

A public lecture by David Walsh in the UK

Art and socialism: the real premises

26 November 2008

The following is a slightly edited version of the talk delivered by WSWWS Arts Editor David Walsh to audiences recently in Glasgow (November 14), Sheffield (November 16) and London (November 18).

This is part of a series of discussions on the subject of art and socialism. We're holding three meetings in Britain, but this is an ongoing process. On the one hand, we're seeking to direct artists, students and others toward a more serious approach to social life. We're also attempting to raise the cultural level of our own movement and through those we influence, the most advanced elements in the working class and among the students.

There tend to be two types on the Left, and this is certainly the case here as much as anywhere else. On the one hand, we have the practical people, who concern themselves with economic matters, trade union issues and such. On the other, there are the academics, who are left in charge of intellectual and cultural life.

Both tendencies are fully convinced and seek to convince others that you cannot build a culturally deep, politically firm socialist movement in the working class. But that is precisely our aim. The socialist revolution is not the product simply of an immediate political program, much less clever slogans or certain economic demands. It is the product, as the Russian Revolution demonstrated, of a profound socialist culture working on any number of complex questions.

In that regard, there is no way around discussing history and figures you may or may not be aware of, in particular the Frankfurt School, a group of German intellectuals who continue to have a considerable influence. These were individuals sharply discouraged by the events of the 20th century, and whose fundamental impact has been to turn artists and others away from a historical materialist analysis of social life, from the working class and problems of the socialist revolution.

To begin with, however, I'd be remiss if I didn't say a few words about the big doings in the US recently, the election of Barack Obama and the ongoing economic crisis. In a peculiar fashion, it will bring me to a central theme this evening: the force of the objective.



David Walsh at the Sheffield meeting Recently, our movement, the International Committee of the Fourth International and the Socialist Equality Party, has been attacked for supposed 'objectivism,' for devoting too much attention to the objective forces at work in society. We do insist that a

revolutionary party can only base itself on a painstaking analysis of social relations and economic and political life. It's worth keeping this issue in mind this evening, because it has a bearing on art as well.

To return to American politics for a moment. Four years ago, at the time of the 2004 election, which Bush won—or probably won—there was a great deal of talk about values and how Americans were obsessed with cultural values, family values, moral values, etc. The country was supposedly steeped in reaction. 'What was the matter with Kansas,' and indeed the entire US?



Audience members in London

Every nation gets the leadership it deserves, we were told. America deserved Bush, perhaps it even deserved 9/11. We never accepted this.

Suddenly, in 2008 it's a different country. Many of those same people are now enthusing over Obama, and congratulating themselves and the population. Is it a different country? Or is it that every country is a contradiction, and that one has to make a serious study of the relations between classes as they change under changing conditions?

The election shows the real driving forces at work, the economic and material factors of life. Now hardly anyone talks about values. Instead, we're staring the most devastating crisis since the Great Depression straight in the face. The rate of unemployment and under-employment is currently near 12 percent and threatens to soar. Mass layoffs are occurring virtually every day, the auto industry is near bankruptcy. Industrial production recently suffered its worst monthly decline in 34 years. Housing prices are sinking. The stock market has lost some 40 percent of its value in a year.

A recent report from Merrill Lynch economists noted that "unprecedented stuff" is happening and "This recession is unlike any seen in the last five decades." So, entirely appropriately, at the precise moment when we were told we were paying far too much attention to objective developments, the objective factor has coming crashing in through the front door, already changing consciousness and affecting political life.

In the recent US elections, for the powers that be, the disaster of the Bush years required a change—a cosmetic change—literally, a new face. For them, the new face, a darker face, is the change.

There will be a continuation of the same policies, with tactical shifts.

Barack Obama promised on television the other night that there would be "a seamless transition" on national security issues from the Republicans. But tens of millions voted precisely for a change on those issues—war, torture, spying, etc.

There are popular hopes, expectations, illusions. We witnessed genuine euphoria at the end of the Bush reign, the most hated presidency in US

history. Once the reality of the economic crisis and the reality of Obama's program become clear, the stage is set for confrontations with the new Democratic regime over basic conditions of life, war, the ongoing attacks on democratic rights.

The unfolding economic crisis will mean the shattering of all sorts of assumptions and illusions about the miracle of the capitalist market.

The ideological implications, however, go well beyond that. The creation of massive amounts of fictitious capital, which now threaten the stability of world imperialism, found its intellectual complement in the postmodern mood. A considerable portion of the academic world in recent decades agreed that objective reality and truth were fictions or semi-fictions, adopted a 'playful' attitude toward history, scoffed at the existence of "great questions" and generally concluded that one could make it all up as one went along, just as the hedge fund managers and investment bankers were doing.

Objective facts are about to take their revenge on the ruling elite and the academic wise-acres alike.

This will not change the circumstances in art overnight, but change them it will.

The problems will hardly sort themselves out automatically. The radicalization among artists will have a highly complex and contradictory character. It is questionable how useful the 1930s is as a model. In 1941, George Orwell, commenting on the situation in Britain, noted, "Since about 1930 [the onset of the Depression] everyone describable as 'intellectual' has lived in a state of chronic discontent with the existing order." Is that likely to be repeated?

The art world has seen a polarization that corresponds to the general process at work in society as a whole. A thin layer has accommodated itself to capitalism, enriched itself enormously and identifies wholeheartedly with the status quo. The younger, the more creative, the more socially conscious, the more marginalized layers, are essentially pushed toward the working class, economically and politically. That social divide will widen, not disappear.

The current generation of artists inherits all the problems of the past. A simple radicalization doesn't do justice to the process; there will need to be a settling of scores, artistic, political, even moral. There is a good deal to overcome, including the corruption. And Britain has witnessed some of the worst and most cynical of it. Decades of reaction and the bombardment of the artists by the worst possible influences have taken their toll, as they have on every segment of society.

In 2008, the international working class faces a new situation. So do the artists. The future promises no shortage of social tension, high drama, world historic events, the heights and depths of human emotion.

What will the artists make of all this? How will they respond?

It seems safe to say that the artists are no more, and perhaps less, prepared than any other segment of society for the emerging crisis. Art lags behind, the attention of the artists is not directed for the most part to day-to-day political and economic life at the best of times. The last several decades of political reaction and cultural decline have left them, with honorable exceptions, farther in the rear than ever.

Insofar as the artists encounter "left" ideas they tend to be associated with various strands of postmodern thought, which reject the possibility or advisability of cognizing the world in art, or with so-called "Western Marxist" (Critical Theory, Frankfurt School) ideology, about which we'll speak somewhat later.

What is generally known as the 'left' today is something Trotsky wouldn't have recognized. This is not the fault, in that sense, of the individuals involved; we're speaking about the results of a complex and difficult historical period.

And there are still Stalinist and left nationalist forces in operation, advancing various theories of "people's art," which in general are neither very popular nor very artistic, but rather petty bourgeois-bureaucratic

limits on what the oppressed are allowed to see and hear.

We Marxists too have our conceptions and we don't intend to be modest about advocating them. We are seeking to revive and rebuild the international socialist culture that was so damaged by Stalinism. We see this as essential to the project of world socialist revolution. To put it bluntly, without a higher level of culture the working class will not achieve victory.

Of course, we don't fault the population for its present predicament. The present situation is an indictment of capitalism—which in its decay, has no interest or capacity to lift masses of people out of degradation and ignorance—and the so-called labor movement, the various Socialist, Communist and Labour parties, and trade unions, which have proven their utter rottenness in the past quarter-century.

Nonetheless, we don't conceal the fact that, in our view, a heightening of the cultural, moral, intellectual level of a significant layer of the population is an indispensable precondition for a profound social transformation.

We devote a good deal of space on the *World Socialist Web Site* to cultural matters. And we intend to expand what we're currently doing. To borrow a thought from Trotsky, we are convinced that the reader will take from an encounter with art and art criticism, if that criticism is properly done, "a more complex idea of human personality, of its passions and feelings, a deeper and profounder understanding of its psychic forces and of the role of the subconscious, etc." In the final analysis, the reader "will become richer" (*Literature and Revolution*).

In regard to the most progressive artists themselves, we offer a perspective, and, we hope, a critical illumination of the general path of development. We're not in the position to command, and if the working class party were in power, it would not order the artists around. It remains true that art must make its own way and by its own means.

But, as I say, we have definite ideas, and we intend to fight for them.

There are conflicting theories as to what constitutes revolutionary or "progressive" or "subversive" art. Our view is relatively straightforward: art is genuinely radical, above all, to the extent that it conveys, by its own means, the truth about life and reality, no matter how painful or complex that may be. Knowing and feeling the world deeply is a prerequisite for those who intend to make a radical change. I think in arguing in that fashion, we are following in the tradition of classical Marxism and also adhering closely to what serious artists have concluded.

This process of telling the truth, or proving the truth, in art is not the same as a history lesson or a political pamphlet. The artist works on reality with special methods and techniques, transforming, dissolving, reordering elements of life into concrete images that convey his or her thought and feeling. Intuition, the non-rational, the unconscious play a far greater role in art than in politics or science, but we insist that a rational, conscious element figures centrally in both the creation and assimilation of the artistic work.

As Hegel notes, it is "an absurdity to suppose" that poems like Homer's "came to the poet in his sleep ... it is silly to believe that the genuine artist does not know what he is doing" (*Aesthetics, vol. 1*). The reader or spectator too has a responsibility to know what he or she is doing.

On the other hand, there's the conception of a section of the petty bourgeois intelligentsia that art is radical to the extent that it flies from reality, that the artist withdraws from an unbearable existence and through form or content hints at a utopian realm. Here the conscious artistic aim is to suspend reality, to liberate oneself as much as possible from its nightmarish influence. The very rupture supposedly points toward the intolerability of the present situation and the fact the world must change.

Individuals who adopt this approach are working off the assumption that there is nothing within existing conditions that makes revolution possible. There is no objective impulse, in other words, within the present social organism that would form the basis for going beyond it. Going beyond it

becomes an act of imagination or intuition, an aesthetic act, linked to humanity's biological needs and "life instincts." We'll return to this when we discuss Herbert Marcuse of the Frankfurt School.

These two schools of thought are irreconcilably opposed.

Marxism, for good reason, has gravitated toward realism in art. By that term, we don't mean 'Realism' in a formal sense, but an intensely conscientious attempt, by whatever artistic means, to arrive at a deep understanding of life, including its social organization.

A Cubist painting can be urgent and serious about the world. André Breton's surrealist poem *Free Union* is one of the most beautiful poems I know.



Leon Trotsky

Trotsky, at various points in his life, spoke of an "artistic acceptance of reality," not in the sense that artists should accommodate themselves to what exists, the present-day institutions and social relations, but that nothing valuable could be achieved by shying away from life, by taking refuge or mystically elevating oneself above reality.

We agree that a powerful feeling for life is indispensable for the artist.

To look at the world, including oneself, with great honesty; to have an eye or ear to the shapes, sounds and contours in which life presents itself; to weigh up human behavior and emotion in all their forms; to call things unsparingly by their proper names—all in all, "a preoccupation with our life of three dimensions as a sufficient and invaluable theme for art" (*Literature and Revolution*).

To speak broadly of realism in art today will bring down on one's head accusations of philistinism and Stalinism. This is a sign of some of the current difficulties.

Many great figures in art have dedicated themselves to working out as vividly and concretely as possible their understanding of the world around them and communicating that to others. They considered it almost a sacred duty. They were prepared to sacrifice their health and even lives to that cause. Flaubert identified so thoroughly with his fiction that he fell ill when he was writing about Emma Bovary's self-poisoning.

That art was rooted in reality was certainly the view of the great Russian literary and social critics, the revolutionary democrat and utopian socialist V. G. Belinsky [1] and the Marxists Georgi Plekhanov, Leon Trotsky and Aleksandr Voronsky.



A.K. Voronsky

For these figures, all of whom were deeply

engaged in efforts to make a better world, art did not exist in a realm apart from humanity's other activities. Its specific character was recognized, and its specific laws, but art work was held to be part of the overall effort of socially-organized humanity to gain its bearings in the world, to penetrate more deeply into the nature of things and to live a more satisfying and harmonious existence.

Marxism, despite the caricatures of its opponents, has never viewed art as mere ideology or some superstructural element born of the efforts of the ruling classes to oppress the population. Art, like science, cognizes the world. The great artists, through the depth and beauty of their images, have derived essential, objective, relatively universal truths.

The remarkable Soviet critic and enemy of Stalin, Aleksandr Voronsky, noted that "the question of all questions," in relation to art, is: "Do our subjective sensations have objective significance?" All of postmodernist and much of academic leftist sentiment answer resoundingly, 'No!' or, rather, they wouldn't answer at all, as they consider the question itself to be absurd and hopelessly passé.

The Marxists, however, reply 'Yes' to this question of questions. Whoever understands that being determines consciousness, as Voronsky goes on to say, is obliged to answer "that our subjective sensations can also have objective significance. ... [W]e cognize an objective world that is independent of us. Our images of the world [in art] are not its exact copies, but neither are they vague hieroglyphs of the world; moreover, they are not merely subjective in character. Practice determines what it is in our images that has only personal significance and what is a genuine, accurate representation that provides the truth" (*Art as the Cognition of Life*, "On Artistic Truth").

At the same time, of course, the individual artist belongs to a certain time and country and, above all, class, so his or her work has a specific socio-historical character as well. No one jumps entirely out of his or her skin. The greater the artist, the more profound the insights, the less tainted by class prejudices is the artwork. This is not merely the result of individual genius or will; certain historical circumstances permit the artist to have a larger vision, a broader overview of human relations, than others.

We encourage an art that would develop knowledge and feeling among wide layers of people within a situation where capitalism's contradictions are exploding. To do that, we think the artists have to have something in their heads, besides impressions and intuition.

The artists bring their subjectivity to bear. Art works come from or ought to come from far inside human beings, where all sorts of feelings and thoughts, not all of which we approve of, are to be found. But there's subjectivity and there's subjectivity. The issue is whether in a given case something important and illuminating has been conveyed through the prism of the artist's personal effort.

In his last published article in 1928, Voronsky, who was murdered by Stalinism in 1937, commented: "Instead of objects which are beautiful in themselves, artists very frequently give us their interpretation of them" (*Art as the Cognition of Life*, "The Art of Seeing the World").

Of course, you would find very few people in the contemporary art world who would agree with this criticism—which is why I point to it. For the most part, especially in the visual arts, the artist and his or her interpretation are everything and the world is nothing, or next to nothing.

Is it a secret that a kind of "bad subjectivism" has been damaging to art in the past half-century or more? We do urge a greater objectivity in art.

Is it a matter of counterposing examination of the world to examination of the self? No, the matter doesn't break down so neatly as that. We're interested in the outer *and* the inner life (which is not "nonsense" to us). We're not looking for works restricted to any particular category.

But we have to confess, first of all, that *whose* inner life is under consideration counts for something. Some inner lives, frankly, are more interesting than others.

There are different kinds of individualism. The petty bourgeois intellectual usually has more than his or her share. In the working class, it's a different matter. As Trotsky noted, "the average proletarian" lacks individualism. We seek to heighten and encourage that.

Contemporary artists will have to turn their attention to a host of questions. Not because we say so, but because life will demand it.

Our approach is in accord with the materialist conception of history and social life, first arrived at by Marx and Engels in the 1840s: We ascend from earth to heaven, proceeding not from what human beings say or imagine, but from real, active people and their life-process. Life is not determined by consciousness, but consciousness by life. We start out from the real premises—human beings in their process of development under definite social and historical conditions—and "never abandon them for a moment."

What passes for Marxism and for Marxist art criticism on the university campuses is another matter and this is an issue we need to address.

Thinking about art *in general* at the moment takes place at a very low level; artists and students are not encouraged to think about the source of their own artwork, what lies behind their immediate motives or impulses. Art is often considered simply a matter of personal expression, fancy, imagination. All of those elements come into play, but we accord art a more important role.

Art is a means of thinking about and feeling the world in images. Science and art cognize the same universe, but by different means and for somewhat different purposes, and even in different aspects. There are corners of existence that can't be reached by scientific axioms and laws, and corners that can't be reached by poems. Intuitively, we understand this difference.

To view art simply as self-expression, independent of anything except a personal significance, is an especially crude approach, but there are others, identified as 'left' or even 'Marxist.'

In general, academic leftism separates art from life, from social life in particular.

Postmodernism, in my view, is not terribly interested in art. Of course the postmodernists make endless references to art, but art is not taken more seriously by them than any other important human endeavor. It's seen as a self-referential, narcissistic activity. Art is about other art, art is about texts, art is a kind of 'virtual reality' or 'hyper-reality,' anything but the proposition that art reflects and takes in life. There are only individual narratives, each of equal value or lack of value. There is no objective reality or objective truth, everyone makes up his or her own truth.

How could art be appreciated in such a cynical and debased atmosphere? Artists devote themselves body and soul to getting at the nature of things. The postmodernist, to whom everything is relative, without depth, without universality, is the natural enemy of the serious artist.

As I say, there are other arguments around, which continue to have a resonance in one fashion or another. There is the notion, which seems very left-wing, that art is nothing but class ideology. According to this view, the ideology of the ruling class is like water, which envelops you, which you can't see or combat because it has already determined how you see everything. It even determines the nature of your protests. This outlook denies that such a thing as a genuine author exists, and reduces the human subject to a mere shadow, a reflection of bourgeois ideology.

These views are a caricature of classical Marxism and the attitudes of the great Marxists toward art.

At the other end of that spectrum you find figures like Herbert Marcuse, of the Frankfurt School. He and others like him transform society and history into passive givens and make the individual or collective psyche the site of significant change.

Such critics insist that art is dependent on relatively constant elements of human experience and potentiality. Society is a static element and it is

humanity's underlying psychological-biological condition that impels artistic creation.

I want to speak a bit about Marcuse and these kinds of ideas. Whether you know of him or not, his influence continues to be there, even in diluted or indirect forms. He was born in 1898 and ended up in the US, a refugee from Hitler, and had a significant influence on the New Left student movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

There is no shortcut around a bit of history of the early part of the 20th century and even before. The first large working class parties emerged in the last part of the 19th century—in Germany, above all, in the Social Democratic Party, a mass party with many organizations, newspapers, etc. Its central contradiction was that although it had an ostensibly revolutionary program, revolutionary conditions did not exist. Increasingly, theoretical adherence to Marxism was accompanied by opportunist or reformist practice, an accommodation to German bourgeois society. This opportunism led to the catastrophic betrayal of August 1914, when the SPD, along with the other social democratic parties of Western Europe, took the working class into the slaughterhouse of World War I.

Marcuse and other eventual members of the Frankfurt School were growing up in the first decades of the 20th century.

A Marxist tendency developed, ultimately led by Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky and others, who insisted that the party of the working class had to be oriented toward preparing for the inevitable eruption of capitalist contradictions, which would present the revolutionary party with the opportunity to take power. This view was indicated in 1914 and 1917.

However, there were other critics of social democracy. Lenin explains in his *Left-Wing Communism, an Infantile Disorder* that Bolshevism in Russia, for example, had matured "in the long years of struggle against petty-bourgeois revolutionism ... The instability of such revolutionism, its barrenness, and its tendency to turn rapidly into submission, apathy, phantasms, and even a frenzied infatuation with one bourgeois fad or another—all this is common knowledge."

This type of opposition to social democracy, reflecting the impatience and instability of the petty bourgeoisie, was essentially of a left-bohemian character.

The sins of social democracy were known, to Lenin, Luxemburg, Trotsky. But they were also problems of a mass labor movement. In attacking the sins, the left-bohemian elements often overlooked its virtues. They threw the baby out with the bathwater.

The mass working class movement seemed ponderous to these intellectuals; after all, it refused to follow their instructions.

This opposition of the intellectuals took a philosophical form. Individuals like Marcuse, along with fellow members of the so-called Frankfurt School, George Lukács and others, came to argue in the 1920s that the problems of social democracy, and they blamed Engels as well, lay in its supposedly passive or vulgar or mechanical materialism, which reduced the socialist revolution to a historic inevitability that the workers movement could await with folded arms. This is a caricature of the position of Engels and the best elements of the social democracy.

This layer of intellectuals experienced a series of defeats, which helped shape their lives and thought. The murders of Luxemburg and Liebknecht in the failed revolution of 1918-19 left the newly-founded Communist Party virtually headless. Before it had time to develop a new Marxist leadership, the growth of Stalinism in the Communist International damaged it irreparably. The failure of the 1923 German revolution added to the fatal confusion and demoralization. The final blow was the coming to power of Hitler in 1933, with all its horrifying consequences.

Under those conditions of a growing political vacuum and setbacks for the international working class, a criticism of Marxism, along false and incorrect lines, by sections of the philosophically-trained petty bourgeoisie emerged and gathered strength.

Marcuse seems to have been especially predisposed to disillusionment

and to distance from the working class. He had joined the SPD, leaving it at the time of Luxemburg's murder. As early as his dissertation in 1922 he declared that the artist would "not find fulfillment" if he sided "with the revolutionary masses," for "these masses battle for everything else but for which he yearns."

He was among those in particular who eventually took Marxism to task for its supposed inattention to subjective human experience. According to this view, the categories of historical materialism were inherently incapable of grasping 'the reality of the human essence.' The notion of an essence residing in each individual was specifically rejected by Marx in the *Theses on Feuerbach*. Rather, Marx insisted, human nature is the ensemble of the social relations.

The *cri de coeur* at the turn of the 20th century in defense of 'authenticity' and 'genuinely lived existence' represented in part the response of a layer of the alienated intelligentsia to the growth of mass industries, great cities and the mass working class movement. When the intellectuals complained that Marxism couldn't come to terms with the problems of 'subjectively lived human existence,' they often meant that scientific socialism failed to account satisfactorily for how *they* experienced the world.

It was all very well for the socialists to write and speak about history, the class struggle and the prospects for social revolution, but what about the intellectuals' daily frustrations and anguish, their unfulfilled desires and ambitions?

We reject the notion that Marxism is too insensitive an instrument for making sense of and representing any social phenomenon. It depends, of course, on who's wielding the instrument. In the hands of a Marx, caustically discussing the various elements involved in the French revolution or counterrevolution of 1848, or a Trotsky, precisely and sensitively responding to the post-revolutionary poets and novelists ... ? These are indelible contributions to social psychology, as well as brilliant literature.

Marcuse's thought undoubtedly underwent many changes, but it is possible to discern certain constants in his outlook. He was revolted by the emptiness and spiritual impoverishment of bourgeois existence and drawn to art, whose formal qualities seemed to offer a concrete, sensuous alternative, both in the present and as an indicator of what life might be like if it were organized along different lines.

Marcuse also evinced a lifelong hostility to determinism of any kind and the concept of a law-governed social process. He strenuously denied the existence of any objective basis for the social revolution and ridiculed the notion that socialism could mature in the womb of the old society. For him, the impulse for revolution came from the conflict between humanity's essence—envisioned as the working out of biological needs, the "life instinct," the pleasure-urge—and its present existence, in which a repressive "performance principle" held sway.

Art, according to Marcuse, plays a critical role in restoring and holding out to human beings the possibility of a liberated existence.

The philosophical-aesthetic heart and soul of many of Marcuse's propositions came from the school of Schopenhauer [2], Nietzsche, Wilhelm Dilthey [3] and the Vitalists or 'Life Philosophy'—and later Heidegger [4] and Freud. Marcuse adopted an insufficiently critical attitude toward the latter's work and, in general, toward the theoretical traditions in which he was working.

According to the Vitalists: life is a dark current, not accessible to conscious, rational thought, but only to intuition. The existence of a world independent of consciousness, disdainfully referred to as "objects and facts," is rejected or considered a meaningless question. Along these lines, Marcuse argued, for example, in a 1932 essay that objects only become real as the result of human activity. "The objective world ... is part of man himself" ("The Foundation of Historical Materialism"). There are echoes here of Schopenhauer: "You must understand nature out of yourself, not

yourself out of nature."

The "humanization" of thought in this fashion excludes nature, the material universe, as something independent of and existing prior to humanity. As the Socialist Equality Party of the US noted in its document on the historical and international foundations of our party, this so-called dialectic is "the pseudo-dialectic of a subjectively-conceived interaction of the discontented petty-bourgeois intellectual and his environment, in which that individual—unbound by objective laws that govern the development of nature, society and consciousness—is free to 'create' the world as he or she sees fit."

This fits Marcuse to a T.

As I noted earlier, the ICFI has been attacked for 'objectivism.' Marcuse used this term; it meant the recognition of a world of objects existing independently of our consciousness. We insist, on the other hand, that analysis of world economic development and social relations is the basis for revolutionary practice—not our will, our utopian, aesthetic-erotic fantasies, our desire for a better world, but the logic of the real situation.

The contention that Marcuse represents a 'revolutionary Marxist tradition' is nonsense. He would have rejected such a notion out of hand. Marcuse didn't want anything to do with that tradition. We have less trouble with these figures themselves, Marcuse and the others, than with the claims made on their behalf.

The members of the Frankfurt School—Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer and so on—were individuals of high culture and considerable intellect. To be blunt, they were in over their heads. They were not politicians. There is a tragic element here. They were very distant from the working class and fell in with their milieu. If the working class had come to power in Germany in the 1920s, they would have developed differently and played a role in the cultural development of a socialist society. At least we would like to think so.

In the end, the socio-historical source of Marcuse's ideas lies in the deep discouragement of the petty bourgeois intellectual in the revolutionary capacities of the working class, in the wake of the defeats of the 1920s and 1930s. Rather than tracing the catastrophic fate of the German working class in particular to the programs and practices of definite parties and political leaderships, Marcuse and his Frankfurt School colleagues attributed the disaster to the failings of the German population, its supposed propensity to obey authority and other weaknesses.

In the postwar period, Marcuse and his co-thinkers argued that bourgeois society was now a society of plenty and workers were more or less incorporated into the system. Some of these comments are simply laughable today. Marcuse contemplated a society in which technical progress, of which he disapproved, meant the end of unemployment, overwork and poverty.

(It should be noted that Marcuse worked as an intelligence analyst for three US government agencies from 1942 to 1951. He remained with US intelligence for six years after the war ended, and, in 1949, submitted a 500-page confidential intelligence report entitled, "The Potentials of World Communism.")

In any event, in various works in the postwar period Marcuse contemplated a totally administered, bureaucratic, industrial-technological, 'one-dimensional' nightmare, from which human beings had few escapes, one of them being art. Needless to say, this is not our view of modern life. Capitalism means many terrible things, and it is a system incapable of resolving its fundamental contradictions, but humanity's productive capacity is a conquest that is vital for the future development of society.

If a supermarket, a motorway or the Internet simply strikes you as sterile, impersonal, horrifying, nightmarish, you will have a difficult time orienting yourself. This is not our view. This has nothing to do with the socialist perspective.

Marcuse's viewpoint on art finds consummate expression in his final

work, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, published in 1977.

He makes his case at the start: he sees the political potential, the subversiveness, of art "in the aesthetic form as such." As a result of its form, art is largely autonomous in relation to the given social relations; it protests these relations and transcends them.

One might respond to this more with sadness than anger. It's a position of defeatism, resignation, withdrawal from life.

The claim that form is everything is a wretched position. Art is a special way of taking stock of life, of enriching and rendering people more flexible by showing them sides of reality, sides of themselves, that they've never seen or paid attention to before, sides of reality that science and politics and philosophy can't reach, or reach less concretely.

Arguments for the predominance of form are signs of intellectual decay. What's really being said? Life is too painful, it can't be looked at, or, if we looked at it, we'd draw the most discouraging conclusions.

We don't moralize about this in regard to the history of art. There are conditions where the artists find themselves cut off on all sides and are obliged to retreat into themselves and the formal qualities of their work. We have the examples of poets Charles Baudelaire in the 1850s and 1860s and Alexander Pushkin after 1825, or the Abstract Expressionist painters in New York City after the Second World War.

But it's a disgraceful position for a quasi-political leader or political theorist to advocate in the late 20th century.

Despite its radical flavor, this kind of shrinking from life amounts to an accommodation with "what exists, in all its real ugliness" (Trotsky), because it leaves our real life of three dimensions unexplored, uncriticized, unexposed.

Important art has important substance, not in the form of a lump, content as a simple 'message,' but a social purpose, "a living complex of moods and ideas" seeking expression. The artist always has an idea about life he or she wants to, needs to communicate. Van Gogh wrote: "I see paintings or drawings in the poorest cottages, in the dirtiest comers. And my mind is driven towards these things with an irresistible momentum" (*The Letters of Vincent Van Gogh*).

No doubt art's formal qualities in themselves suggest something "other" than what exists, but that's not all, or primarily, what art does. That's a subsidiary element. Its more fundamental and concretely subversive role lies in developing the thinking and feeling of readers and spectators and viewers through the most comprehensive and critical examination of *what is*.

For Marcuse, however, such an enterprise is largely a waste of time—for there are no objective premises for a social revolution. Halfway through *The Aesthetic Dimension*, he makes clear his standpoint: the proletariat, to whom Marxists are theoretically directing their efforts, he writes, is "to a great extent integrated" into existing society. On the next page, he restates the point, the present condition is "the integration of the proletariat under advanced monopoly capitalism." So forth and so on.

Since there is no social force capable of bringing about a new society, 'revolutionary theory,' such as it is, becomes a matter principally of fantasy and imagination, utopian dreaming about 'potentialities' and 'possibilities.' There is very little of this world, except perhaps our 'life instincts' and our intuition, that is of any use in the revolutionary process. Why bother considering it? And, indeed, Marcuse, in the 1960s, would remark: "that which is already there is of no importance to art" ("Art in the One-Dimensional Society"). An astounding comment. Hence the vehement hostility to realism in art, or, as he charmingly puts it, "the realistic-conformist mind."

It turns out, in fact, that Marcuse is drawn to art for the opposite reason than we are, precisely because, in his view, art is not bound to reality, not obliged to be 'realistic' in any meaningful sense.

Another critical theme is the positive character of the "flight inward." Marcuse says, "With the affirmation of the inwardness of subjectivity, the

individual steps out of the network of exchange relationships and exchange values, withdraws from the reality of bourgeois society, and enters another dimension of existence" (*The Aesthetic Dimension*).

In fact, the individual doesn't do any such thing. Marcuse fails to see what Marx and Engels clarified first in the 1840s, that liberation is a historical act, not a mental one. Instead of stepping out, in one's imagination, of a 'network of exchange relationships and exchange values,' what's called for is practical action to end a state that demands such 'inwardness.' A world that needs to be withdrawn from in this drastic fashion is one that needs to be altered.

The political element is decisive here, in my view: discouragement, resignation, and, unpleasantly, cynicism. This is what drives the work. A decade earlier, Marcuse was honest enough to explain that he had come to preoccupy himself with the phenomenon of art out of "some sort of despair or desperation."

More than simply Marcuse's trajectory is involved here. At issue is an occupational hazard of those, including Marxists, who work in this field. In the face of a difficult political situation, temporary setbacks, a change in popular mood, it may be tempting to turn to art as a refuge, a realm of beauty and sophistication and heightened emotion.

Nor can the attraction of the artists for Schopenhauer, Nietzsche and others simply be viewed as an enormous misunderstanding. The creative personality may well find charm in the exuberant appeal to the emotions, intuition, 'primal being.' The poetry seems to be lodged there and not in the working class struggle, which is more prosaic, more protracted, not instantly grasped or solved by the 'free-spirited' individual.

Moreover, the life activity of artists (under conditions of the division between mental and manual labor in this society), which gives them the apparent liberty to create whatever comes into their brains, makes historical materialism, with its insistence on the primacy of being over consciousness and the law-governed character of social and spiritual life, difficult to grasp.

At any rate, as Marcuse carries on in *The Aesthetic Dimension*, he largely loses interest in the significance of artistic form and subjectivity for the revolution, because it turns out the revolution—highly unlikely to occur—doesn't really touch on our greatest problems anyway, which are part of the inevitable, gloomy human condition. In the last few pages of the book, the author tells us, "While art bears witness to the necessity of liberation, it also testifies to its limits. What has been done cannot be undone; what has passed cannot be recaptured."

And, finally, socialism "could never resolve all the conflicts between the universal and the particular, between human beings and nature, between individual and individual. Socialism does not and cannot liberate Eros from Thanatos." The revolution "is the struggle for the impossible, against the unconquerable whose domain can perhaps nevertheless be reduced." In other words, socialism cannot conquer death and the laws of nature. No one ever promised that it could.

In conclusion, I want to reiterate that the Marxist and the Frankfurt School-Critical Theory approaches to art and society are diametrically opposed. We fight in art for the fullest consideration and representation, which has immense significance, of our reality on this planet.

We are entering a period of immense upheaval, of rapid shifts and changes. The artist too, in our view, has to take his or her point of departure from the epoch we live in. Make of it what you will, treat it, transform it, rearrange it as you will, but nothing good will come of avoiding its incontrovertible reality.

The artists, we believe, need to know something about history and society, feel deeply for suffering and struggling humanity and draw on the entire history of artistic effort in their treatment of life. For our part, we will encourage serious work and contribute to it any way we can.

Notes:

1. V.G. Belinsky (1811-1848): Russian literary and social critic, editor

of an important literary journal, who began referring to himself as a socialist in 1841. [return]

2. Arthur Schopenhauer (1788-1860): German philosopher, anti-democratic and pessimistic, the author of *The World as Will and Representation* (1819). [return]

3. Wilhelm Dilthey (1833-1911): German historian and philosopher, concerned to establish the distinction between the natural sciences and the "human sciences." [return]

4. Martin Heidegger (1889-1976): German philosopher and influence on existentialism, early mentor of Marcuse; author of *Being and Time* (1927) and, in the 1930s, a supporter of Hitler's Nazi party. [return]

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