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Pertti Ahonen

“Repressive Tolerance” – Reflections after Sixty Years

This brief article revisits Herbert Marcuse's classic essay 'Repressive Tolerance', first published six decades ago in 1965. It explores the key ideas expressed by Marcuse and offers some thoughts about their potential relevance today.

How do we rate tolerance: is it by definition a good thing? How tolerant of contrasting opinions should societies be? Should they set limits? Or should the freedom of speech be absolute, on the assumption that, through free, informed debate, sane and sensible opinions will ultimately prevail and society therefore benefit, no matter how ugly or objectionable some of the expressed views may be?

These are fundamentally important questions, and pluralist, democratic societies have always grappled with them. Indeed, soul-searching about the extent of tolerance is in many ways a defining feature of liberal democracy; in illiberal and dictatorial societies similar issues do not arise, as tolerance is always curtailed, typically severely, by the *diktats* of the rulers, who claim to know best. In today's context, as the liberal-democratic order and its defining values are facing sustained attacks from several directions, the promises and pitfalls of tolerance are, once again, actively contested. As a contribution to the ongoing debates, this brief essay re-evaluates a short study from 60 years ago, which deserves to be labelled something of a lost – or at least largely forgotten – classic: Herbert Marcuse's 1965 essay “Repressive Tolerance”.

Herbert Marcuse was a German-American philosopher and public intellectual rooted in the Marxian thought of the Frankfurt School, who rose to a peak of international prominence during the mid-to-late 1960s. Born in Berlin in 1898, he began his career in Weimar Germany, writing his dissertation under the supervision of Martin Heidegger and starting work in the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt before the Nazi seizure of power forced the Jewish and strongly anti-fascist Marcuse to emigrate, first

to Switzerland and then to the United States. In the US, he contributed to the battle against Nazism as a senior intelligence analyst in the Office of Strategic Services, the wartime precursor of the CIA, and then returned to academia by the early 1950s. During the following decades, up to his death in 1979, he published a series of major philosophical studies that interwove Marxian and Freudian elements into a trenchant critique of contemporary societies, primarily those in the capitalist West, above all the United States, but also their rivals in the socialist East.

To Marcuse, technological advances and the accompanying phenomena of centralized control, mass production, and mass consumption had created inherently repressive societies characterized by a false consciousness of materialism, in which people had succumbed to the seeming immutability of the existing realities, losing most of their individual agency and freedom. To break the chains of oppression, Marcuse advocated a “great refusal”, a mass rejection of consumerism and other oppressive mainstream norms prevalent in advanced industrial societies, as a way to both individual fulfilment and societal transformation. However, Marcuse had lost faith in the working class as an agent of such revolutionary change. According to him, the workers had become hopelessly integrated into the existing power structures, and the leadership in any revolutionary transformation therefore had to derive from a different source: an alliance of radical intellectuals and representatives of marginal groups not yet integrated into mainstream society, such as the socially marginalized, the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and oppressed, including members of ethnic minorities.

With these ideas, expressed in studies such as *Eros and Civilization* (1955), *An Essay on Liberation* (1969) and especially *The One-Dimensional Man* (1964), his most widely read book, Marcuse became the pre-eminent philosopher of the western New Left of the 1960s. Although the basis of his popularity with the New Left lay in the core ideas expressed in his theories, the agency that he assigned to (aspiring) intellectuals certainly magnified his appeal to the student movement in particular, as did his willingness to engage with the young radicals, again and again. In the late 1960s he was a seemingly omnipresent speaker and observer at centres of student protest: in Berkeley, West Berlin, and Paris – Marcuse was there, giving lectures, surrounded by admiring crowds. And although the Movement of the late 1960s obviously failed to reach its radical goals, Marcuse nevertheless retained a considerable level of relevance in progressive circles in the following decade as well. He

continued to encourage and support social movements that arose out of the radical milieu of the 1960s, particularly feminism, writing actively and lecturing widely around the world. Even his sudden death from stroke in summer 1979, at the age of 81, came in the middle of a lecture tour of West Germany.

What about “Repressive Tolerance”, then, the 36-page essay that Marcuse published in 1965? What did he argue and do his arguments still matter? The text appeared as one of the three chapters in a book entitled *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, written by Marcuse and two other powerful left-wing voices in American academia, the sociologist Barrington Moore Jr. and the political philosopher Robert Paul Wolff. The title referenced Immanuel Kant’s classic 1781 study of reason, and, in a spirit similar to his, the authors set out to critique the prevailing theory and practice of tolerance in pluralist democracies. Of the three single-authored contributions that made up the book, Marcuse’s essay quickly became the most widely noticed – and most controversial.

Marcuse’s argument was relatively straightforward, although – typically for him – it was conveyed in frequently opaque and convoluted language. His starting point was that, historically, tolerance had constituted “the great achievement of the liberal era”. By enabling the open expression of political dissent, within certain bounds, it had paved the way for a transition from authoritarianism towards “economic and political liberalism” (p. 115) – a strongly progressive historical development. However, in the structural conditions that prevailed in contemporary “advanced industrial society” – embodied for Marcuse above all by the United States – tolerance had lost its earlier progressive and liberating function (p. 81). In Marcuse’s words, it had been “perverted” (p.111).

To be sure, tolerance was still widely professed as an essential pillar of the liberal democratic order, and it was also seemingly practised, to the degree that strongly contrasting viewpoints were allowed open expression. However, to Marcuse this apparent tolerance of dissenting voices was “abstract and spurious” (p. 116) because behind the tolerant façade “the economic and political process” was in fact “subjected to a ubiquitous and effective administration in accordance with the predominant interests” (p. 115). In concrete terms, this meant that an inter-locking network of deeply entrenched and very powerful economic and political forces – an entity that the radical sociologist C. Wright Mills, a close friend of Marcuse, had labelled the “power elite” in the late 1950s – held liberal democratic society in an iron

grip. These entrenched elites were “conservative and reactionary” (p. 116), and they had succeeded in creating a system in which true alternatives to the existing power relations and societal structures seemed illusory and impracticable. Ordinary people were “indoctrinated by the conditions under which they live[d] and [thought] and which they [could] not transcend” (p. 98) so that the “false consciousness” of systemic immutability had become “the general consciousness” in society (p. 110).

In this kind of system, which Marcuse described with several interchangeable terms, including “closed society” (p. 106), “coordinated society” – with echoes of Nazi-style societal *Gleichschaltung* (p. 116) – and even “totalitarian democracy” (p. 99), the function of tolerance had altered fundamentally. It now served to “contain [...] change rather than to promote it” because the existing structures and power relations appeared so ingrained and fixed that any talk of challenging them could be very easily dismissed, ridiculed, or simply ignored as naive babble (p. 116).

In the practical operation of this type of “repressive tolerance”, Marcuse highlighted the integral role of the mass media. To him, the multiplicity of media outlets in a liberal democracy such as the United States was ultimately just a sham because the media served the interests of the power elites that owned and controlled them, promoting regressive, right-wing agendas. The result was “monopolistic media” through which “a mentality (was) created for which right and wrong, true and false are predefined wherever they affect the vital interests of society” (p. 95). Admittedly, many different ideas could be expressed, but “the massive scale of the conservative majority” and the internalization of conservative values by most of the populace “outside such enclaves as the intelligentsia” meant that progressive or radical ideas had next to no chance of being taken seriously (p. 96). Marcuse illustrated his point with a concrete example, taken directly from the American context: “When a magazine prints side by side a negative and a positive report on the FBI, it fulfils honestly the requirements of objectivity: however, the chances are that the positive wins because the image of the institution is deeply engraved in the mind of the people.” (p. 98)

Characteristically, Marcuse was not content with simply analysing the status quo, as he saw it; his essay also sketched out ideas for resistance and transformation. The primary task was to “break the tyranny of public opinion and its makers in the closed society” (p. 106). For that to succeed, the people had to be “freed from the prevailing indoctrination (which is no

longer recognized as indoctrination)” (p. 99). They had to become “capable of deliberating and choosing on the basis of knowledge”, through “authentic information” and “autonomous thought” (p. 95). The leadership in this process was to come from dissenters and activists – essentially left-wing intellectuals, broadly defined – individuals who had already “learned to think rationally and autonomously” (p. 106). At present, such dissenting forces were small and insulated, and they needed support and encouragement so that they could begin to exercise their “natural right of resistance” against the existing order (p. 116). Once they had built enough momentum, “a subversive majority” could develop around them, a majority of rational, progressive forces that would change society for the better (p. 100).

Because of the deeply entrenched nature of the existing system, “apparently undemocratic means” would probably be needed to initiate and advance such a process (p. 100). The main concrete policy tool advocated by Marcuse was what he called “liberating tolerance”: “intolerance against movements from the Right and tolerance of movements from the Left”, which was to “extend to the stage of [...] deed as well as of word” (p. 109). In practice, this meant active promotion of progressive, left-wing causes, combined with censorship and repression towards the right, including “the withdrawal of toleration of speech and assembly from groups and movements which promote aggressive policies, armament, chauvinism, discrimination on the grounds of race and religion, or which oppose the extension of public services, social security, medical care etc.” (p. 100). With tough pre-emptive measures like these, he claimed, even “Auschwitz and a world war” could have been avoided (p. 109).

Marcuse also made another, particularly controversial policy prescription for the progressive vanguard: a qualified endorsement of violence. In observations that foreshadowed subsequent analyses of structural violence by Johan Galtung and others, Marcuse argued that violence prevailed even “in the advanced centres of civilization”, “in the prisons and mental institutions”, for example, or “in the fight against racial minorities” (p. 102). It was a fundamental component of the system, just as “law and order” in general “always and everywhere” served to “protect the established hierarchy” (p. 116). Marcuse then drew a distinction between “revolutionary and reactionary violence, between violence practised by the oppressed and by the oppressors” (p. 103). While acknowledging that both were problematic from an ethical viewpoint, he contended that ethical standards were largely irrelevant in

history: “To start applying them at the point where the oppressed rebel against the oppressors, the have-nots against the haves is serving the cause of actual violence by weakening the protest against it” (p. 103). Violence applied by progressive forces for the sake of “humanity” would not “start a new chain of violence but try to break an established one”. Therefore, such violence was justified, within reason, and “no third person, and least of all the educator and intellectual, [had] the right to preach [...] abstention” (p. 117).

These ideas hit a nerve – or possibly matched the *Zeitgeist*, if such a thing exists – among the New Left activists of the late 1960s. But what can one say about them from today’s vantage point? Do they still retain any significance or relevance, beyond the purely historical and philosophical?

From the contemporary perspective, it is easy to find a good deal to criticize and reject in Marcuse’s essay. This applies especially to the policies that he thought the progressive vanguard should follow in its struggle against the entrenched powers that be. The arrogation of the leadership role to a vaguely defined and supposedly enlightened circle of leftist intellectuals raises all kinds of questions about legitimacy and accountability. The sweeping suppression of voices defined in abstract terms as regressive or reactionary is another highly problematic recommendation, one that could – and historically has – open(ed) the door for arbitrary abuse. The various state socialist regimes of the 20th century provide plentiful examples of such pitfalls. But the most objectionable aspect of the essay, certainly in the setting of the year 2024, is its facile argumentation about violence. Even if it is true that a certain level of structural violence exists within any political system, a violent struggle against a democratically elected government cannot be justified with simplistic claims about chains of violence, certainly if the regime in question possesses the kind of proper democratic validation as the US government of the 1960s, against which Marcuse was riling.

Marcuse’s analysis of the fundamental problems of liberal democracy in the 1960s also seems extensively time-bound – and partly anachronistic from today’s perspective, which is hardly surprising. Many things have changed in the intervening six decades, after all. A case in point is his portrayal of the (American) mass media as a monopolistic, co-ordinated structure, whose different outlets ultimately all dance to the tune of a narrow conservative and capitalist power elite. At least in surface-structural terms, that description no longer fits today’s realities. With technological advances that Marcuse could not have foreseen, the media landscape once dominated by a small number

of powerful actors has splintered into numerous parallel segments of varying sizes and in large part mutually exclusive audiences, so that the kind of single voice of authority once embodied by the newsreader of a major television network or a *New York Times* editorial no longer exists.

Despite these problems, some of Marcuse’s key points do still resonate – and continue to provide important food for thought. Although certain societal realities have changed very extensively in the intervening years, at least on the surface, as evidenced by transformations in the mass media, the deeper, underlying structures of power and dominance described by Marcuse still largely prevail in the contemporary (Western) world. Indeed, in the post-Cold War context, in which market economies and global capitalism reign largely unchecked, with no obvious challengers, Marcuse’s claims about the ability of interlocking power elites to promote their material interests in a comprehensive fashion are even more striking than they were in the era of the systemic East–West rivalry of the 1960s. The seeming lack of credible alternatives is starker now than it was then, at least as far as visions that Marcuse would have described as progressive are concerned.

Marcuse is also well worth contemplating on the wider societal effects of media discourses. The kind of concentrated mass media landscape that he witnessed in the 1960s no longer exists, as discussed above, but his fundamental points about what types of media messages find broader acceptance and why still hold. In today’s international economic and political setting dominated by right-wing agendas of capitalism, individualism, and competition, leftist alternatives typically fail to find enduring prominence, regardless of their popularity within particular social and political bubbles. However, regressive causes initially popularized in an entirely different set of bubbles, at the other end of the political spectrum, tend to catch on much better and then to spread towards the political mainstream. Contemporary examples abound: the dehumanization of refugees, and partly of transnational migrants in general; the advocacy of narrow, exclusively defined nationalisms; the stigmatization of the poor and accompanying calls for drastic cuts in social welfare provisions; the espousal of racial prejudice, whether openly or through more or less coded euphemisms. In the most extreme cases, rising choruses of right-wing voices are even hinting at the overthrow of democratic governments and their replacement with dictatorships. Marcuse would undoubtedly be repelled and deeply alarmed by the kind of far-right rhetoric that has recently been emanating from his adopted homeland, for example.

At this point, a return to the question of the limits of tolerance in a liberal democracy becomes germane. As discussed above, Marcuse was only too willing to impose such limits towards what he regarded as regressive causes – limits that were dangerously broad in scope. However, in his description of the types of individuals that should lead the vanguard of dissent against the status quo, he accentuated a very important notion: reason and rationality. To him, these were essential qualities that the leadership cadres of the movement had to possess. They also seem very useful as boundary markers of democratic tolerance more generally. A healthy liberal democracy should be highly tolerant of different opinions and viewpoints – but within limits set by rational debate. Ideas and causes that can be defended peacefully with open, rational, objectively evidence-based arguments and with respect for those who disagree should be tolerated, whereas those that cannot meet such criteria should not, particularly if they advocate social exclusion, hatred, or violence.

Very similar points were made forcefully in the 1940s by another political émigré from Nazi Germany, Karl Popper, a man who would not have agreed on much with Marcuse politically, but whose important observations about what he called “the paradox of tolerance” deserve to be cited as the concluding words to this essay. They sound as timely today as they did 80 years ago:

Unlimited tolerance must lead to the disappearance of tolerance. If we extend unlimited tolerance even to those who are intolerant, if we are not prepared to defend a tolerant society against the onslaught of the intolerant, then the tolerant will be destroyed, and tolerance with them. In this formulation, I do not imply, for instance, that we should always suppress the utterance of intolerant philosophies; as long as we can counter them by rational argument and keep them in check by public opinion, suppression would certainly be most unwise. But we should claim the right to suppress them if necessary even by force; for it may easily turn out that they are not prepared to meet us on the level of rational argument, but begin by denouncing all argument; they may forbid their followers to listen to rational argument, because it is deceptive, and teach them to answer arguments by the use of their fists or pistols. (Popper, p. 668)

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Internet resources

- Herbert Marcuse Official Homepage: <https://www.marcuse.org/herbert/>
- The Herbert Marcuse Internet Archive: <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/marcuse/>