

Liberation and The Great Refusal: Marcuse's Concept of Nature

At the same pace that mankind enslaves nature, man seems to become enslaved to other men or to his own infamy. Even the pure light of science seems unable to shine but on a background of ignorance. All our invention and progress seem to result in endowing material forces with intellectual life, and in stultifying human life into a material force.

Karl Marx

The subjective spirit which cancels the animation of nature can master a despiritualized nature only by imitating its rigidity and despiritualizing itself in turn.

T. W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer

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German Senior Essay

¹ Karl Marx, “Speech at the Anniversary of the *People’s Paper*”, April 1856. Quoted in D. Ryazanov (ed.), *Karl Marx. Man, Thinker, and Revolutionist* (London, 1927), p. 74. Also, Alfred Schmidt *The Concept of Nature in Marx* (New Left Review: London, 1965 [1962]), p. 7.

² *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 57.

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Thank you.

Chris: This page was written in Verdana 11 font.

Introduction

Herbert Marcuse's philosophy of liberation redefines human nature and the relationship between man and his environment. It is utopian in the sense that it is a dream and goal, not in the sense that it is impossible. The nature of oppression in society can be closely linked to the instrumental rationality of modern science and technology, which results in the objectification of subjects (other people and nature). Similarly, instrumental rationality in political realms (as is the case with advanced corporate capitalism and authoritarian socialism) instrumentalizes and de-democratizes the public sphere. An ideology of domination is therefore built into these social structures. A culture industry concerned with capital eventually commodifies, reifies and homogenizes the consumers and their society at a psychological and cultural level. An objectifying, quantifying view of nature results in environmental devastation. The implications of these rationalities to Marcuse are especially grave: one's being is manipulated and repressed. Also, one's liberation is made virtually impossible, as the interests and expression of the individual are lost in the commodity culture and in unnecessary, alienated labor and manufactured needs. The domination of nature is instrumental to this repressive order, and Marcuse sees the liberation of man and nature as the same struggle – combating what bell hooks calls “the ideology of domination.”¹

Marcuse proposes a society in which technology and science are used to liberate humans, not enslave them, and in which the priorities are peace, gratification, creativity

¹ bell hooks: “Feminism is a "struggle to eradicate oppression...It is a struggle to eradicate the ideology of domination and a commitment to reorganize society so that the self-development of people can take precedence over imperialism, economic expansion, and

and happiness, not toil, hard work and productivity. One fundamental aspect of this “new sensibility” is the maximization of an emancipatory, harmonious relationship with nature. Marcuse posits, along with *early Marx*², that nature is a fundamental aspect of our being, and is especially important to our liberation. It exists in its own right, and should be treated as a subject, not object. Either philosopher does not explicate exactly what the relationship should be, but it is clear that it should not be the exploitation of nature, in this case, the dominating instrumental rationality which emerged in the especially powerful and destructive form of early capitalist modes of production. Since the natural world and its patterns are such a vital aspect of being, its domination is necessarily a repression of human being³. Marcuse updates Freud’s premise that repression is necessary to combat scarcity and advance civilization⁴ by introducing the concept of surplus-repression, necessary only to bolster the performance principle of advanced industrial societies. The need to repress instinct to deal with scarcity is now minimized (maybe eliminated) by technological achievements. Much of our labor is unnecessary, and not even gratifying or liberating. We should incorporate the ultimate alienated labor, automation, to provide our necessities, and use our free time to cultivate our human potentialities, which liberate our consciousness and combat repression. His analysis of the aesthetic dimension fuses reality with a non-instrumental, emancipatory realm in

material desires”. *Feminist Theory : From Margin to Center* (Boston: South End Press Classics, v. 5, ed. Manning Marable & bell hooks, 2000) p 24.

² Marcuse’s “The Foundation of Historical Materialism”, (*Studies in Critical Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon, 1972), translated by Joris de Bres), first published in 1932, was one of the first reviews of Marx’s *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*.

³ Adorno and Horkheimer concur: “The subjective spirit which cancels the animation of nature can master a despiritualized nature only by imitating its rigidity and despiritualizing itself in turn.” *Dialectic of Enlightenment* 57.

⁴ Freud *Civilization and its Discontents*

which reconciliation with nature is possible. This paper will explore, challenge and elucidate Marcuse's philosophy and critique its applicability to the contemporary world. For all of his progressive steps, there are also faults. For instance, his "sensuous rationality" is underdeveloped, and lacks self-reflective qualities. Also, his views of nature are largely imposed from an anthropocentric perspective, but attributed to nature itself. Since this philosophy entails a "new basic experience"⁵, giant steps are taken and shortcomings are inevitable, unlike a negative philosophy. But the humanitarian and environmental crises of our times require a radical reorientation of politics and philosophy. In his *Great Refusal*, Marcuse insists upon a less repressive order, both for humans and nature.

I. The Inception of Red/Green Philosophy:

Marx's *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*

How did Karl Marx conceive of the natural world and its relation to humanity and social order? This analysis is confined to one work, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*, because it is integral to Marcuse's social theory and philosophical development. According to Marx, nature is an integral part of man's physical and spiritual life. He does not deal extensively with how it should be treated, but rather defines its role and relation to humans. Ultimately, the question I'm concerned with is: What is the role of the natural world in human freedom and emancipation? This examination of Marx will help to establish a framework to further pursue this question,

⁵ "A new basic experience of being would change the human existence in its entirety."

and to address Marcuse's claim that *EPM* is "the extension of Historical Materialism to a dimension which is to play a vital role in the liberation of man."⁶

Firstly, there are some important attributes to nature that describe how Marx conceives of it. The abstract thinker will misunderstand nature as in contrast to thought⁷, and therefore conclude that nature is defective. Marx clarifies the contradiction of this conception:

Something which is defective not merely for me or in my eyes but in itself - intrinsically - has something outside of itself which it lacks. That is, its being is something other than it itself. Nature has therefore to supersede itself for the abstract thinker, for he already posits it as a potentially *superseded* being.⁸

Therefore, nature exists for itself and is not lacking attributes of its own nature. Nature is not defective in itself - but can it be improved upon, as Marcuse sometimes suggests? Since humans can create beauty out of it⁹, it is possible for nature to exist as a means to something else, in this case, a human creation. But nature has not really been improved upon. Rather, nature has been altered to create something different, in this case something beautiful.

Secondly, the essence of nature is sensuousness¹⁰. It is not an ideal or abstraction, but rather our sensuous experience. Nature is essential for the human experience:

EC 158.

⁶ CRR 68.

⁷ Karl Marx, *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* (tr. Martin Milligan) International Publishers: NY, 1964. p. 188.

⁸ *Ibid* p. 193.

⁹ *Ibid* p. 114.

¹⁰ *Ibid* p. 192.

The worker can create nothing without *nature*, without the *sensuous external world*. It is the material on which his labor is realized, in which it is active, from which and by means of which it produces.¹¹

Since expression and creation are vital components of being human, humans would not be able to realize themselves without nature. Therefore, nature is not only important to human being, but rather an integral part of human essence:

The universality of man appears in practice precisely in the universality which makes all nature his *inorganic* body - both inasmuch as nature is (1) his direct means of life, and (2) the material, the object, and the instrument of his life activity. Nature is man's *inorganic body* - nature, that is, in so far as it is not itself the human body. Man *lives* on nature - means that nature is his *body*, with which he must remain in continuous interchange if he is not to die. That man's physical and spiritual life is linked to nature means simply that nature is linked to itself, for man is a part of nature.¹²

There is a substantive interconnection between, and reliance upon, nature by man. There is both a physical necessity which is provided by nature and without which humans would starve or otherwise perish, but there is also a lack of life activity without nature. Embeddedness in nature is part of the human fulfillment of potentiality. Alienated labor creates a rift between man and nature and, ultimately, in himself. Alienated labor is a denial of nature's life-giving (and, according to Marcuse, emancipatory) qualities.

The distinction between animals and humans helps elucidate Marx's vision of what humanity is capable of, and what it is. It also establishes one distinction between nature and culture, culture having the capacity to freely create beauty.

¹¹ *Ibid* p. 109.

¹² *Ibid* p. 112.

[An animal] produces one-sidedly, whilst man produces universally. It produces only under the dominion of immediate physical need, whilst man produces even when he is free from physical need and only truly produces in freedom therefrom. An animal produces only himself, whilst man produces the whole of nature...Man...also forms things in accordance with the laws of beauty.¹³

Man has a greater potential than animals in that he can produce out of freedom, not out of necessity, and can create beauty. These all occur best when man is not estranged from his labor and product; this relationship also allows a cultivation (not domination) of the natural, material world. This is a clear advantage over animals. But this potential carries with it the loss of even man's necessities if the fragmentation of the producer/product relationship occurs:

In tearing away from man the object of his production, therefore, estranged labor tears from him his *species-life*, his real objectivity as a member of the species and transforms his advantage over animals into the disadvantage that his inorganic body, nature, is taken away from him.¹⁴

Again, not only is individual man's potential squandered, but so is his potential as a member of the human species. He is left virtually impotent and without a choice, essentially subject to the system within which he works. This is due to the forced split between him and nature, him and his labor. Contrary to many models of human/nature relations, nature is not an alien power over man and therefore cannot truly dominate him¹⁵. In this case, it is the owner of the worker's product who is the alien, dominating force.

Alienated labor is defined as the separation of a laborer from his labor. It becomes unfulfilling. The relationship between material and worker is necessarily a less co-

¹³ *Ibid* p. 113-4.

¹⁴ *Ibid* p. 114.

operative one. Alienated labor functions against an appreciative or non-dominating relationship to nature¹⁶. Alienated labor simply produces a product lacking gratification for the laborers, thereby lacking beauty for the worker. I think it is fair to argue that alienated labor is less likely to produce works of beauty, as beauty is derived in part from a natural connection to one's life sources (nature and other people). This will be further elaborated at the end of this section. Alienated labor and exploitation hinder the interchange between nature and human and therefore lessen the degree to which humanity is being true to its being and existence. Since nature is both its grounding and life-source, severing this connection would diminish humans' ability to fulfill its potential. Alienated labor necessarily does this, as nature is the object of man's life activity. One could also say that humanity is not realizing itself if it is not continually interacting in a way that maximizes the potential of humanity. A realization of the significance of nature in human existence (as man's "inorganic body") is the opposite of estrangement and alienation.

Humans function as part of a whole, the species, in a context, nature. Estrangement weakens the vital connection between man and nature, and man and others. This has greater implications than simply harming the individual: "In estranging man from (1) nature, and (2) himself, his own active functions, his life activity, estranged labor estranges the *species* from man"¹⁷. Since the constructive relationship between man and nature, unalienated labor, is so critical to humanity, its fracturing affects the entire

¹⁵ *Ibid* p. 115.

¹⁶ The opposite of alienated labor is characterized by Wendell Berry as "true materialism" - an appreciation for, and non-exploitative relationship with, the materials being manipulated.

¹⁷ *Ibid*

species. Defining humanity so strongly, almost fundamentally, upon the relationship of labor to being grants great import to the implications of alienated labor. Its large-scale enactment, as is the case in industrial capitalism, constructs a dire picture of the direction of humanity. Not only is man unfulfilled as a result of his labor, but he is also isolated from other people. His humanity is not realized at all, and he is virtually brought down to the level of animality, if not to a lower tier, as is the case with impoverishment of necessities and alienated labor.

The implications of alienated labor also apply to other humans, as the connection between nature, humans and other humans is so vital to the existence of man.: “Every estrangement of man, from himself and from nature, appears in the relation in which he places himself and nature to men other than and differentiated from himself”¹⁸.

Estrangement from nature corrupts human interaction because it is a vital component of being human in the first place. Social order and the achievements of the human species therefore suffer in addition to the individual. Yet labor is necessary for survival.

Therefore a balance must be struck. The production of human activity as labor is alien to nature, man, consciousness and the expression of life¹⁹. Such production necessarily undermines the life of man, the human species, and being, yet is wholly necessary for civilization and mankind to exist. A dialectical tension exists between mankind’s complete embeddedness in nature and the fact of labor, to which no ideal answer (i.e. reconciliation with nature) exists.

An emancipatory relationship to nature is essential to human expression and the achievement of the potential in the human species. Exactly how nature should be treated

¹⁸ *Ibid* p. 116; also Adorno and Horkheimer in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

is implicitly explored, and I'd like to draw out some possible exegeses. The relationship between man and nature is both a co-operative and exploitative one. Were it not, we would be destroying or forcing an integral part of ourselves into an undesirable nature. Marx lays the groundwork which all for a relationship in which nature should be cultivated, not exploited. My sense of exploitation and domination of nature involves destruction and differentiation²⁰. It does not involve much constructive creation, as cultivation does²¹. Since nature is part of ourselves, our "inorganic body", to destroy or abuse it would be to alienate ourselves from ourselves and others. To dominate it would even be problematic. This doesn't exclude a hierarchical relationship, which probably exists, despite the tension between nature for its own sake and nature becoming beautiful with human intervention. It seems that beauty would be harder to produce by exploitation, destruction, alienation, domination or fragmentation – genuine fulfillment by the worker definitely is. On the other hand, work produced by alienated labor (e.g. the Great Pyramids) and expressions of destruction (e.g. Guernica) carry incredible beauty²². According to Marcuse, the aesthetic dimension allows a reconciliation with nature to be conceived, thereby facilitating its partial introduction into reality. Irrespective of the production of beauty, the human species would be more fulfilled were it to establish a less wasteful and exploitative connection to nature. For instance, production methods

¹⁹ *Ibid* p. 122.

²⁰ For instance, the use of solar energy (both passive and active) is not even close to as exploitative and destructive as non-renewable, pollutant-emitting fossil fuels are. Natural energies such as sunlight and wind, if used properly, would be part of a less dominating relationship to nature.

²¹ Here I use the term 'cultivation' to mean an attempted harmony with natural patterns and forces. Smaller farms involving personal involvement, for instance, are cultivated, whereas factory farms exist in a brutal and separated relationship to nature.

²² The significance of Marcuse's aesthetic theory will be discussed in section V.

which minimized or disallowed waste benefit nature, industry and man – they are not pursued because they fall outside of the system of waste, unlimited growth, and the established manufacturing paradigm²³. There is even the prospect of capitalism including natural resources as capital, thereby minimizing unnecessary waste and exploitation²⁴. Since nature is such a central component to our being, its abuse would only translate into an abuse of the individual and the species. While Marx changes his view on nature towards a more exploitative, objectifying one later in his life, this early treatise is useful in grounding further Marxist environmental ethics, and in establishing a liberatory project for mankind.

II. Eros, Nature and Liberation

(Freud's *Civilization and its Discontents* & Marcuse's *Eros and Civilization*)

In *Eros and Civilization* and *One-Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse presents a redefinition of the relationship between man and nature. The domination and mastery of nature is an outdated model which necessarily involves repression of man himself, since man's being is closely related to the natural world. Marcuse uses Marx's views of nature in his early works, specifically *The Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844*. To what extent does Marcuse idealize the role that nature should play in man's existence? Does it even make sense (Habermas argues that nature is outside of the intersubjective sphere, and that Marcuse's philosophy of nature is irrational²⁵)? Can automation of many

²³ William McDonough and Michael Braungart, in *Cradle to Cradle*, show that waste need not be a concept in manufacturing. They have created a factory which is sustainably powered, completely non-toxic, and produces cleaner effluent than influent.

²⁴ See Paul Hawken, Amory Lovin and L. Hunter Lovin *Natural Capitalism*.

²⁵ Habermas, Juergen. *Technology and Science as "Ideology"*, 1968, from *Towards a Rational Society: student protest, science, and politics*. Translated by Jeremy J. Shapiro. Boston: Beacon Press, 1970.

essential tasks, a goal of both Marx and Marcuse, accommodate this model of an interactive relationship to nature? How does automation fit into a sensual experience? Finally, does Marcuse think that nature as subject-object is even realizable? I hope to explore and elucidate these points and critique their feasibility within the context of the texts cited above.

In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse critiques Freud's notion of humanity in his *Civilization and its Discontents*. Freud's basic premise is that man's instinctual behavior, characterized by a life (Eros) and death (Thanatos) instinct, determine the progress and manifestation of culture according to the degrees of sublimation and repression controlling those instincts. Eros and Thanatos must be balanced in order for destruction to be tempered with progress. Repression of Eros, in the form of delayed or denied gratification, allows for this energy to be used for socially useful means such as labor. Thus, the pleasure principle is denied in the interest of the reality principle, which is historically contingent. In the case of advanced capitalism, the reality principle is defined as the performance principle, in which efficiency and productivity are the highest goals. Scarcity (Ananke), while originally a legitimate justification for a sublimated pleasure principle (e.g. in order to work for food), is now used as an illegitimate justification for repression through the manufacturing of needs and organized scarcity. Surplus-repression, domination beyond actual necessity, has been created.

The result of this repression is both misdirected and unfulfilled expression of instinctual energies, resulting in a lack of happiness and imbalanced excess of destructive energies. Happiness is satisfaction, knowledge and freedom according to Marcuse, not solely satisfaction. As human existence has been manipulated by industrial society and

surplus-repression, the potential for freedom, expression and progress are all significantly stifled in the interest of control, “growth” and the status quo. Freud necessarily links unfreedom and constraint to civilization, lest civilization regress into barbarity, and disallows the prospect of the gratifying, free, advanced civilization which Marcuse attempts to justify. Marcuse acknowledges the necessity of repression historically, but criticizes the surplus-repression created by new needs, waste and dominating political structures. Marcuse lucidly describes the result of repression and civilization based on a necessary split between pleasure and reality: “The better living is offset by the all-pervasive control over living”; “The individual pays by sacrificing his time, his consciousness, his dreams; civilization pays by sacrificing its own promises of liberty, justice and peace for all”²⁶. This is a system run amok. The individual’s awareness of his own repression is dumbed down by the manipulated consciousness and controlled information flow. The potential for liberation is highest when most needs can be satisfied without toil, yet repression is all-pervasive in the interest of the status quo, domination and misunderstanding. Exploitation and domination of nature plays both a symptomatic and causative role in this type of civilization.

Freud writes that the destructive instinct is sublimated into forms such as “power over nature”. Marcuse responds with a question concerning balance:

To be sure, the diversion of destructiveness from the ego to the external world secured the growth of civilization. However, extroverted destruction remains destruction: its objects are in most cases actually and violently assailed, deprived of their form, and reconstructed only after partial destruction; units are forcibly divided, and the component parts forcibly rearranged. Nature is literally

²⁶ Marcuse *Eros and Civilization* p. 100-1.

“violated”...Destructiveness, in extent and intent seems to be more directly satisfied in civilization than the libido.²⁷

However, such satisfaction (technological destruction) is one that aims towards death. Therefore, “the growing mastery of nature then would, with the growing productivity of labor, develop and fulfill the human needs *only as a by-product*: increasing cultural wealth and knowledge would provide the material for progressive destruction and the need for increasing instinctual repression”²⁸. According to early Marx and Marcuse, man and nature are strongly interconnected. Man relies upon nature for both physical existence, expression and fulfillment of potential (e.g. creating beauty). Mastery and destruction of nature is to treat it as simply an object to be exploited. Lacking a co-operative relationship, intersubjective or not, man’s needs will not be fulfilled. Industrial agriculture creates foods with minimal nutritional value and multiple toxins; wilderness destruction demolishes aesthetic beauty and diminishes biodiversity; pollution negatively affects our health, especially the health of the impoverished and laborers²⁹.

Whether or not nature has to be treated as a subject for preservation and cultivation to occur is uncertain. To assume that it exists for its own sake is to treat it as a subject. Marx doesn’t seem to be doing this, but rather placing nature in the context of fulfilling man’s potential while maintaining nature’s role as an object. Habermas seems to do a similar thing - valuing and not exploiting nature while keeping it in the instrumental, object realm. Marcuse diverges greatly in this respect. He aims at a subject-

²⁷ *Ibid* p. 86.

²⁸ *Ibid* p. 87.

²⁹ Examples: cancer rates among Hispanic agricultural workers in California; asthma in inner cities; citing of waste incinerators in African-American communities; dumping of nuclear waste in Native-American communities; disease rates among high-tech factory workers.

object relationship in which nature is treated largely as existing for its own sake. He does not do this in a utopian way, as he admits that peace with nature is realistically impossible: “The end of this war, the perfect peace in the animal world - this idea belongs to the Orphic myth, not to any conceivable historical reality”³⁰. He makes a very strong theoretical argument, though, which gives validity to any attempt to bridge the gap between man and nature. This the importance of the aesthetic dimension – in which non-instrumental relationships and more peaceful alternative realities can be created. He is considered utopian by those who misunderstand aesthetic imagination as simple dreaming or idle speculation. He is wise not to commit the fallacy of thinking he’s solved the problem with one new concept.

Marcuse further explicates the traditional basis of nature-as-object by starting with Greek philosophy. He argues that the ego is placed in antagonistic contrast to both human nature and external nature, to be fought and dominated: “The struggle begins with the perpetual internal conquest of the “lower” faculties of the individual: his sensuous and appetitive faculties. Their subjugation is, at least since Plato, regarded as a constitutive element of human reason, which is thus in its very function repressive. The struggle culminates in the conquest of external nature, which must be perpetually attacked, curbed, and exploited in order to yield to human needs”³¹. He continues with Aristotelian thought:

[T]his idea of reason becomes increasingly antagonistic to those faculties and attitudes which are receptive rather than productive, which tend towards gratification rather than transcendence - which remain strongly committed to the pleasure principle...Reason is to insure, through the ever more effective

³⁰ *Counterrevolution and Revolt* p. 68.

transformation and exploitation of nature, the fulfillment of the human potentialities³².

This characterization of Platonic and Aristotelian thought is fair, and there are numerous examples to support it³³. At the same time, Plato argues that the body must be cultivated, trained and developed in order to be fully human. Physical education and cultivation (ballet, wrestling) were strongly accented components of Plato's model of education. While this example does not necessarily establish a co-operative relationship with human nature, it creates the possibility of cultivation as opposed to domination or brutal manipulation. Marcuse is perhaps basing his analysis somewhat excessively on interpretations of Greek thought, not a close reading. Nonetheless, the hierarchical notion of mind over body and the subjugation of nature are supported in a reading of Plato and Aristotle. The Socratic dialog *Phaedo* speaks of the inability to think in the countryside³⁴. But, I would argue that they can be read as being more receptive to the interactive notion of cultivation of senses and mind than Marcuse reads them.

The fact that, historically, most Western thought has followed this model of nature-and-body-as-object (or even deception) is very true, and Marcuse responds appropriately. The model of humans being whole with their given faculties is generally disapproved of - the body and senses are treated antagonistically and the priority given to abstract idealism in the mind is overwhelming. In the "Aesthetic Dimension" chapter of *Eros and Civilization*, attempts to join sensuousness and rationality, and to therefore form

³¹ *Eros and Civilization* p. 110.

³² *Ibid* p. 111.

³³ E.g. Plato's notion of the body as a tomb in the *Phaedo*.

³⁴ Socrates: "I'm a lover of learning, and trees and open country won't teach me anything, whereas men in the town do." Plato *Phaedrus*, trans. R. Hackforth, in *Plato*,

a “new sensibility” in which moral compulsion is replaced by aesthetic sensibility. For instance, brutality would become so offensive that its enactment or observation would be unbearable or impossible. The philosophy of natural and sensual domination is only one part of the picture. The economic mode of capitalist-based production, immense technological development and population increase (all increases in the potential for liberation) are undoubtedly more important, as environmental destruction has only reached extreme levels in the past centuries.

III. Counterrevolution and Revolt

In *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, written in the aftermath of the students’ revolt, Marcuse further develops his philosophy of nature. It focuses on the implications of a new sensibility, early Marx’s philosophy of nature, and the integral role that a new concept of nature plays in liberating human consciousness. This view of nature is integral to the formation of a new sensibility that rejects excessively repressive industrial society. The “new sensibility” is the medium between political and social participation and personal liberation. Nature is a fundamental component of this fusion. Grounding the psyche firmly in the liberating qualities of nature serves as a basis for a liberated consciousness. The intimate link between internal and external nature (Marx: “man’s inorganic body”³⁵) is further explicated to demonstrate the reciprocal domination of both natures by a technological rationality. The “Nature and Revolution” chapter of *Counterrevolution and Revolt* will serve as a basis for question and criticism of

The Collected Dialogues, ed. Edith Hamilton and Huntington Cairns (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1982), 230d.

³⁵ *EPM* 112.

Marcuse's philosophy of nature, as it is dense, well-formulated and relatively comprehensive.

Nature as a Liberatory Model and Agent: "Nature and Revolution"

The natural world is a necessary component of Marcuse's new sensibility. This sensibility is a rationality connecting mind and body, based on man's higher dispositions, such as peace and aesthetic judgment, and is integral to man's liberation³⁶, serving as a medium between the political and personal. Counter to its place in the dominant model of society, Marcuse suggests that nature can be an ally in human liberation, but that its liberatory potential must be unleashed, both by not abusing it (based on instrumental rationality) and by "helping it". "The violation of nature aggravates the violation of man"³⁷ because nature is the liberating and foundational basis of man's existence.

According to Marcuse, a violation of nature and human nature is necessarily detrimental to one's inner nature, or psyche, as it is the symptom and cause of imbalanced destructive energies. The excess of aggression in modern US culture is evident, as is the wholesale and shameless destruction of the environment and, in some cases, human lives.

Destruction of nature is destruction of life. It is not a leap to state that the exploitation of either is a similar type of neglect towards life. At a simpler level, the destruction of nature diminishes man's opportunity to gain peacefulness or beauty from it, thereby furthering the cycle of destruction. And the violation of nature also being that of man is evident at a more direct level, too. Ecocide is often another form of genocide. During Vietnam, the

³⁶ "Far from being a mere "psychological" phenomenon in groups or individuals, the new sensibility is the medium in which social change becomes an individual need, the mediation between the political practice of "changing the world" and the drive for personal liberation." CRR 59

³⁷ CRR 59.

use of Agent Orange both killed many civilians and ensured that many future generations would either die or suffer severe debilitation. Landmines, nuclear weapons and waste, air pollution and destruction of rainforest are all examples of natural domination displaced and removed through technological destruction, seriously affecting many future generations. (The fact of technology allows for guilt to be minimized as this destruction occurs). That these activities often target disenfranchised or abused classes is not coincidental. Just as nature is a vehicle for human liberation, the destruction of nature is a requisite symptom and cause of a system that, by its very nature, instrumentalizes and weakens human liberatory potential. Marcuse's new sensibility, grounded in peace and freedom, is tailored to the current historical challenge – advanced technological capitalism. As inner and outer nature are reciprocally determined, liberating one's inner self via this new sensibility is part of the Great Refusal – the attempt to undermine dominating rationality at the physiological and instinctual levels, as well as the political and global ones.

A new sensibility (and epistemology based on it) is crucial to changing the world successfully:

The radical redefinition of sensibility as “practical” desublimates the idea of freedom without abandoning its transcendent content: the senses are not only the basis for the *epistemological* constitution of reality, but also for its *transformation*, its *subversion* in the interest of liberation³⁸.

The need to break out of a cycle of exploitation and domination – both of man and nature – is clear, and an epistemology based on sensuous rationality would encourage and necessarily pursue peacefulness and joy. A rationality based on instrumental technology

³⁸ CRR 71.

does not lead to peace, especially when the public-political sphere is coopted by this rationality³⁹. Marcuse proposes a natural, sensuous rationality eliciting the beauty and serenity in nature.

What this reorientation further achieves is making freedom “the objective of the Life Instincts.⁴⁰” Presently, the concept of freedom has little meaning grounded in the potential and reality of humanity, but rather is given meaning within a system which seems to encroach upon human freedom: advanced technological industrialization based largely on alienated labor⁴¹. According to Marcuse, grounding rationality in sensuousness opens up the possibility of freedom as an active, immanent, embodied ideal. The prospect of a sensuous rationality is tenuous, as it might lack reflective qualities. But a synthesis of reflective, abstract intellect, and acknowledgement of the fact of embodiment and embeddedness could yield a partially reflective rationality. This rationality in turn bases the striving for freedom upon Eros, not intellect or abstraction⁴². A break from alienated labor (and, therefore, from a “blunted sensibility”) allows for opportunities and possibilities not conceivable within the restraints of the existing society. In this sense, a

³⁹ “No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarianism, but there is one from the slingshot to the megaton bomb...the *One and All* that keeps rolling on to this day – with occasional breathing spells – would teleologically be the absolute of suffering.”

Adorno, T.W. *Negative Dialectics* Tr. E. B. Ashton (NY: Seabury Press, 1973) p. 230.
⁴⁰ CRR 71.

⁴¹ The American military campaign, “Enduring Freedom”, is a recent example. “Freedom” in this case is simply a vague justification for questionable military involvement in Afghanistan and other countries, as the stability of the US’s exploitative economic system and global ethic has been challenged.

⁴² “Human freedom is thus rooted in the human *sensibility*: the senses do not only “receive” what is given to them, in the form in which it appears, they do not “delegate” the transformation of the given to another faculty (the understanding); rather, they discover, or *can* discover by themselves, in their “practice,” new (more gratifying) possibilities and capabilities, forms and qualities of things, and can urge and guide their

reorientation of the senses is vital to a more liberated consciousness, as the senses connect one to the repressive society intimately.

Another reorientation of nature that comes with a sensuous rationality is its historical variability⁴³. Contrary to many ecological philosophers, nature is not seen as a romantic, idyllic place which must maintain a certain level of purity⁴⁴. Nature is manipulated by society, and humans interact with it under a particular rationality (in this case, scientific-technological instrumentality) – its variability cannot be avoided. Yet Marcuse seems to be arguing both for some universal aspects of nature: its liberatory potential and its antagonism to man (assumedly what creates the need to overcome some “struggle with nature”⁴⁵), and the historical circumstances of technological development. The liberating qualities of nature would counter the ever-increasing dominant rationality: capitalist exploitation. He gives two examples of how capitalism has come to control the primary drives. Aggressiveness has been transferred to technological destruction, allowing widespread destruction and killing with minimal guilt. Sexuality, through controlled desublimation, standardizes and “legitimizes” the beauty industry⁴⁶.

realization. The emancipation of the senses would make freedom what it is not yet: a sensuous need, an objective of the Life Instincts (*Eros*).” CRR 71.

⁴³ CRR 59.

⁴⁴ Marcuse, once a student of Heidegger’s and a dedicated critic of Nazism and fascism, was very aware of the dangers of falling into the purist, confusedly romantic determinism of the National Socialist’s perverse notion of nature. I don’t think that his “reconciliation with nature” falls into this trap. See Michael Zimmerman *Contesting Earth’s Future* (UC: Berkeley, 1994), p. 150-183.

⁴⁵ CRR 59.

⁴⁶ CRR 60. Since 1972, the sphere of commodified and instrumentalized control of psychological aspects of humans in the US has grown tremendously. An example: the cooptation and commodification of racial tolerance in the form of acceptance of racial minorities into positions which are often exploitative in some form (racial discrimination (i.e. Clarence Thomas & J.C. Watts), or exploitative CEOs). Challenges to the dominant rationality have been subsumed under that rationality itself. Look at G.W. Bush’s

Since nature has been fully colonized, “‘liberation of nature’ cannot mean returning to a pre-technological state, but advancing to the use of the achievements of technological civilization for freeing man and nature from the destructive abuse of science and technology in the service of exploitation.⁴⁷” Marcuse acknowledged the fact of an altered nature and the benefits of some aspects of technological growth, the most important of which is the (arguable) ability to virtually eliminate toil and labor. Neither is he arguing for a romanticized, pure nature, as many critics argue. His point is in some respects quite simple: eliminate the exploitation of nature, as it deserves to exist as a subject unto itself; and, treat nature such that our post-scarcity potential can allow us to liberate humankind as much as possible.

Much contemporary politics and philosophy doesn’t allow for nature to play any fundamental role – only a secondary or submissive one – in human existence. Yet “[c]ommercialized nature, polluted nature, militarized nature cut down the life environment of man, not only in an ecological but also in a very existential sense.⁴⁸” To make the seemingly obvious step of placing human beings in their existential context – the natural world – seems to still be a problem, at least for the practical reality of the

“compassionate conservatism”, “infinite justice”, “war on terror”, or “enduring freedom”. Environmentalism has similarly taken on a feel-good popular appeal, where everyone considers himself an environmentalist. SUVs have conservation license plates; grossly excessive consumption of recycled goods is seen as environmental; Bill Gates builds a 1.5 acre, two-family “ecological” house. These are all examples of lessening the damage **within** the wasteful rationality that created it, thereby ameliorating the sense of guilt while not solving the problem. It also suggests that environmental devastation is an unintentional side effect of advanced capitalism, whereas it is integral to the rationality.

⁴⁷ CRR 60.

⁴⁸ CRR 60. The quote continues: “It blocks the erotic cathexis (and transformation) of his environment: it deprives man from finding himself in nature, beyond and this side of alienation; it also prevents him from recognizing nature as a *subject* in its own right – a subject with which to live in a common human universe.”

world. Yet most contemporary environmentalists still don't register their concern at an existential level. The removal of nature from exploitation is reciprocated in the liberation of humans:

Liberation of nature is the recovery of the life-enhancing forces in nature, the sensuous aesthetic qualities which are foreign to a life wasted in unending competitive performances: they suggest the new qualities of *freedom*.⁴⁹

Conceiving of nature as such is incompatible with the view that nature is value-free matter – something to exploit or research. Marcuse notes that this view of nature is “a *historical a priori*, pertaining to a specific form of society.⁵⁰” Without instrumental technological rationality or capitalist exploitation, we might conceive of a radically different science and technology⁵¹. This science would cultivate instead of exploit, and liberate both man and nature. It would encourage a radical new sensibility, in which reason is subject to the senses and body, not disembodied. This new experience lies at the root of a serious change:

It is this qualitative, elementary, unconscious, or rather preconscious, constitution of the world of experience, it is this primary experience itself which must change radically if social change is the radical, qualitative change.⁵²

Marcuse is positing a reorientation of Western epistemology, and even the concept of Reason⁵³. Such a shift would give new significance to the natural environment.

⁴⁹ CRR 60-61.

⁵⁰ CRR 61.

⁵¹ Habermas argues that a radically new science or technology is not possible, as instrumental action towards nature is inherent in humanity. (“Technology and Science as ‘Ideology’”)

⁵² CRR 63.

⁵³ Similar major challenges to Western epistemology via embodiment and sensuous reason: David Abram *Spell of the Sensuous*; George Lakoff and Mark Johnson *Philosophy In The Flesh : The Embodied Mind And Its Challenge To Western Thought*; Maurice Merleau-Ponty *The Visible and Invisible*.

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, “what men want to learn from nature is how to use it in order wholly to dominate it and other men.⁵⁴” A disembodied, dominating rationality is tied to this mentality. If our senses were a more fundamental aspect of our being, our concept formation, and our sensibility, simply exploiting or objectifying the natural world would result in the lack of human fulfillment according to Marcuse’s notion of gratification (and a generally incomplete existence in general). It is quite convincing that this is already the case in contemporary industrialized countries. The degree of environmental degradation requires a thorough explanation, and a reasonable answer could be the misunderstanding of sensuous rationality resulting in objectification of the world and humans.

This new rationality entails the “emancipation of the senses”, in which the senses “become ‘practical’ in the reconstruction of society.⁵⁵” These senses are: freed from the excessive toil resulting from unnecessary and alienating labor, brought into harmony with Eros, and freed from the mentality which shuns the senses. They would “repel the instrumentalist rationality of capitalism while preserving and developing its achievements.” They are based on universal principles which counter capitalist tendencies for destruction, yet maintain the constructive aspects⁵⁶. This is achieved both negatively (the defeat of aggressive acquisitiveness, competition and defensive competition) and positively (allowing nature’s peaceful and gratifying qualities to help humans liberate themselves). The latter involves changing nature into a medium for personal liberation and growth, an environment “free to develop the specifically human

⁵⁴ DE 4.

⁵⁵ CRR 64.

⁵⁶ CRR 64.

faculties: the creative, aesthetic faculties.⁵⁷” With a new science and technology, and the ability to minimally toil, aesthetic gratification can be a primary endeavor of mankind. A New Science challenges many assumption of contemporary science. For one, this New Science posits a teleology in harmony with nature, namely human liberation, passivity and gratification. Positing no purpose to nature (or potential purposiveness), contemporary science further devalues and objectifies nature. Marcuse is not suggesting a teleological quality to nature, but one in the relationship between man and nature: “liberation is the possible plan or intention of human beings, brought to bear upon nature.⁵⁸” This establishes the possibility of a liberatory and liberated nature:

[T]here are forces in nature which have been distorted and suppressed – forces which could support and enhance the liberation of man. This capacity of nature may be called “chance,” or “blind freedom,” and it may give good meaning to the human effort to redeem this blindness – in Adorno’s words: to help nature “to open its eyes,” to help it “on the poor earth to become what perhaps it would like to be.⁵⁹”

According to Marcuse, there is a possible relationship between humans and nature that liberates **both**. A relationship that cultivates natural qualities, such as serenity and beauty, will benefit humans. Two significant questions arise from this passage: If these forces have been suppressed under exploitation and technology with great destructive power, was nature much more liberatory prior to these events? And, why would nature need to be liberated from anything other than human exploitation? That humans require nature for liberation is clear – without it, man wouldn’t exist or be able to survive. The opposite is significantly less clear, as nature does not rely upon humans for survival. Actually, it

⁵⁷ CRR 64.

⁵⁸ CRR 66.

has lost much of its life due to humans. Adorno might be referring to the human creation of aesthetic objects from nature, yet he seems to be speaking of nature as a whole. His view of nature is more ingrained in the colonization of nature than Marcuse's – Adorno probably wants nature to be freed from human exploitation. Nature does not have the limitations of toil and scarcity that limit human survival. What does man give to nature to “liberate” it? The role of humanity in nature is further problematized by Marx.

Early Marx hopes to appropriate nature nonviolently and nondestructively. The sensuous, life-enhancing and aesthetic qualities of nature would therefore be enhanced⁶⁰. But, there is an overly strong anthropocentrism to Marx's ideals, which perhaps partially accounts for his later regression to objectified nature⁶¹. Firstly, the idea of nature in its own right seems historically and practically untenable. Secondly, early Marx is still calling for the appropriation of nature by humans which, benevolent or not, seems to violate the subjectivity of nature: Marcuse says that it “retains something of the *hubris* of domination⁶²”. This seems to be analogous to a master who treats his slave well – the hierarchy and denial of a subject in its own right remain. While keeping in mind mankind's best interest, an entire context must be considered because, while there may be priorities, a complete plan for liberation involves nature, too.

While this standpoint is radical and, given the economic, political and psychological state of the industrialized world, untenable in the foreseeable future, Marcuse realizes this and sets pragmatic limits to his philosophy:

⁵⁹ CRR 66.

⁶⁰ CRR 67; EPM 114.

⁶¹ Schmidt, Alfred. *The Concept of Nature in Marx* tr. Ben Fowkes (London: NLB, 1971)

⁶² CRR 68-9.

[A]s the world is, priority must be on *human* solidarity among human beings. And yet, no free society is imaginable which does not, under its “regulative idea of reason,” make the concerted effort to reduce consistently the suffering which man imposes upon the natural world.⁶³

This is one of many examples challenging the interpretation of Marcuse as an unrealistic, utopian thinker. He sees nature as a liberatory tool, and as having inherent value, but doesn't wrongly prioritize natural plight over genocide. But splitting to two is very problematic, as the two often entail the other.

Intellectual imagination and critical analysis must be connected in order to understand the present, and provide hopeful possibilities for the future. Yet this pragmatic disclaimer does nothing to lessen the profundity of his philosophy of nature. It is firmly grounded in the present reality, and yet includes the extreme potentialities of humankind. Nature is still integral and vital to our existence, and attempted domination will only inhibit the human potential for liberation and beauty.

Violation and suppression then mean that human action against nature, man's interrelation with nature, offends against certain objective *qualities* of nature - qualities which are essential to the enhancement and fulfillment of life. And this is on such objective grounds that the liberation for man to his own humane faculties is linked to the liberation of nature - that “truth” is attributable to nature not only in a mathematical but also in an existential sense. The emancipation of man involves the recognition of such things in truth, in nature⁶⁴.

While hierarchies have a short-term political significance, there is no existential hierarchy (at least not one of domination) of man over nature. If nature is a vital component of fulfillment and life-enhancement, it should be treated and thought of accordingly.

Therefore, domination of nature is not only indicative of wrongly sublimated aggression,

⁶³ *Ibid.*

but also serves to further misdirect instinctual energies and create a repressive civilization in which man will not realize his potential. Most importantly, the qualities which both nature and humans strive for are the same – there seems to be minimal compromise between natural liberation and human liberation, contrary to the depiction in capitalist logic of these as opposed. To give nature a “truth” for humans completely undermines the value-free conception of nature. To give nature existential value – beauty, peacefulness – is to give it a (highly anthropocentric) role in human existence, a role that has thus far been denied by most European philosophy. (Nature has other qualities, which would be similarly existential, like brutality, destruction and pain.) It is interesting to note that Marcuse almost seamlessly shifts between characterizing natural qualities as desirable, and as both desirable and necessitating a “struggle”. It is assumed that he is speaking of nature’s desirable qualities (the ones that require technological advancement to exist without struggle) in this passage. What is the existential truth of the “struggle with nature”? The rights of man and nature as subjects unto themselves will inherently conflict at points, as a harmonious relationship with nature is unlikely in practice. Nonetheless, nature’s existence as subject needs to be better understood.

In addition to understanding the liberatory qualities of nature, a complete view entail understanding nature as subject-object: “as a *cosmos* with its own potentialities, necessities, and chances.⁶⁵” This entails the right of nature to exist for its own sake, whether or not it is understood by humans. While this again does not seem like an advanced notion when personally faced with an example – clearing a forest for a parking lot definitely destroys something of aesthetic value – the dominant exploitative logic not

⁶⁴ *Ibid* 69.

only allows destruction, but encourages it. The conception of nature as having its own subjectivity, because of its challenge to the dominant rationality, is marginalized as “imaginative” or “idealistic”. Similarly, ethics such as pacifism would be much more realistic if thought outside of the dominant mode of thinking was encouraged and nurtured. A subject-object relationship to nature is ascribed idealistic status, because it does not coincide with the “given forms.”⁶⁶Not only are such projects rejected, but their formation similarly is hindered by the dominant rationality – realistic dreams only occur within the system. A sensuous rationality would inherently oppose what under an objectifying rationality is acceptable; it is the foundation of “*universal liberation*”⁶⁷. Pictures of human rights abuses would take on a personal and real tone; industrial landscapes would be more repulsive; the machine aesthetic and commodity fetishism would lose their appeal. The “natural sensibility” to oppose ugliness would become less confused by technification and the aestheticization of industrial blight, and might take on the objective qualities which Marcuse ascribes to it: aversion to brutality. Once again, Marcuse makes a relatively obvious point which has been generally neglected in dominant discourse, which appeals to the “new” sensibility - that “progress” often isn’t, and that some problems don’t require intensive discourse to be elucidated⁶⁸. An instinctual reason, which finds natural destruction inherently ugly, and pain and toil

⁶⁵ CRR 69.

⁶⁶ CRR 70.

⁶⁷ CRR 72.

⁶⁸ MARCUSE: Of course every human being knows that nature looks more beautiful if I don’t put up a sixty-story building on the shores of a lake. You don’t need any philosophy to know that. It is a call to instinct. It undoubtedly looks more beautiful, it is more satisfying, it is more calming. The same holds true for those damn atomic energy plants.

HABERMAS: If it were that simple, we wouldn’t be sitting in all this shit.

inherently objectionable, is the grounds for a more sustainable society. Marcuse defines this instinctual reason in an interview with Jürgen Habermas as “protection of life, enrichment of life, beautification of life.⁶⁹” And this reason is not a building block of a utopia, but an instinctual direction to counter the mutilated sensibilities of the contemporary world.

This and the following passage seriously destabilize those who argue that Marcuse is a romantic or utopian theorist. The struggle with nature is inevitable and ever-present, and the goals are not abstract ideals. Marcuse describes freedom in such a way that allows for practical application while maintaining the humane goals of his ideals:

Dialectical materialism understands freedom as historical, empirical transcendence, as a force of social change, transcending its immediate form... - not toward ever more production, not toward Heaven or Paradise, but toward an ever more peaceful, joyful struggle with the inexorable resistance of society and nature. This is the philosophical core of the theory of the permanent revolution.⁷⁰

Utopianism, as evinced in its etymology, strives eternally for something that doesn't exist. Marcuse's theory of the permanent revolution does not do so. It aims in a particular direction – one of peace through aesthetic contemplation. It is a directional model, not an abstract, idealized one. The struggle with nature is not eliminated, as would be the case in a utopian model. But this struggle must be minimized, as technological advancements seem to facilitate. The transcendent aspect is maintained, and it is also grounded in the historical, material and human reality of the world. The bridge between these two is the aesthetic dimension, in which reality and possible futures merge. Marcuse walks this line – by keeping open the prospect of a peaceful future, yet maintaining his basis in reality.

MARCUSE: Yes, we would. It's forced on us.
⁶⁹ TP 136.

(“Theory and Politics” 137)

Marcuse achieves this grounding both by critical historical analysis, the use of Freud's Eros and Thanatos, and descriptions of biological predispositions. A fundamental one which might not seem revolutionary at first is receptivity. This quality, which Marcuse sees as essential to nature, is "a precondition for freedom"⁷¹, as it facilitates aesthetic contemplation and therefore imagination. It similarly allows man to experience the erotic energy of nature. It is by its nature opposed to destructive productivity. For Marcuse, receptivity is practically important because it can connect this philosophy to a concrete political movement, feminism, and because it is inherently dynamic and tolerant. While carefully (but nonetheless still problematically) distinguishing between determinate, dehumanizing roles and natural ones, Marcuse wants to elicit the benefits of receptivity (which he finds in women):

It is woman who "embodies," in a literal sense, the promise of peace, of joy, of the end of violence. Tenderness, receptivity, sensuousness have become features (or mutilated features) of her body – features of her (repressed) humanity.⁷² For Eros to ascend over aggression, such "female" qualities must be cultivated and released. Destructive qualities must be overcome by discovering the erotic energy to overpower it in nature, so as to create a new, peaceful sensibility. Marcuse's points on receptivity are well-taken, despite his representation of it through feminism.

IV. Marcuse and his Critics: the inherent value of nature, the struggle with nature, and liberating mastery

While advocating a harmonious relationship with nature, Marcuse also posits a "liberating mastery"⁷³, with widespread automation and technological interaction with

⁷⁰ CRR 70-1.

⁷¹ CRR 74.

nature. Is this a contradiction, tension or cover-up for total domination of nature? Is it a feasible strategy? Does nature need our help to be liberated, as we need nature to be free? What is the method for reaching this harmonious relationship with nature? Douglas Kellner, Steven Vogel and C. Fred Alford offer some challenges and readings which will elucidate these questions.

IVa. Dominating nature

One possible reading of this philosophy is that Marcuse wants to dominate nature fully, either out of phantasy or ideology. While there is material which supports this reading, it is selective and doesn't represent a complete picture of Marcuse's plan. There is an irreconcilable tension between the inherent value of man and nature, and Marcuse notes that the "struggle with nature"⁷⁴ is eternal. There is a necessary exchange between man and nature, in which man uses natural resources and qualities, and nature (perhaps) benefits from its "liberation." Alford's reading of Marcuse only takes half of this equation fully into consideration, and does so incompletely:

The new science is rhetoric designed to soften Marcuse's otherwise terribly harsh – especially in light of Horkheimer and Adorno's original goal of reconciliation with nature – goal of the complete subordination of nature to human purposes. The new science is, in a sense, an ideology. It grants the aura of reconciliation with nature to what is actually projected to be humanity's final victory over it.⁷⁵ What this accusation excludes is Marcuse's goal of incorporating nature's beneficial qualities into human existence harmoniously. While Alford might argue that the desire for peacefulness and the erotic are appropriation in this case, it seems against the nature

⁷² CRR 77.

⁷³ ODM 236.

⁷⁴ CRR 59.

⁷⁵ Alford *Science and the Revenge of Nature* p. 64.

of peacefulness to destroy its basis, in addition to the obvious fact that one would be dominating and conquering the quality of peacefulness. Alford comes to his conclusion of subversive domination partially because Marcuse's philosophy seems to appease humanity's desires almost completely, surely at the loss of natural rights. Perhaps Alford simply doesn't understand Marcuse's claim that there is a tremendous overlap in the qualities of nature and the liberating qualities of man, and that technology allows for man to maximize these qualities. Alford makes the erroneous assumption that nature and man are eternally in complete conflict, and that dominating nature is the only way for man to be gratified. Ironically, Marcuse's point is to disprove this assumption.

Steven Vogel takes this point one step further, by stating that Marcuse not only desires to dominate nature, but does so to wish the world and otherness away:

[Marcuse] wishes to "dominate" nature, thoroughly and totally, so that all traces of the resistance that otherness poses to practice evaporate. The dream of total automation that never lies far below his words is the symptom of a wish that the real world would go away, so that humans could spend all of their time in that other phantasy one.⁷⁶

This argument is based on Marcuse's struggle to maximize human freedom by proposing a radical new direction for epistemology and experience in minimizing **unnecessary** objectification, for the political objective of combating repression. This is quite distinct from Vogel's reading. Marcuse, if anything, is thoroughly immersed in the world (e.g. his goal of gratification), but wishes away the repressive capitalist society in which he lives. By associating the repression with "the real world", Vogel commits a fallacy which Marcuse warns against – seeing the existing order as real, and alternatives as phantasy. Marcuse's "phantasy" is grounded in a sensuous rationality and natural ontology,

accounting for the historical reality and technological opportunities. Especially considering his pragmatism in *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, dismissing Marcuse as an idealistic romantic is to abandon the directional goal of liberation which Marcuse strives for, and to limit his social criticism and liberation philosophy. Similarly, Marcuse's notion of passivity and receptivity is misunderstood. One could read Marcuse as advocating passive behavior only, or as attempting to mine the natural quality of passivity for its ability to facilitate aesthetic contemplation. Vogel does the former:

Marcuse wants to assert an active role for humans in the liberatory transformation of nature, but can only do this by imagining an activity that does not really act and instead leaves everything as it was. The truth is that, like Adorno, he is deeply suspicious of activity *as such*: it is too closely bound up for him with “productivity,” “the performance principle,” and hence domination.⁷⁷

Nature “as it was” is virtually unrelated to Marcuse's philosophy. The use of advanced technological development, and the explicit purpose of “liberating” nature are in no ways a return to any nature that ever existed before. The liberatory transformation of nature is quite an active affair – at least getting there is. It is a vital part of a revolution, for one. While aesthetic contemplation and sensual languor are two goals, Marcuse's vision does not seem to be a passive, hedonist paradise, but a society in which these qualities are valued and cultivated, not derided for being inefficient or unnecessary. Receptivity is vital for the imagination to construct a better society. To associate activity with domination is similarly incomplete, as passivity is often the other half of a dominating relationship. Rather than leaving one with no possible action, as Vogel claims, Marcuse makes that action a non-traditional (and necessary) one, imagination. Reflection,

⁷⁶ Vogel *Against Nature* 139-40.

⁷⁷ Vogel 138.

expression, analysis and refusal can liberate one's sensibility. A Great Refusal involves passivity, but as a path to the aesthetic dimension which challenges repressive societies.

A similar challenge balancing between passivity and activity is the process of liberation itself. Is Marcuse stuck in a loop when he calls for both nature to liberate man and vice versa? If there was no underlying quality to nature, this would be a problem: "Nature [in Marcuse is] the foundation of social change, but perversely we are now supposed to change nature first in order to make it possible for it in turn to change us."⁷⁸ But Marcuse's point is that existing qualities will help man liberate his senses, which in turn will result in a more harmonious natural relationship. Both parties are eliciting existing qualities, and therefore the problem of a starting point is moot. There is always an exchange between the two, so "changing nature first" has already occurred. Man has to start manipulating nature in a more beneficial way, and choosing to learn from particular qualities. Tranquility for humans exists in nature already, but technology allows for it to be more accessible to humanity. Instead of regressive thinking, Marcuse is accepting the present state of technological progress and mining the possibility of maximizing peaceful and aesthetically fruitful experiences in nature.

IVb. Liberating mastery and inherent nature

Marcuse's philosophy creates a significant tension between a liberating mastery⁷⁹ of nature and nature existing for its own sake⁸⁰. It is uncertain whether or not these two actions conflict. This philosophy attempts to ground human liberation in something

⁷⁸ Vogel 140.

⁷⁹ ODM 236

⁸⁰ CRR 62

stable, without turning to essences or ideologies. Therefore, nature's inherent liberatory qualities are being utilized to ground human freedom. But why would nature need to be liberated, other than from man? It seems that this grants nature not only rights as a subject, but as an inherently repressed entity. Another question, to be further pursued in the section on science and technology (V), is how (and if) technology, a vital aspect of Marcuse's liberated humanity, would respect nature's inherent value.

First, a passage which seems to both raise most of these problems, and represent Marcuse's philosophy of nature:

[T]here are forces in nature which have been distorted and suppressed – forces which could support and enhance the liberation of man. This capacity of nature may be called “chance,” or “blind freedom,” and it may give good meaning to the human effort to redeem this blindness – in Adorno's words: to help nature “to open its eyes,” to help it “on the poor earth to become what perhaps it would like to be.”⁸¹

The distortion and suppression is both by Nature's interaction with man, and by the balancing of Nature's limiting qualities – scarcity, want and suffering⁸². Reason and technology allow for these limitations to be “transcended”, and for human creation, abundance and fulfillment to occur⁸³. Therefore, “nature, too, awaits the revolution⁸⁴” – to be freed from a negative existence, its brutality and blindness⁸⁵.

⁸¹ CRR 66.

⁸² ODM 236.

⁸³ “[T]he “realization” of Nature is not, and never can be Nature's own work. But inasmuch as Nature is in itself negative (i.e., wanting in its own existence), the historical transformation of Nature by Man is, as the overcoming of this negativity, the liberation of Nature.” (ODM 236)

⁸⁴ CRR 74

⁸⁵ “Civilization produces the means for freeing Nature from its own brutality, its own insufficiency, its own blindness, by virtue of the cognitive and transforming power of Reason.” (ODM 238)

It is definitely an anthropocentric view that Nature requires Man and Reason to liberate it. It does require liberation from man, though. The treatment of Nature as needing help from man is questionable. How can Marcuse determine the intentions of nature, and its need for Reason to free it. How can Reason free nature from its own scarcity? From an anthropological perspective, he is utilizing the emancipatory qualities of nature and imposing his intentions on his concept of nature. Nature and technology can free man from scarcity, but how would nature's scarcity be diminished? How would the natural brutality of storms or predators be diminished without destroying ecological balances or a natural order? "Poverty, disease and cancerous growth" should be eliminated, but poverty and cancer are historical and related to man⁸⁶. Disease be part of a larger natural order which we don't understand, and the "liberation of life" by its reduction could result in overpopulation and other natural devastation. This is highly speculative, but so is Marcuse's point that natural limitations to life are necessarily repressive. Who is to say that Nature would be somehow freer if it was made into artwork? Nature's liberation from human domination is necessary, both for man and nature, but respecting the rights of Nature as a subject is distinct from determining its subjective desires, if such things exist.

Vogel recognizes the problem of inherent nature versus liberated nature, but fails to see what natural qualities transcend history:

The solution [to relativism] seems to be to posit a nature (in-itself) whose *own* "needs" are being violated by such a system and then to make the revolution in its name. Yet if "nature is a historical entity" no such nature-in-itself really exists; it is always already the consequence of historical practice and so a product of social

⁸⁶ "Poverty, disease and cancerous growth are natural as well as human ills – their

construction. And as we have seen to try to speak of “constructing” nature in such a way as to “let it be,” of allowing it to exist “for its own sake” or to realize its inherent telos, will not work: for again there is no “it” there, no model for the “natural” separate from what we *do*.⁸⁷

Marcuse again and again makes the point that nature is historically determined⁸⁸.

Similarly, many of his alterations of nature are to free it from the burden of human exploitation. But, just as man is historical, there are some essential qualities which pervade his existence. Nature’s are scarcity and brutality, serenity and the erotic. Nature definitely has “needs” in that it would most likely not want to be destroyed by man.

Whether or not it needs to be liberated is a valid question, though. Explicating the tension of this model of nature is important, but not for the (fallacious) reason that nature cannot be modeled, but because it is difficult to interact with nature so as to grant it freedom. An example might be animals, which can be freed from toil and brutality by man. It is uncertain if they are liberated, though, or if domesticated animals are somehow happier. The intention and wishes of nature must be more clearly determined prior to its “liberation”.

V. Aesthetic Judgment and Liberation

The aesthetic realm merges the sensuous and imaginative with the rational. In it, relationships are non-instrumental, imagination is fostered, and a different reality is conceivable. It is within the aesthetic realm that “reconciliation with nature” is possible, also meaning that it is impossible to apply this to reality. A true aesthetic judgment, in Marcuse’s mind, would embrace his “new sensibility”, and apply to real world problems.

reduction and removal is liberation of life.” (ODM 240)

⁸⁷ V 141.

⁸⁸ CRR 59.

For instance, brutality against people would offend this aesthetic judgment, as would the ugliness of a destroyed natural world. This realm must be cultivated and desublimated from the effects of industrial-capitalistic culture in order to allow a new reality principle and a liberatory experience. The aesthetic dimension connects the possibility of a different world with the present one by synthesizing imagination, reason and sensibility⁸⁹.

Cultural inhibitions to imagination are central to Marcuse's cultural criticism. The possibility of an alternative reality free from unnecessary domination and repression is generally marginalized in academia, media, politics and pop culture. Imagination, along with sensuousness, generally falls outside of the performance principle, and therefore is deemed inappropriate or subversive⁹⁰. The importance of this realm is to determine potential human liberation:

To reduce imagination to slavery – even if one's so-called happiness is at stake – means to violate all that one finds in one's inmost self of ultimate justice.

Imagination alone tells me what *can* be.⁹¹

Marcuse gives countless examples of this delimitation of imagination. This is partially accounted for by the separation of the aesthetic realm from the sensuous and practical ones. Under a sensuous rationality and an unmutated aesthetic sensibility, productive imagination leading towards liberation is encouraged⁹².

Imagination and phantasy therefore are subversive to the current reality principle of performance. To deny human rights in the name of the "free market" is a popular

⁸⁹ "This is the synthesis of two antagonistic levels of reality: the established order of things, and the possible or impossible liberation from it – on both levels, interplay between the historical and the universal. In the synthesis itself, sensibility, imagination, and understanding are joined." CRR 95.

⁹⁰ In the undesirable sense (i.e. from the Establishment's point of view).

⁹¹ André Breton *Les Manifestes du Surréalisme* (Paris: Editions du Sagittaire, 1946 [1924]), p. 15.

example that undermines the faculty of phantasy. In Marcuse's case, it is the entire society that he would like to reimagine. As this challenges the existing power structures, it is necessarily a form of resistance:

In its refusal to accept as final the limitations imposed upon freedom and happiness by the reality principle, in its refusal to forget what *can* be, lies the critical function of phantasy.⁹³

This defiance takes root in the aesthetic realm, although it is obviously meant to be practiced. But it is important to identify the various modes of resistance: fighting social and environmental destruction from within the mental constructs of a reality principle that necessarily produces domination, waste and repression is powerless, as is creating a utopia without adequate grounding in human history and human nature. In that it is non-instrumental, liberatory and beautiful, the aesthetic realm conflicts with the reality created by the performance principle: “[The aesthetic achievement] expresses the “great refusal” which is its primary characteristic.”⁹⁴ Schiller's *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* help to formulate how the aesthetic dimension must necessarily merge the senses and intellect in order to be emancipatory, exactly what Marcuse calls for with his “new sensibility” and “sensuous rationality”. This fusion is what Marcuse envisions in the “reconciliation with nature.”⁹⁵

⁹² “Imagination is perhaps about to reclaim its rights” Ibid 25.

⁹³ EC 149.

⁹⁴ A.N. Whitehead, *Science and the Modern World* (New York: Macmillan, 1926), p. 228. Also, EC 149.

⁹⁵ “Reconciliation with nature, of the sort envisaged in *Eros and Civilization*, can...only take place in the aesthetic dimension and not in reality.” (Kellner 356)

Immanuel Kant⁹⁶ and Friedrich Schiller⁹⁷ both describe the fusion of senses and intellect in the aesthetic realm. A drive in the sensuous world must come into a cooperative relationship with the intellect in order for Truth to prevail:

If Truth is to be victorious in her conflict with forces, she must herself first become a force and appoint some drive to be her champion in the realm of phenomena; for drives are the only motive forces in the sensible world. If she has hitherto displayed so little of her conquering power, this was due, not to the intellect which was powerless to unveil her, but to the heart which closed itself against her, and to the drive which refused to act on her behalf.⁹⁸

In the aesthetic dimension, and ultimately in a freer society, spontaneous expression of impulses and drives will coincide with morality, without moral compulsion or moralism. Sensuousness is rationalized, and vice versa, and that which is irrational offends this new sensibility. The present reality principle devalues the senses to an either distracting or vulgar level, and disembodies and abstracts the intellect. Genuine art defies the existing reality:

⁹⁶ “[The aesthetic judgment is] in respect of the feeling of pleasure or pain, a constitutive principle. The spontaneity in the play of the cognitive faculties, the harmony of which contains the ground of this pleasure, makes the concept [of the purposiveness of nature] the mediating link between the conceptual realm of nature and that of freedom... , whilst at the same time this spontaneity promotes the susceptibility of the mind to moral feeling.” (E. Kant *Critique of Judgment*, Introduction, IX; p. 40-1. Also , EC 179.

⁹⁷ “But we know that the modes of determination of the human will must always remain contingent, and that is only in Absolute Being that physical necessity coincides with moral necessity. If, therefore, we are to be able to count on man’s moral behavior with as much certainty as we do on natural effects, it will itself have to be nature, and he will have to be led by his very impulses to the kind of conduct which is bound to proceed from a moral character... If, then, man is to retain his power of choice and yet, at the same time, be a reliable link in the chain of causality, this can only be brought about through both these motive forces, inclination and duty, producing completely identical results in the world of phenomena; through the content of his volition remaining the same whatever the differences in form; that is to say, through impulse being sufficiently in harmony with reason to qualify as universal legislator.” AEOM Fourth Letter, 1. p. 17.

⁹⁸ AEOM Eighth Letter, 3. p. 49.

In its autonomy art both protests [the given social relations], and at the same time transcends them. Thereby art subverts the dominant consciousness, the ordinary experience.⁹⁹

A fundamental change to the existing problems of our society involves a new consciousness built upon these lines (Marcuse speaks of the revolution having its own rationality¹⁰⁰).

A new consciousness entails a new sensibility in harmony with the aesthetic dimension. The mediation between senses and intellect, man and nature, is necessary if they are to be brought together. Aesthetic judgment applies both to the real and the unattainable. Genuine art and aesthetic judgment can be socially constructive under this model, as violence, domination and destruction would offend this aesthetic standard. Nature is part of this schema, as the aesthetic experience relies upon the qualities of passivity and receptivity that Marcuse attempts to elicit from Nature. For Marcuse, nature serves as a model for a sensuous culture, in which beauty and reality intertwine spontaneously. The body becomes a “vehicle of liberation” in that it both pursues this higher sensibility and inherently rejects the mutilating performance/capitalist sensibility¹⁰¹.

⁹⁹ AD p. ix. Also, K 354.

¹⁰⁰ CRR 132.

¹⁰¹ “The harmonizing illusion, the idealistic transfiguration, and, with it, *the divorce of the arts from reality* has been a feature of this aesthetic form. It desublimation means: return to an “immediate” art, which responds to, and activates, not only the intellect and a refined, “distilled,” restricted sensibility, but also, and primarily, a “*natural*” sense experience freed from the requirements of an obsolescent exploitative society. The search is for art forms which express the experience of the body (*and* the “soul”), not as vehicles of labor power and resignation, but as vehicles of liberation. This is the search for a *sensuous culture*, “sensuous” inasmuch as it involves the radical transformation of man’s sense experience and receptivity: their emancipation from a self-propelling, profitable, and mutilating productivity. But the cultural revolution goes far beyond a reevaluation in the arts: it strikes at the roots of capitalism in the individuals themselves.” CRR 81-2.

Marcuse's ambiguous, questionable, and often mystical-sounding descriptions of a "reconciliation with nature" (which he later clarified to only be possible in the aesthetic realm, not reality) can be clarified through aesthetics. The sensuous rationality of Schiller and Marcuse is ultimately non-instrumental, therefore excluding violence¹⁰². It also brings life to those things normally considered simply objects. Marcuse mentions a subject-object relationship with nature, and considering it from the standpoint of the aesthetic dimension, this becomes a theoretically sound possibility:

The result [of the synthesis of sense and reason] is the creation of an object world other than and yet derived from the existing one, but this transformation does not do violence to the objects (man and things) – it rather speaks for them, gives word and tone and image to that which is silent, distorted, suppressed in the established reality.¹⁰³

The favorable qualities that Marcuse sees in a technologically modified nature seem to be identical to those he identifies with the aesthetic dimension – non-instrumental relations, subject-object relationships, non-violence, receptivity and beauty. The aesthetic dimension bridges the gap between natural qualities and their application by humans. In an aesthetically cultivated imagination, there lies the prospect of peaceful relations and an end to repression.

VI. Conclusion

In this paper, I've tried to connect Marcuse's critical theory of industrial society to our present world. I think that the similarities are unpleasantly striking, especially his critique of repressive governments and manipulative language. Nature has been further

¹⁰² Hannah Arendt, in *On Violence*, explains how violence is necessarily instrumental, and relies upon the self-perpetuation cycle of justification into the future. Force and power still exist, but are granted to government by a democratic populace.

¹⁰³ CRR 96.

destroyed, as predicted by Marcuse, as part of the attempt at unlimited economic growth. In many ways, his philosophy is more urgent than ever. The need for a grounding in human experience and psychology that could help liberate man from domination and dehumanization, along with saving “man’s inorganic body”, is incredibly pressing.

There are many flaws in Marcuse’s philosophy, by virtue of his imaginative risks. For instance: How does one achieve reconciliation with nature? By fully automating production via potentially destructive technology. Marcuse is aware of the limitations of society and human experience, and repeatedly notes that fulfillment lies outside of labor relations¹⁰⁴. Similarly, reconciliation with nature is only possible in the aesthetic dimension. Art is therefore integral to the Great Refusal¹⁰⁵, as it contains the rationality of negation, and allows the imaginative creation of alternative realities. Seen in this context, Marcuse’s ideas are grounded in human potential, and therefore not utopian.

There are nonetheless great limitations. The strength of the culture industry, military-industrial state, and pervasiveness of “mutilated” consciousnesses with only a glimmer of self-determination and freedom, all further challenge the prospect of Marcuse’s hopes for humankind. Similarly, further ecocide inhibits the prospect of learning from the erotic and emancipatory qualities we can find in it and, at a more immediate level, destroys the health of ourselves and future generations. The destruction and wastefulness which Marcuse criticizes has strengthened, further harming the possibility of a non-repressive society:

¹⁰⁴ EC 156.

¹⁰⁵ ODM 63.

Capitalist progress thus not only reduces the environment of freedom, the “open space” of the human existence, but also the “longing,” the need for such an environment¹⁰⁶.

There are further deterrents to Marcuse’s plan. His “sensuous rationality” requires serious development, as its universality and self-reflective qualities are questionable¹⁰⁷.

The ontological qualities of nature are perceived from an anthropocentric perspective, thereby diminishing nature’s autonomy. Peace-as-a-quality-of-nature attributes to nature an experience of humanity as an inherent value. This error doesn’t undermine the potential benefits of nature to humans, but reorients Marcuse’s understanding of nature itself.

A final tension in Marcuse’s writings that is worth elaborating on is the socio-economic implications of his attempted unity with nature. When it comes down to a direct choice, he explicitly voices support for human solidarity¹⁰⁸. I believe that the tension between nature and humans is grossly overstated in advanced industrial societies, as it strengthens the ideal of unlimited growth (at the expense of nature). But a tension exists: humans are laboring animals, and nature isn’t innately constructed for humans. Instead of Marcuse’s attitude towards nature being secondary to social and economic sustainability, I think that it is integral. A harmonious attitude towards nature is mutually beneficial: toxic-free industries don’t dump lethal waste, and don’t poison their workers. Industry ideals are aged, exploitative and heavily biased by political and prejudicial

¹⁰⁶ EOL 18.

¹⁰⁷ Maurice Merleau-Ponty (*The Visible and Invisible*) offers a possible next step. He grounds perception and concept construction in the world (man is like “a fish in the sea”), creating his own sensuous rationality and challenging abstract, disembodied transcendence. Merleau-Ponty’s transcendence becomes somewhat immanent, and the visible and invisible worlds are fused. The environment becomes man’s body and mind in almost every sense.

¹⁰⁸ CRR 68-9.

forces (look at the lack of public transportation in this country largely as a result of oil and automobile lobbying). Marcuse's New Science and New Technology would most likely model itself on a cooperative relationship with nature, for instance replacing the one-direction model of production (leading towards waste) with a cyclical one (fully reusing "waste")¹⁰⁹, or drawing energy from renewable resources. From a scientific, ethical and technological perspective, there does not seem to be any significant, sound reason to not pursue these avenues. The limitation comes from the economic and governmental structure, and intellectual shortcomings. I fail to see any significant limitation to non-repressive social or economic change that conflicts severely with Marcuse's model.

Marcuse's philosophy challenges the established principles of existence and livelihood by proposing peace, joy, aesthetic contemplation and imagination as tenets of society. He uses an anthropocentric view of nature to establish the ideal (yet ultimately improbable) qualities of an emancipated society – non-instrumental relations, aesthetic judgment, peace and gratification. In the aesthetic realm lies reconciliation with nature, sensuous reason and a non-repressive order. Due to the enormous risks he takes with his philosophical and political visions, he inevitably stumbles. But the need for an ecologically sustainable and non-repressive model for civilization is vital, and Marcuse establishes the framework for such an imaginative exploration.

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¹⁰⁹ See William McDonough and Michael Braungart "The NEXT Industrial Revolution" *Atlantic Monthly* October 1998. (<http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/98oct/industry.htm>)

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