

Toward a Dialectical Anthropology: Rethinking the Concept of ‘Human Being’ with Herbert Marcuse

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Introduction

Of the different sections that compose Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (1944), the concluding and most fragmentary section, “Notes and Sketches,” is in the authors’ own admission notes toward a “dialectical anthropology.”¹ Though the possible reasons for this turn to anthropology at the end of the work and the apparent abandonment of the topic are left unclear by the authors, a brief consideration of the ‘anthropological’ fixation shared by many in the history of political thought might shed some light on this question.

Beginning at least as far back as Aristotle, attempts at defining and re-defining human being have figured prominently in many theories of

¹ See the preface to Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: University of Stanford Press, 2002), xix.

politics and the state, and this emphasis only seems to have intensified with the onset of modernity. Hobbes, Locke, and Rousseau – the ‘three musketeers’ of early-modern political theory in Europe – all predicate their social contract theories on ‘states of nature’ that they thought shed light on the human condition and so provide solid ground upon which theories of a good state might rest. In this conception, the good state and the good citizen are mirror images of one another, the state representing the pinnacle of human achievement. However, the fragile and potentially disastrous character of such a project had become devastatingly clear by the time of Horkheimer and Adorno’s writing: the promise of a freer, better life made possible through a state which expressed rational progress and truer knowledge of human nature had been transformed into the horrors of Auschwitz and Hiroshima. In this sense *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as an attempt to write “a primeval history of the subject,”² turns to anthropology as though returning to the scene of a crime, the crime upon which the horrors sanctioned by an allegedly universal and rational state were said to be based: a particular form of human being. The halting, fragmentary character of the book and this last section in particular should be understood less as a project stillborn than as an accurate description of the state of the rational subject of enlightenment in 1944: torn to shreds by its own hubris.³

Loosely informed by Horkheimer and Adorno’s project described above, I will attempt in the following essay to read Herbert Marcuse’s

² Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 2007), 185.

³ Beyond the performative structure of this section of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the continuing recurrence of anthropological themes in later works by both authors would seem to suggest that these ‘Notes and Sketches’ were not abandoned, but did indeed serve as the groundwork for later studies. Take for example the following statements from Horkheimer’s *Eclipse of Reason*: “The human being, in the process of this emancipation, shares the fate of the rest of his world. Domination of nature involves domination of man” (64); “To survive, man transforms himself into an apparatus that responds at every moment with just the appropriate reaction to the baffling and difficult situations which make up his life” (65); “The history of man’s efforts to subjugate nature is also the history of man’s subjugation by man. The development of the concept of the ego reflects this twofold history” (72). Likewise, Adorno’s late essay “Subject and Object” concerns, among other things, the emergence of the human and biological individuation with respect to ontology, arguing that “Man is a result, not an *eidōs*” (511). See Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason* (Continuum: New York, 2004) and Theodor W. Adorno, “Subject and Object,” in *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. Andrew Arato & Eike Gebhardt (New York: Continuum, 1982), 497-511.

philosophy as a kind of ‘dialectical anthropology’ – a theory of human being that attempts to follow its repressed potentials – that might be seen to respond to the conception of human being frequently advanced in the history of political thought. Insofar as it is addressed to a particular relation between philosophical conceptions of ‘human being’ and ‘state’, this ‘dialectical anthropology’ is already in some sense a *philosophical* anthropology. That is to say, it is an immanent critique of ‘man’ through his philosophical conception – not a criticism or even discussion of the empirical study of human beings, their origins, or development from the perspective of the discipline ‘anthropology’. In order to better grasp how Marcuse’s philosophy can be seen as a dialectical anthropology, and how this dialectical anthropology relates to the history of political thought, some consideration of Marcuse’s philosophical roots will be necessary – in particular, discussions of the work of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, and Benjamin.⁴

It will be argued that Marcuse’s dialectical anthropology can be understood to take its principal source of departure from Hegel. Hegel, as the paragon of modern European thought, is the thinker who more than any other accomplished a comprehensive synthesis of rational progress and the modern state with a particular understanding of human being. The Hegelian understanding of human being is challenged, I argue, in the work of Marx and Nietzsche, both of whom, albeit in different ways, attempt to outline a kind of materialist conception of human being that can be seen as a response to Hegelian philosophy. After outlining the contributions of Marx and Nietzsche to a dialectical anthropology, I then turn briefly to examine Walter Benjamin, arguing that his unique contribution to a theory of historical materialism makes

⁴ Clearly, many more thinkers could be added to this list – perhaps most notably Kant, Schiller, and of course, Freud. However, in the interest of brevity I have chosen to focus on those thinkers frequently considered to be ‘canonical’ in the history of western political thought in order to highlight the degree to which a Marcusean dialectical anthropology can be seen to both spring from this tradition, and subvert it. I further exclude Kant here due to a lack of space. The obvious exception to this treatment of ‘the canon’ is Benjamin, who is considered here as a critic of Hegel whose own way of going about this critique will have a lasting influence on Marcuse and the direction of the ‘Frankfurt School’ in general, and seems to me necessary in order to understand the particular way in which certain ‘canonical’ thinkers are appropriated by Marcuse. See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics* (New York: Macmillan, 1979) and Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

possible a kind of reconciliation between Marx and Nietzsche that enables a deepening of the critique of Hegel and sets the stage for Marcuse. Finally, and most extensively, I attempt to reconstruct the theory of human being developed in the work of Herbert Marcuse, arguing that this conception of human being is the culmination of the above trajectory, making possible an erotic re-configuration of Hegelian personhood that effectively desublimates human being and state, thus making possible a human being that might develop its potentials without the necessity of expression in a state. In this sense, unlike the anthropologies that have underwritten theories of the state and its practices, dialectical anthropology aims to unearth that which is other than the human being made the appendage of the state: that which is not yet, but might still be.

I.

For Hegel, the subject of ethical duty, the citizen of a nation-state structured by a system of rational laws and animated by the will of a monarch, represents the most comprehensive realization of freedom in the world, and hence the highest actualization of human potential in this world.⁵ The state is the concept of freedom made actual as Idea, the unification between thought and existence: it is the actual that is rational and the rational that is actual, or “*the march of God in the world.*”⁶ Only through the state are the life and property of the individual preserved, while family and civic life are structured toward common ends; only through the state can the individual act in accordance with self-interest, moral interest, and indeed, the interest of the whole community simultaneously, for only through the state is the individual in his

⁵ Hegel writes that the highest duty of an individual is to be a member of a state and find actualization therein (§258); however, this *duty* would not necessarily preclude the possibility of some other higher vocation for human being that does not necessarily take the form of duty, such as *absolute knowing*. While the nuances of the relation between duty and absolute knowing, or the active and contemplative worlds, lie beyond our present concerns we might still maintain that absolute knowing as an even higher actualization of human potential than ethical duty for Hegel presupposes ethical duty: the philosopher can only aspire to the greatest of heights as a member of a nation-state. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

⁶ *Ibid.*, §258. Addition.

particularity reconciled with the universal in a rational fashion, and can thus be said to be free.

In this sense, the state is that which harmonizes different ends, binding them together in a single and unified whole. Only by virtue of being a member of this whole can an individual even be said to be an individual, and indeed, *virtue* is that which makes one suitable to one's place in this order.⁷ Through duty rendered to the state, the citizen aligns his will and aims with the universal and rational aims of the state and its will, thus himself becoming a universal and rational being. In the passage through family and civil society, the will of the citizen is educated, becoming ever more rational and universal, until finally he realizes that his greatest ends are to be found in those of the state.

However, in order for the state to function as the binding agent that makes singular and universal the plurality of particulars that compose the social world, it requires the kind of *agency* specific to individuals. That is, the plurality of institutions that compose the state must themselves be unified in a single whole consonant with a single end, and this individuality is embodied in the person of the monarch. The monarch, as sovereign, unifies the power of the state beneath a single set of aims directed by a single living will, thus making substantial the plurality of institutions as state and the state the guarantor of society – its beginning and end.⁸

In order to preserve the sovereign individuality of the state and the whole that it makes possible – the whole that makes the individual possible – it may be required of the individual citizen to sacrifice himself for these aims.⁹ Insofar as it is the citizen who must sacrifice himself for the monarch in order to preserve the whole, and not vice versa, the distinctly hierarchical and antagonistic nature of the Hegelian state comes into focus. If the monarch occupies a privileged position within the institutional machinery of the state required to consolidate its aims and make substantial the concept of freedom, then it might be said that the freedom that becomes actual in the state is equal for all only in an ideal or ideological sense. All rational and universal parts of the whole are equal in the reconciliation of their particular wills to the universal

⁷ "Virtue represents nothing more than the simple adequacy of the individual to the duties of the circumstances to which he belongs" (Ibid., §150).

⁸ Ibid., §275.

⁹ Ibid., §324-8.

and rational will of the whole, but their practical expression, their expression as ethical duty, requires different actions depending upon one's place in the whole.

Thus, the expression of ethical duty in the commander of the state's army can be to command according to the aims of the state, and the expression of the ethical duty of the officer of this army, to die when necessary. That the preservation of the whole demands that some die at the behest of others – that the highest duty and expression of freedom in the world is to have one's life annexed by the will of the sovereign – demonstrates that the freedom actualized in the Hegelian state is a freedom structured unequally among its members. The fundamentally antagonistic character of this state is cloaked beneath the words 'rational' and 'universal.'

In peeling away the layers of freedom actualized in this manner, in the ethical duty of the citizen, we find that the sphere of ethical life and the institutions of which it is composed presuppose another kind of subject and another sphere of life: the moral sphere, or *morality*. For Hegel it is the moral subject, the subject who, in recognizing himself as existing in the world and thus capable of acting in this world, undertook the activity that sought to structure the world according to thought, so that he might *see himself in the world he had wrought*,¹⁰ thus laying the groundwork for the institutions of the ethical sphere. Yet morality, as the sphere in which the subject acts according to his own particular conception of the good and seeks everywhere to find this conception in his own actions before being taught to find this good in the external world, presupposes yet another subject of another sphere of life: the *person*, the denizen of what Hegel calls 'abstract right.'

It is here, in the sphere of abstract right and its subject, the person, where we find the root of Hegelian freedom. The moral subject can only be such insofar as he can recognize himself as existing in the world, and it is in the sphere of abstract right that the subject first steps on to the plane of existence. Personality is the result of the will, that practical attitude of thought striving to give itself existence,¹¹ emerging from the pure and abstract universality of itself as an 'empty 'I'', simple potential, into the actuality of the world as objects of possession. The will emerges from the abstract into the concrete by placing itself in external objects,

¹⁰ Ibid., §113; §132.

¹¹ Ibid., §4. Addition.

making them its possessions, and thus, through these possessions, recognizing itself as existing in the world. The first object of this process, the original object possessed of will and so transformed into property, is for Hegel the body of the individual.¹² Through possessing a body, the abstract will becomes concrete for the first time, capable of recognizing and being recognized in the world as a *person*, a legal subject.

The person as the complex of will and body, whereby the body is the possession of the will, the malleable instrument of its aims, mirrors the relationship between the sovereign monarch and the dutiful citizen.¹³ Insofar as Hegel's conception of freedom actualized in the state patterns itself after a particular understanding of the structure of human being and its potential, it may thus be said that Hegelian freedom has at its core a kind of anthropology.¹⁴ A critique of Hegel's conception of freedom thus appears to entail a liberation of human potential from the bonds of property, as the human being conceived as property can find its freedom only in the reified form of the state. To conceive of human being as other than property, as other than the ability to possess and to be possessed, will thus be necessary if the reification of freedom as it is actualized within the state is to be overcome. Insofar as "that which is real opposes and denies potentialities inherent in itself" and *dialectics* concerns making the *absent* – that which is prohibited by the real – *present*,¹⁵ then the recovery of human potentials repressed by the state can be called a *dialectical anthropology*.

¹² *Ibid.*, §57.

¹³ See Horkheimer and Adorno when they write: "In the relationship of individuals to the body, their own and that of others, is reenacted the irrationality and injustice of power as cruelty" (193).

¹⁴ Indeed, in Hegel's *Philosophy of Mind* the subsection that begins the first division, "Subjective Mind", "Anthropology", corresponds with the subsection that begins the second division, "Objective Mind", "Right" (to become "Abstract Right" by the time Hegel writes the *Philosophy of Right*). Thus, in Hegel's philosophical edifice, anthropology and right, soul and property, are intimately entwined: two sides of the same coin. In this sense, just as "the soul is the prison of the body" so is property the prison of the body. See G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind*, trans. W. Wallace and A.V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon, 2007), and Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Modern Prison*, trans. Alain Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1995), 30.

¹⁵ See Herbert Marcuse, "Preface: A Note on Dialectic," in *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory* (Boston: Beacon, 1960), x.

II.

Marx explicitly and Nietzsche implicitly take up the question of the subject – of human being and its potential – as it is framed within Hegel’s philosophy, and in so doing engage in what might be called the first steps toward a dialectical anthropology. We will begin by examining how this project is undertaken by Marx before turning to Nietzsche’s contributions.

Not unlike Rousseau before him, Marx asserts that the problem with the philosophy of his day – with Hegel as its “most profound and complete expression” and hence representative – is its inability to grasp human being as it really is: Hegel’s account of the modern state and the freedom actualized therein “leaves out of account the *real man*.”¹⁶ A radical critique of Hegel’s conception of the state, freedom, and the human potential trapped therein must therefore, as Marx etymologically insists, go to the *root*, and the root of the problem of the human being is the human itself. Forcing an encounter between human being as she really is and her ideal Hegelian counterpart – that is, between the material being composed of the ensemble of social relations she both inherits and reproduces (or transforms), the being who must suffer these relations, and the subject of that “Eden of the innate rights of man”¹⁷, the Hegelian anthropological archetype found in the sphere of abstract right – can be nothing but revolutionary. It implies the overturning of

¹⁶ Karl Marx, “Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*: Introduction,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Second Edition, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), 59. The relation between ‘right’ and ‘man’ and the possibility of criticizing the former via an examination of the latter may have been borrowed from Rousseau. Compare with the following passage: “It is this ignorance of the nature of man which throws so much uncertainty and obscurity on the true definition of natural right.” See Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men,” in *The Basic Political Writings*, trans. and ed. Donald A. Cress (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 1987), 34.

¹⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital Volume 1* (New York: Penguin, 1990), 280. Marx’s account here of “free persons, who are equal before the law” bears a striking resemblance to the person as described by Hegel in the sphere of abstract right, thus inviting a comparison between the sphere of abstract right in the *Philosophy of Right* and the sphere of circulation and commodity exchange described in *Capital*. In this sense, when Marx invites his readers to descend with him “into the hidden abode of production” (279) he is effecting this anthropological encounter: the human being ennobled by the rights he possesses in bourgeois society is coming face to face with human being as she or he is compelled to toil in this society, thereby stressing the suffering these rights require.

the modern state Hegel describes and the social relations embalmed therein. For Marx, this re-integration of human being to herself – the encounter between human being as she actually exists and her philosophical abstraction – *is communism*,¹⁸ and can only be completely accomplished practically: that is, the potential world offered up in philosophy can only be realized through practice. It is under this notion of communism as the return of human being to herself that we ought to understand when Marx writes that “the entire revolutionary movement necessarily finds both its empirical and its theoretical basis in the movement of *private property* – in that of the economy.”¹⁹ For as we have seen with Hegel, private property is precisely what human being in bourgeois society *is*, manifesting in the structure of the economy, the fundamental presupposition of the freedom guaranteed him by the state.

Thus, the transcendence of private property is *the emancipation of all human senses* and attributes.²⁰ That is, the human sensory complex that has developed in conjunction with the practices that make up human life, the labour by which a human being transforms the external world and himself,²¹ has become trapped within bourgeois society as private property. Not only are the objects of his labour appropriated and enjoyed by others, but his very senses – the way his *eyes and ears gratify themselves* – are structured by the form of private property (insofar as his labour has become a commodity), and are thus debased as a result. It is for this reason that the liberation of human being from private property is the liberation of the very sensibility of human being – the sensory complex that makes up the physical body through which he relates to others would be fundamentally transformed, altered to suit a new ensemble of social relations. Just as “the *entire so-called history of the world* is nothing but the begetting of man through human labour, nothing but the coming-to-be of nature for man,”²² so the transcendence of private property would be the transcendence of the form of human being enthralled to it and the social relations from which it has sprung – the creation of a new form of human being. Thus communism is “the actual

¹⁸ Karl Marx, “Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts,” in *The Marx-Engels Reader*, Second Edition, ed. Robert C. Tucker. (New York: Norton, 1978), 84.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* Original emphasis.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 87.

²¹ Marx writes: “The forming of the five senses is a labour of the entire history of the world down to the present” (*Ibid.*, 89).

²² *Ibid.*, 92. Original emphasis.

phase necessary for the next stage of historical development in the process of human emancipation and recovery [...] the necessary pattern and dynamic principle of the immediate future, but [...] not the goal of human development”²³: the goal or end is, rather, the birth of a new kind of human being and communism is but its means.

Unlike Marx, Nietzsche very rarely mentions Hegel explicitly; however, Nietzsche’s discussion of the human being as a historically constituted animal can be seen in many ways to be an attack on the Hegelian notion of human being as one that forms part of the realization of freedom through the modern state.²⁴ For Nietzsche the first state was a “terrible tyranny,” the ruthless machine instituted by “some pack of blond beasts of prey” in order to give shape to the still shapeless mass over which they ruled²⁵ – a ‘thing’ decidedly lacking the kind of majesty one might attribute to “the march of God in the world.” However, if the whole history of higher culture is indeed, as Nietzsche claims, characterized by an increasing intellectualization and ‘deification’ of cruelty,²⁶ then it is perhaps unsurprising to find that after several millennia of increasingly refined forms of cruelty, the state, God, and Idea can in Hegel’s day become synonymous. In this sense, Nietzsche’s account of man as the historically constituted animal can be seen as a kind of precondition for Hegelian freedom: an account of what had to be suffered in order for there to be a Hegel capable of conceptualizing the realization of human potential in the manner that he does. In making possible an encounter between the idealized account of human being as citizen and the brutal prehistory that made this conception possible,

²³ Ibid., 93.

²⁴ The only direct references Nietzsche makes to Hegel of which I am aware can be found in the subsection of *Twilight of the Idols* entitled “What the Germans Lack,” §4 and §21, in the subsection of *Nietzsche Contra Wagner* entitled “We Antipodes,” and in *The Case of Wagner*, §10, though none of these includes a substantial discussion of his philosophy. See Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols and The Anti-Christ*, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (London: Penguin, 2003), 74; 90; “The Case of Wagner” and “Nietzsche Contra Wagner,” in *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols, And Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, trans. Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 252; 271.

²⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morality*. Revised Edition, ed. Keith Ansell-Pearson, trans. Carol Diethe (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 58.

²⁶ Ibid., 42.

Nietzsche, like Marx, opens up the category ‘man’ for question and the possibility of his radical transformation.

Thoroughly *unlike* Marx, however, Nietzsche does not appear to link the project of creating a ‘new kind of human being’ with emancipatory politics. For Nietzsche, the possibility of human beings transcending the “blood and horror” which lie “at the basis of all good things”²⁷ is much more ambiguous. On the one hand, Nietzsche offers a theory of organic evolution determined by violence and domination, whereby the power of one over another determines the course of this evolution and “man’s sacrifice *en bloc* to the prosperity of one single *stronger* species of man [...] *would be progress.*”²⁸ Yet on the other hand, Nietzsche writes of mercy being “the prerogative of the most powerful man,”²⁹ his singular way of emancipating himself from the legal structure predicated upon the aforementioned cycle of violence in which he is implicated. Whether Nietzsche is calling on his readers to have the courage and discipline – *the stomach* – for the kind of blood-drenched deeds from which he claims all great things have arisen (despite his disdain for the militant political movements of his day), or calling on them to express the power made possible by this history of violence in a kind of anarchic sublation of the legal code of equivalence (despite his disdain for pacifism), is wholly unclear. However, a clue to this aporia may be found in the study of history.

For Nietzsche, human being is possessed of memory only by means of thousands of years of cruelty inflicted upon himself. It is only by grace of this violence that the human’s animal instincts were altered, and, possessed of memory, conscience, and an entire “inner world,”³⁰ became who he is. Yet, for the modern human being, it is precisely his over-active memory which keeps him from becoming what he might otherwise be – what memory has made possible, yet simultaneously impedes. The instincts trained by memory – by history – now suffer at its expense.³¹ Thus, in order to liberate human instincts from history,

²⁷ Ibid., 39.

²⁸ Ibid., 52. Original emphasis.

²⁹ Ibid., 48.

³⁰ Ibid., 57.

³¹ “Excess of history has attacked life’s plastic powers, it no longer knows how to employ the past as a nourishing food” (120). See Friedrich Nietzsche, “On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life,” in *Untimely Meditations*, ed. Daniel Breazeale, trans. R.J. Hollingdale (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997). These “plastic

and human being from what he has become, one must begin to conceive of history in terms other than it has been previously: if the human being is to change, so must his history. While the distinctions Nietzsche draws between monumental history, antiquarian history, and critical history³² may be useful in untying the aporetic knots in which his writings coil, what is of concern with regards to a dialectical anthropology is the way in which Nietzsche links the human being and his instincts to history: for Nietzsche *both* human being *and* history are constituted in their relation. Not only does the human instinctual complex emerge historically, but as one's perspective of history shifts, so does one's understanding of this instinctual complex. Thus the possibility of a new kind of human being, "this man of the future [who] will redeem us,"³³ is not only historical, but historiographical.

To sum up, it might be said that while Marx understands the possibility for the creation of a new kind of human being to reside in political practice and the transformation of the social relations of which she is composed, he remains somewhat ambiguous about how human self-consciousness and the role of thought are related to this process. On the other hand, Nietzsche's ambiguity appears to lie principally on the side of political practice, offering no clear 'prescription' for how this new human might be created, yet insisting that the conditions for his appearance are inseparable from thought: thinking differently about man's origins already in a sense prefigures him for change – it is the sun that ripens the fruit, preparing it for the fall that will finally serve to split it apart. In this sense, both Marx and Nietzsche offer conceptions of human potential that do not find their highest expression within the institutions of the state, but instead show the state itself to be an agent of their suppression.

III.

Yet the anthropological critique of Hegel undertaken in different ways by Marx and Nietzsche respectively appears to be divided between these distinct notions of human being in a way that serves to rob them

powers" are for Nietzsche the capacity to transform and develop in one's own way, to incorporate into oneself what is past and foreign, to replace what has been lost and "recreate broken moulds" (62).

³² Ibid., 67.

³³ Nietzsche, *Genealogy*, 67.

of their force and prevent their cross pollination. If the question of bringing about a new kind of human being is strictly a practical question whereby the possibilities of political practice are determined by the historical conditions in which one finds oneself, the danger emerges of political practice taking on an 'aura' of inevitability, as if the historically 'correct' political practice will simply emerge when necessary. In this vulgarized notion of Marx's anthropological critique, the new human becomes a kind of *telos* toward which history automatically unfolds – beneath this aura, the danger of catastrophe in all senses is obscured, and one need but faithfully wait for things to be made right.

Conversely, if the possibility of a new kind of human being emerging is conceived primarily in thought, practice along with 'mundane' political concerns are denigrated at its expense. In this view, one need only imagine oneself to be the harbinger of the new human in order for it to be so, and the philosopher comes to wander between prophet and clown. In both cases, the anthropological critique raised against Hegel which served to subject his idealized conception of human being to the brute reality of his material existence is transformed into its opposite: his *corporeality* in the present is conjured away, transformed into a kind of *spirituality* of the future, as the new human becomes a new god, and the hope to see his realization becomes theological.

Against the theological structure that haunts the kind of 'historical materialism'³⁴ discussed above, we might understand Walter Benjamin's attempt to marry theology and historical materialism to offer important insights. By bringing theology into the service of a historical materialism already shrouded in theology, Benjamin performs a kind of exorcism, ridding historical materialism of its ghosts: most prominently among these, the belief in progress that makes political processes appear automatic. In this same move, we can see a kind of reconciliation between our two streams of anthropological critique and thus the next step toward a dialectical anthropology. Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History" places Marx and Nietzsche in constellation. On

³⁴ By 'historical materialism' I mean here a theory that is both 'historical' in the sense that it relies on some understanding of recorded development over time, and 'material' in the sense of opposing stylized characterizations meant to represent the 'essence' of a thing with how that thing 'actually is' in the world and to which all have sensible access. In this very general sense, both Marx and Nietzsche can be said to be 'historical materialists,' despite the clear differences between how each thinks 'material things' ought to be grasped historically.

the one hand, it draws on Nietzsche to radically undermine the notion of progress that underscores much of Marx's work, and which serves to shield his adherents from the thought that history might indeed be *against* them, with catastrophe a real possibility. On the other hand, it shows how the historical facts that serve to outline an understanding of the social ensemble of which the Marxian image of human being is composed are themselves determined by this social ensemble, and hence themselves part of class struggle.

Thus, it is the task of the historical materialist to “brush history *against* the grain”³⁵ – to uncover historical facts that appear to us as a natural series of causes inevitably leading toward the social relations of the present, which they frame and whose possibilities they configure, as themselves radically open to change. Just as Nietzsche wrote that the belief that one is a latecomer, that one is *at an end*, is harmful at any time,³⁶ so the historical materialist must see the sun of history to be always rising, always at a beginning. The great wave of forgetfulness whose torrent threatens to drown the past is only ever successful when the concerns of the past are not recognized as those of the present. In this sense, the historical materialist must operate according to a “constructive principle” in order to supply “a unique experience with the past,”³⁷ forging a relation between a past event and the present in order that the past might be lived again in the present – that its struggles might be made those of the present, and the same catastrophe that threatens them both might be averted.³⁸

By shattering the historical continuum in this manner, in forging an experience of time composed of events free of the linear causality that characterizes “homogeneous, empty time,”³⁹ it is as if the blood pouring from the chopping block of history had been made to flow backwards. Insofar as human being – *the temporal being par excellence* – is constituted in this empty time filled with a chain of events causally linked, she is easily

³⁵ Walter Benjamin, “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” In *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), 257. My emphasis.

³⁶ Nietzsche, *Uses of History*, 83.

³⁷ Benjamin, 262.

³⁸ Or put differently by Horkheimer and Adorno: “Only when the horror of annihilation is raised fully into consciousness are we placed in the proper relationship to the dead: that of unity with them, since we, like them, are victims of the same conditions and of the same disappointed hope” (178).

³⁹ Benjamin, 262.

annexed by social democracy and the cult of progress which depends upon this endless stream. But time experienced otherwise, frozen at the precise moment in which history is being written – for past generations as well as the present – becomes a time of struggle: a time of creation where human being might be otherwise than she has been.

In this sense, we might understand Benjamin to make use of Nietzsche's 'lessons' in historiography and his happy disdain for 'progress' to liberate Marx's anthropological critique from the throes of social democracy and recover its revolutionary potential.⁴⁰ Yet how is this potential to be conceptualized, when even concepts – which appear to depend on this same notion of empty time in order to operate – appear to fail us? That is, how can we both think and practice a politics that tends toward an image of the new human – this human that is no longer human – through the increasingly robust defences of advanced industrial society? In order to continue along our path – *this bridge* – we will now turn toward the critical anthropology of Herbert Marcuse.

IV.

Through their treatments of sensibility, instinct, and time, the respective critical endeavours of Marx, Nietzsche, and Benjamin have served to de-sublimate the conception of human being enclosed within Hegel's realization of freedom in the state, thus making possible a kind of dialectical anthropology that might draw out from these sources and others a theory of human being as she *could* be. As we shall see, Herbert Marcuse follows along this path, sketching out through a re-alignment

⁴⁰ The Marxian conception of human being implies that he is a temporal creature who gives time to himself *through labour*. The time spent in labour is held before his eyes as the products of this labour – it is through these products that he recognizes himself as a temporal being. Thus in alienated labour the capitalist who appropriates from the worker the products of his labour robs him not only of the time spent labouring, but of the capacity to recognize himself as the creator of himself as a temporal creature. It is for this reason that time in bourgeois society is experienced as a kind of stream of events whose current forever pushes us along, regardless of our own intentions. Thus it might be said that to abolish alienated labour would be to transform the temporal matrix in which human being is constituted, insofar as time itself is a function of the labour process, a part of the social relations to be transformed. Recovering the capacity to determine ourselves as temporal beings through labour would be to recover the capacity to create ourselves otherwise than we have been. In this sense, the re-appropriation of the products of labour is the practical actualization of the old philosophers' greeting: *take the time*.

of sensibility, instinct, and time a theory of human being as she is not yet, as the constellation of repressed potentials awaiting only the shock that will serve to actualize these potentials, crystallizing into something altogether new.⁴¹

Just as Benjamin writes of the image of happiness being linked to one of redemption,⁴² so Marcuse writes that happiness can never be more than a thing of the past so long as the human life instincts remain captive to time: redemption of the past would unbind instincts from the strictures of time, whose power would wilt.⁴³ However, to struggle against time, to strive towards being free of time, seems utterly impossible and hence unreasonable to us, given that the very instinctual complex of which we are composed is structured by the same time we would struggle against. For Marcuse, freedom is rooted in the primary drives of human beings, inextricably bound to the life instincts for the sake of their enhancement, and dependent upon a kind of sensibility, a passivity or receptivity, which allows for the adaptation of these instincts to one's environment.⁴⁴

Through this sensibility, our instincts become pliable: receptive to change. Thus, human being is fundamentally a being in transition, a being whose freedom is found in the flourishing of a transformative capacity made ever more refined insofar as this capacity itself becomes the object of transformative capacity. It is precisely this freedom which is stymied in Hegel's conception, bound as it is to private property and the will of the sovereign. Thus, in order to transform freedom according to its potential – not according to its actuality in the state – the instincts must themselves change. Through a transformation of the instinctual complex that both structures and is structured by labour – or rather, the homogenous, empty time characteristic of *alienated* labour – human being could overcome labour, molding her instincts instead according to

⁴¹ One will recall that insofar as reality opposes and denies the potentialities inherent in itself, and dialectical thought aims to recover these potentialities – to make present what is absent – then an anthropology that takes the recovery of repressed human potentials as its aim can be said to be dialectical. See Herbert Marcuse, "Preface: A Note on Dialectic," x.

⁴² Benjamin, 253.

⁴³ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud* (London: Routledge, 1998), 233.

⁴⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *Counter-Revolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 71; 74.

play, and in so doing, become something other than the human tied to property, in a time other than the time bound by labour.

“Instinct itself is beyond good and evil,”⁴⁵ Marcuse writes: basic libidinal wants and needs are highly plastic and pliable, capable of being shaped and molded by society in order to suit its requirements and “cement” its order.⁴⁶ Only by going back beyond this order in a critical regression (for which Marcuse draws upon Freud), back into the deepest biological layers, can the fundamentally negative structure of these instincts – their capacity to be other than themselves – be revealed. Marcuse holds this revelation to be inherently critical, for it reveals the degree to which the human is not human, that the creature found in civilization is by no means natural or permanent, but instead has been made to be how she is – the *result* of civilization and not its origin.⁴⁷

Human instincts emerge as such only under the compulsion of external reality which serves to sublimate animal drives, and hence transform the ‘nature’ of the species.⁴⁸ As a bundle of animal drives, human behaviour conformed to what Marcuse, after Freud, calls the ‘pleasure principle’: the simple gratification of the drives. However, the human beast soon learns that the full and painless gratification of all these drives is impossible, and so comes to give up the gratification found in momentary, uncertain, and destructive pleasures in favour of deferred, constructive, and assured pleasures. This transformation of the experience of pleasures serves to shift the human constellation of behaviour from under the sign of the pleasure principle to a new principle: the reality principle. Under the reality principle, human behaviour takes on its properly ‘human’ characteristic of *reason*, and its animal past fades from view. Organized under the ego, the drives become rationally directed towards ‘testing’ reality with a view to its transformation into the means of gratification. The human thus learns to distinguish in its behaviour between good and bad, true and false, useful and harmful, while acquiring the faculties of attention, memory, and

⁴⁵ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 226.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 241.

⁴⁷ Or as Horkheimer and Adorno put it: the constitution of the human and its own relation to itself, “the fate of the human instincts and passions repressed and distorted by civilization,” constitutes a “subterranean” history of Europe (192).

⁴⁸ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 12.

judgment. Under the light of reason, the human emerges as human: a thinking subject, conscious of himself and his world.⁴⁹

However, the conquering of the pleasure principle by the reality principle is never complete: as Marcuse insists, the reality principle must continually re-assert its organization over the instincts both at the social and individual levels as the gratification of pleasure remains a fundamental part of society. Thus, insofar as certain forms of gratification are repressed in favour of others – in favour of those deemed socially useful by those with the most social power – the reproduction of the human as a particular instinctual complex is affected not by nature but by other humans.⁵⁰ It is human being that reproduces human being, and that molds him in the image of his desires. Insofar as this image must repress certain forms of gratification at the expense of others, working to the benefit of one subset of society at the expense of another, the human being is the subject of domination – the figure of his own mutilated potential.

That this domination requires different organizations of gratification – that the human must continually remold the instruments which he uses to keep himself bound – entails different structures of the reality principle according to the historical context of its deployment. Thus the structure or ‘body’ of the reality principle is different in different kinds of civilization, though it always finds itself part of the societal institutions, laws, and values of a given historical form in order to mobilize the degree and scope of repressive power over the instincts necessary to maintain this regime of human dominated by human.⁵¹ Marcuse calls the prevailing historical form of the reality principle *the performance principle*, and the particular restrictions it places on the instincts in order to structure human behaviour in a manner that will reproduce this form of social domination, *surplus repression*.⁵²

At our own stage of civilization – advanced industrial society – the hold of the reality principle over the instincts has become so comprehensive that Marcuse fears the instinctual roots of our behaviour have begun to dry up.⁵³ Industrial society, being that it couples an

⁴⁹ Ibid., 14.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 16.

⁵¹ Ibid., 37.

⁵² Ibid., 35.

⁵³ Ibid., 102.

extremely abstract form of social organization with one of the most comprehensive sets of requirements for individual behaviour, has served to nearly completely abstract the individual from her human potentials. Behaviour made automatic according to the assembly line, the office routine, and ritualistic buying and selling, serves to divorce the individual from the negative and dynamic nature of the instincts. Externalized and ossified so completely in this form of social organization, the instincts threaten to become inextricably enthralled to the domination enshrined in the order of the present. In this sense, exploitation would no longer be second nature to human beings, but *first*.⁵⁴

The performance principle of advanced industrial society, as the behavioural logic of an acquisitive and antagonistic society in the constant process of expansion, has over the course of its development served to make the necessities of domination seem increasingly rational.⁵⁵ As this form of society expands both in breadth (over an increasing number of geographical locations) and in depth (over an increasing number of activities in these locations), the restrictions its performance principle imposes on the libido appear to be increasingly rational, universal, and necessary. Human sexuality is transformed according to the agenda of alienated labour: the body is desexualized as the libido is concentrated in specific zones of the body, cordoned off from the rest which are transformed into instruments of labour. Likewise, this spatial reduction of the libido is accompanied by a temporal one, as sexuality becomes an expression confined to certain times, places, and bodily parts.⁵⁶

These restrictions operate both through the objective laws of society and its subjective mores, becoming absorbed into the conscious and unconscious life of the individual. In this way, societal authority is exerted on the individual both externally and internally, coming to operate as the individual's own desire, morality, and fulfillment: under the rule of the performance principle, this *technological rationality*, the body and the mind are made into the instruments of alienated labour and

⁵⁴ As Marcuse writes in *One-Dimensional Man* (Beacon: Boston, 1991), "Just as this society tends to reduce, and even absorb opposition (the qualitative difference!) in the realm of politics and higher culture, so it does in the instinctual sphere. The result is the atrophy of the mental organs" (79).

⁵⁵ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 45.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 48.

shaped according to its dictates.⁵⁷ Thus, even the ways in which the individual seeks gratification in this society – according to the rational dictates of its performance principle – are themselves instruments of repression,⁵⁸ for in advanced industrial society the individual cannot be said to direct her own actions.⁵⁹ Divided in the establishment of the reality principle, the mind of the individual is sorted and structured by technological rationality, which expels that which hinders the performance of the behaviour necessary to reproduce society in this form: in this world, *I is not I*.

However, despite the mutilation of instincts this civilization has wrought, Marcuse sees in these developments great potential: surplus repression in advanced industrial society has reached such dizzying heights only because basic repression has become so minimal. That is, through industrialization, the possibility of fundamentally transforming the very nature of the struggle for existence that has characterized the history of civilization has become reality, and it is only through the *irrational* suppression of this potential that social domination persists.⁶⁰ Thus Marcuse can write that the history of humankind and the vicissitudes of its instincts seem to be tending toward a new and radical transformation. Whereas the Freudian schema of this history locates two radical breaks where the mental structure of human being underwent an explosive transformation in order to adapt to a radically changed environment (the first located in geological history, the second at the onset of civilization), Marcuse holds that we may be at the edge of a third like transformation.⁶¹ Here, at the *highest attained level of civilization*, human being as a conscious, rational subject may finally break from this ‘prehistory’ and emerge onto a new terrain.

Advanced industrial society, in restraining and guiding instinctual drives and making biological necessities into individual needs and

⁵⁷ Ibid., 46.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 92.

⁵⁹ “The human existence in this world is mere stuff, matter, material, which does not have the principle of its movement in itself” (Ibid., 103).

⁶⁰ Marcuse writes: “The technological processes of mechanization and standardization might release individual energy into a yet uncharted realm of freedom beyond necessity. The very structure of human existence would be altered” (*One-Dimensional Man*, 2) thus “Civilization has to defend itself against the specter of a world which could be free” (*Eros and Civilization*, 93).

⁶¹ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 150.

desires, has served not to reduce but rather *increase* gratification – or at least *potential* gratification – while breaking the compulsive dependence of gratification on nature.⁶² The rationalization and mechanization of labour, in serving to reduce the amount of instinctual energy necessarily devoted to the struggle for existence, allows a greater amount of this energy to be devoted to *play* – toward the free realization of human faculties previously subordinated to other ends.⁶³ In transforming human life into the mere instrument of labour, advanced industrial society has demonstrated that the human being does not realize herself in labour – she *cannot* do so insofar as this labour stands opposed to her as an independent power. Thus, rather than re-appropriating labour, the liberation of human being from this state would necessarily be to follow the logic of alienation to its conclusion: to make the divide between human and labour complete by *liberating human being from labour*, a feat made possible by the same industrial development which has served to liberate *some* from toil at the expense of *others*.⁶⁴

By institutionalizing an egalitarian means of distribution, ‘labour struggles’ might strive toward the total automation of labour and thus the reduction of the working day to its barest possible minimum, releasing time and energy to the free play of the faculties and their development for ends completely alienated from labour. Such an historical turn would be a true realization of freedom, transforming human existence in its entirety and thus making possible a completely “new basic experience of being.”⁶⁵ Thus the liberation of ‘man from man’ and the struggle against nature would likewise be a liberation of human being from the human: human being would truly become something other than itself.

In forming a new constellation with being – one free of domination – human being would, strictly speaking, no longer be human. For Marcuse, this new type of being would be fundamentally different from the human being as the subject of class society, even in his physiology.⁶⁶ Emancipated, the blunted sensibility characteristic of human being shaped by alienated labour would be capable of forging a new

⁶² Ibid., 38.

⁶³ Ibid., 93.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 105.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 157-158.

⁶⁶ Marcuse, *Counter-Revolution and Revolt*, 64.

relationship with nature: in this relation nature would not be reducible to its simple utility but would instead be experienced as an object-world animated by life *in common* with ‘humans.’ Nature would thus no longer be the object of the mastery of the human subject, for this ‘in common’ would make of human being not a subject but a kind of “living object.”⁶⁷ As a living object, the ‘human’ appropriation of nature would be non-violent and non-destructive, oriented instead toward the mutually life-enhancing, sensuous, and aesthetic qualities inherent in nature.⁶⁸ Animated by this common life force – *Eros* in Freudian terms – man and nature would be *erotically* reconciled in an aesthetic attitude, allowing for the dominant social functions of order and work to be usurped by beauty and play.⁶⁹

Play as the primary principle of civilization would serve to transform reality, making nature an object of contemplation, rather than an object which must be dominated.⁷⁰ In a world structured according to play, human activity itself becomes *display*: the free manifestation of potentialities. Insofar as labour here is completely subordinated to play and display, human being transcends her existence as *animal labourans* or *homo faber*, and the desexualized body of these creatures previously carved up and devoured by the aims of labour becomes re-sexualized.⁷¹ Without the repressive features of all reality principles hitherto, the libido would be transformed, emancipated from the bonds of genital supremacy, and hence capable of making the entire body an instrument of pleasure: *the erotization of the entire personality*.⁷²

Here we must recall Hegel, and the anthropological knot that served as our point of departure: personality for Hegel is to possess oneself as

⁶⁷ Ibid., 65.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 67.

⁶⁹ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 176.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 189.

⁷¹ This is not to suggest that in a society organized according to play there would be no necessary labour; rather, labour would be undertaken for the sake of perpetuating the capacity of all to engage in the free manifestation of their potentialities. Moreover, just as in a society organized according to the principles of labour leisure is transformed into ‘free time,’ a correlate of the time spent labouring that increasingly comes to resemble and value the things necessary to the labour process, so in a society organized according to play would necessary labour come to look increasingly like play. See Theodor W. Adorno’s “Free Time” in *The Culture Industry*, ed. J.M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 2001), 187-197.

⁷² Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 201.

property and to recognize others and be recognized by them in this form – it is the fundamental human shape upon which freedom as it is realized in the state depends. To erotize personality is to reshape this subject-object/will-body relationship, to place what Hegel calls the ‘will’ and its body in a relation to each other and the external world *that is not reducible to property*, but instead forms a kind of ‘erotic circuit’ in which their potentialities are realized without congealing into the form of the person. To realize ‘human’ potential while simultaneously warding off the development of the Hegelian person is to divert the trajectory of these ‘human’ potentials from their realization in the state⁷³ – to set these potentials along a new evolutionary path, leading beyond their history in the world we know.

Thus the organism which emerges here is something radically other than its human precursor, possessing what we might call a different ‘destiny.’ The spread of libido which served to enlarge the field of realization of the life instincts is simultaneously an erotic reconfiguration of personality where sexuality is not bound by labour but reconciled to these same instincts, to Eros. This erotic reconfiguration of the person calls for the continual refinement of the organism and the intensification of its receptive, transformative sensibility.⁷⁴ The instincts transformed, along with their altered social conditions, come to mutually reinforce one another, forging a new relation between the instincts and the logic of the ‘whole,’ *of reason*, thus instituting a new reality principle.⁷⁵ Where the antagonistic struggle for existence now gives way to the co-operative and free development and gratification of potential, a new rationality of gratification emerges. This rationality, converging with happiness, serves to institute a new division of labour (of what labour is left), according to new priorities, in line with new moral laws.⁷⁶ In this sense, Marcuse, through Benjamin, brings to fruition the reconciliation of Nietzsche’s historico-philosophic transvaluation of values and Marx’s emancipatory political practice in a dialectical anthropology. Through this dialectical anthropology we might conceptualize human being in terms of its

⁷³ A more complete essay might have here a discussion of Pierre Clastres’s anthropology and his idea of societies that ‘ward off’ the development of states through different social relations and the potentials articulated therein.

⁷⁴ Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 212.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 197.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 228.

potential, in terms of the possibility of human being appropriating for herself a future in which she will be other than herself.

And so, we find that the de-sublimation of the Hegelian person through the anthropological critiques of Marx and Nietzsche, brought together and made to resonate through Benjamin, served as a kind of philosophical groundwork for Marcuse's dialectical anthropology. Through this dialectical anthropology, the Hegelian person is erotically reconfigured, forging new relations between the individual, her body, and the environment, making possible a new evolutionary 'destiny' for what was human being, one that does not see his freedom culminate in the state, haunted by the spectre of domination.

By way of postscript, it may be noted that this dialectical anthropology, hinging as it does on a very critical interpretation of Hegel, overlooks the numerous positive remarks – especially with regard to the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and even the image of reconciliation therein – dotted throughout Marcuse's texts.⁷⁷ While the question of Hegel's legacy in Marcuse's works as such lies beyond the scope of this essay, it is possible that the trajectory examined here, beginning as it does with a critique of the Hegelian person, is only one possible trajectory leading from his texts. However, this admission carries with it the danger of lapsing back into the world from which dialectical anthropology has indicated an exit, of making Hegel into the philosophical equivalent of Rome, to which all roads lead. In this sense, Hegel would be our favourite enemy: the resurrected father whom we must eternally murder in order to be free.

⁷⁷ See especially Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization*, 115-117.

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