. This is itself simply one way for the capitalist minority to rule, exploit, and oppress the people. This limited democracy has its uses for the ruling class. It permits factions of the ruling class to raise their disagreements with each other and to work them out (without bloodshed). Also, it serves to bamboozle the people into thinking that they really run the state.

In this context, democratic tolerance becomes “repressive” for Marcuse. It is “repressive” because it supports and justifies the overall undemocratic system. The Left is tolerated, so that liberals get to make their complaints, and even tiny revolutionary socialist grouplets get to put out their rarely-read newspapers. The Left gets to blow off steam and the system looks democratic. But the ruling class is not impacted and the complacent majority is not affected. Similarly the Right is tolerated, from overt fascists, to far-right-authoritarians who deny that they are fascists, to moderate-conservatives.

The Right is permitted to mis-educate the people with lies and bigotry, under the protection of “free speech” and tolerance.

“In endlessly dragging debates over the media, the stupid opinion is treated with the same respect as the intelligent one, the misinformed may talk as long as the informed, and propaganda rides along with education, truth with falsehood. This [is] pure tolerance of sense and nonsense....” (94) This certainly sounds like current U.S. political discourse.

Marcuse’s One-Dimensional Analysis

Marcuse’s analysis of capitalist society was true then and is true now—but it is not the whole truth. It is one-sided and ignores the inner contradictions and conflicts within the apparently totalitarian-democratic-affluent society. Marcuse insisted that industrial capitalism was in the process of ending inner contradictions which might once have moved society forward; it was developing “one-dimensional man”—the title of one of his books. (Ignoring inner contradictions is surprising for an authority on Hegel and dialectics.)

In fact, the sixties and seventies of Marcuse were a time of upheavals and conflicts. It included the Civil Rights and Black Liberation movement. This was the time of the struggle against the Vietnamese war. These two movements shook up U.S. politics and culture. They led to other struggles—for women’s liberation, LGBT rights, ecological sustainability, and so on. By the early seventies, there were large workers’ rebellions, including union organizing, national wildcat strikes, and Black caucuses in unions. Internationally, 1968 was the year of a workers’ almost-revolution in France, an anti-Stalinist national rebellion in Czechoslovakia, and the Tet offensive in Vietnam (a turning point in the war).

Most importantly, *Marcuse did not see that the late sixties and early seventies were the end of the post-World War II boom.* (Marcuse’s blindness to the weaknesses of the capitalist prosperity was pointed out at the time by the libertarian Marxist, Paul Mattick [1972].) The effects which had overcome the Great Depression (such as massive arms spending and looting the environment) had worn out by then (see Price 2012). The world economy began to go downhill overall (with ups and downs). There developed new threats of global environmental catastrophe. The ruling class turned to “neo-liberal” policies, attacking the working class’ living standards, weakening the unions, cutting government social benefits, de-regulating businesses, and slashing taxes on the wealthy. None of which restored overall prosperity.

Rather than everyone happily agreeing about politics and culture, in a stable, affluent, monolithic society, as Marcuse had seen things, there is now turmoil, vicious conflict, and an inability of the ruling class to keep things moving together smoothly. There is working class distress and dissatisfaction, among African-Americans and white workers. There is massive hostility toward the government. This is not (yet) a time of

revolutionary upheaval, but neither is it one of one-dimensional totalitarian unity and solidity as described by Marcuse.

The Benefits of Free Speech and Tolerance for the Left

The capitalists certainly benefit from their limited democracy, freedom of speech, of the press, of assembly, and general tolerance. *But so do the exploited and oppressed and their defenders on the Left.* It is not a one-sided arrangement. The oppressed can form mass organizations to pressure the capitalists for benefits. African-Americans waged a large-scale struggle in the fifties and sixties which succeeded in ending legal racial segregation. Workers organized unions (workers have better pay and better working conditions when they have unions). Similar gains (real, if limited) have been won over time by women, LGBT people, and others due to their (tolerated) freedom to organize and mobilize.

The radical Left has also benefited from tolerance. If we add together all the anarchists, socialists, communists, radical feminists, radical pacifists, and everyone else who regards themselves as radical, this is still a small minority of the population. The big majority dislikes the views of the far Left. That millions of people believe in free speech and tolerance of minority extremist opinions is a major defense for the radical Left—not a complete defense but an important one. To a major extent, it protects the Left from government suppression and mob violence.

Freedom of speech and assembly, tolerance of minority opinions, has permitted the Left to continue even in times of reaction and repression. It has remained possible to for a minority to “blow on the coals” of revolutionary tradition, even in the worst of times. It has made it possible for a minority of advanced workers and youth to make contact with revolutionary socialists and join their cause. Doing this would be infinitely more difficult under conditions of fascist or Stalinist totalitarianism.

The extreme Left has been able to have an impact on the broader society. In times of turmoil, small groups and tendencies may suddenly have a major effect on the world. During the thirties, the Communist Party, and others on the Left, played a major role in organizing unions, the unemployed, and African-Americans. They won improvements for the workers and oppressed. In the upheavals of the sixties, the antiwar movement was organized and led by Trotskyists, Communists, radical pacifists, anarchists, independent socialists, and others—a minority which had a great effect on the politics and culture of the time. Radicals had a smaller, but real, impact on the African-American struggle. The ruling class became worried that too many young people were being influenced by revolutionary programs.

In brief, while tolerance and democratic freedoms have benefits for the ruling class, they also have real benefits for the people and for the Left as such. The capitalist class,

because it is the ruling class, gets the lion's share of the benefits—so long as society is stable and prosperous. But in times of turmoil and upheaval, the Left gets to use its freedom and tolerance to its maximum advantage, to challenge the system. At which point, the rulers would be most likely to attack these freedoms. The Left would be foolish indeed to oppose the very free speech protection that it depends on.

What About Fascism?

What about the U.S. Nazis, the Klan, and similar groupings? Should they be granted freedom of speech or should their organizing be stopped for force, whenever possible?

When the Italian Fascist Party was working its way to power, and when the National Socialists were building themselves in Germany, *the big problem was not their speeches. It was their actions.* They assaulted the sellers of Left newspapers, broke up Left meetings, burned down union halls, and murdered opponents. In response, the police did little and the reactionary judges gave them slaps on the wrist. The failure of the liberal state was in not stopping such behavior. The failure of the Left was in not forming common fronts and fighting back against this aggression.

The Left groupings should have formed defense guards to defend their meetings, their halls, and their newspaper sellers. They should have taken the battle to the fascists. They should have retaliated by breaking up fascist meetings and driving the fascists from the streets. Such tactics were attempted by the Italian anarcho-syndicalists, but the Italian Socialists and Communists would not agree. Similar tactics were proposed by Trotsky to fight the rise of Nazism. Again, the German Communists and Socialists would not agree. In both cases, the Communists were too sectarian to work with other Leftists, and the Socialists had faith in bourgeois legality to protect them.

However, it would be a mistake to call on the government to ban the fascists or outlaw their speech. This is the state—the capitalist state. The Left should not trust it. Given the power to outlaw political opinions, it will put most of its efforts into silencing the Left, not the Right. Far better to demand that the state keep hands off political opinions.

But the Left does not have to respect the fascists! The Nazis are not a Conservative Discussion Club. They deliberately identify with a movement which overthrew political democracy (however limited), murdered millions of Jews, Romany, Slavs, and others, waged aggressive war, and subordinated other nations. Similarly, the Klan identifies with night-riding masked murder done to enforce white supremacy. When either group tries to march through a Jewish or African-American neighborhood, it is not to win local adherents but to frighten people with the threat of violence.

The big majority of U.S. workers are hostile to fascists in a way that they are not toward conservatives. Militant counter-demonstrations against overt fascists (who are understood by most people as fascists) are understandable. Efforts to break up their rallies and marches are justifiable and comprehensible as a form of self-defense.

What Are We For?

Marcuse objected to having a minority (the capitalists and their agents) rule over the rest of the population. He wanted to replace this with a truly democratic and free society. But his methods implied an elite “educational dictatorship.” (106) A minority of rational and autonomous people would make the decisions, while suppressing other views which, they believe, do not lead to peace and freedom. In effect, *he wanted the current society to support free speech for the Left while it is out of power—but if the Left should ever get into power, it should suppress the free speech of others.* This seems like a foolish thing to say out loud, but there it is.

Such views are really quite common on the Left. Much of the Left wants to turn the U.S. into something very like the former Soviet Union, Maoist China, Castro’s Cuba, or even Lenin and Trotsky’s early Soviet Union—one party dictatorships with state capitalist economies. Of course they do not believe in free speech for anyone but themselves—which is not free speech at all. Unlike Marcuse, they rarely say this explicitly, but it is their program.

Also, a great many anarchists openly reject democracy of any kind—not only capitalist representative democracy. (See Price 2016; 2017) They reject even the most participatory, direct, antiauthoritarian-socialist democracy, in the workplace or community (managed by consensus or by majority rule with respect for minorities). They deny, sincerely, that they want any kind of dictatorship, but provide no alternate form of collective decision-making. Without an explicit belief in radical democracy, it is not surprising that many anarchists slide into elitist practices, such as denying free speech to others, even non-fascists. (Many other anarchists believe that anarchism is the extreme form of participatory democracy. When everyone is involved in governing, then there is no government—that is, no institution separate from and over everyone, no state.)

From another perspective (one which is compatible with anarchism and libertarian socialism), on the demand for free speech, “There can be no contradiction, no gulf in principle, between what we demand of this existing state, and what we propose for the society we want to replace it, a free society....What we demand of this state now does constitute our real program....The kind of movement we build now, on a certain basis, will determine our new society, not good intentions....Our aim by its very nature requires the mobilization of conscious masses. Without such conscious masses, our goal [socialist democracy] is impossible. Therefore we need the fullest democracy....We want to push to the limit all the presuppositions and practices of the fullest democratic involvement of the greatest mass of people. To the limit, that is, all the way.” (Draper 1992; 165-6, 170, 172)

In conclusion: An antiauthoritarian Left should have no tolerance for the Right. That is, it should organize against the Right, polemicize against the Right, mobilize and demonstrate against the Right, do all that it can to expose the lies and evil program of the Right. It may demand debates, or, when objectionable speakers appear,

get up and walk out. Within the broader movement of opposition (the “Resistance”, which is mostly pro-Democratic Party liberals), there should be an effort to build a revolutionary, antiauthoritarian, Left wing. This should oppose all sections of the Right. It should also criticize the liberal supporters of capitalism, who have prepared the way for the successes of the Right.

Contrary to Marcuse’s expectations, the current condition of capitalism is shaken by failures and internal conflicts. Fissures in the system have been revealed, and they open up a great deal of dissatisfaction and frustration with the society and the state. There are now possibilities for a revived mass movement of the Left.

But what kind of Left will it be? Will it present an elitist, authoritarian, statist vision of socialism? Or a vision of the fullest freedom and radical democracy? If we want freedom and cooperation, then we need a movement whose methods are consistent with its ends—which prefigure the ends. When necessary it would physically defend workers and People of Color from violent fascists. But in general, it should make clear by word and deed that it is the most consistent and thorough defenders of freedom, including free speech. Whatever his other contributions, Marcuse has nothing to teach us in this area.

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There has recently been controversy on the Left over “free speech” for right-wingers (not necessarily fascists). Should it be supported or physically opposed? Some leftists have revived interest in the ideas of Herbert Marcuse on “repressive tolerance” and why it should be opposed. Marcuse’s theory is reviewed and arguments are raised against it from a revolutionary anti-authoritarian perspective.

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