

# Philosophy of education: herbert marcuse



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Joseph Cunningham Praxis Exiled: Herbert Marcuse and the One Dimensional University, *Journal of Philosophy of Education* Vol 47 No 4 2013

Cunningham's exploration of Herbert Marcuse positions him at the centre of the revolutionary student movements of the 1960's. Higher education could at that time be seen as a place which was shielded to some extent from the pacifying tendencies within advanced capitalist labour. Of all the theories which emerged out of the influential Frankfurt School, Marcuse's was perhaps the one theory which could more easily be applied in practice because it narrowed Marxist critique to analyse the extent to which advanced capitalism's influence penetrated inwardly. Cunningham encapsulates this by stating, 'gendered rhetoric aside, One Dimensional Man, is about you and your life'.

However, Cunningham argues that it was never Marcuse's intention to develop his theory, whilst navel gazing inside an ivory tower. Rather critical theory in education should move students to pierce through the institutional walls and function as actualised praxis, the congruence of theory and action. Cunningham uses Marcuse's own words from 1968, 'By its own inner dynamic, education thus *leads beyond the classroom*, beyond the university, *into the political* dimension and in to the moral, instinctual dimension' (his italics). An inner revolution is a precursor to outer revolution and dialectical critique is the key to the liberation which will nurture that inner revolution.

Marcuse looked beyond labour itself to find the causes of what he thought was creating a one dimensional society: he argued that technology, the

media and a converging standardisation of values coupled with an unending stream of 'must have' commodities combine to attack an individual's authenticity. Reason is usurped by technological rationality and our critical senses are dulled, making us, as Marcuse argued, disinterested in or even hostile to dissent. Cunningham carefully traces how the ripe revolutionary potential of the 1960's has come under the control of capital, as Marcuse predicted might be the case.

I can see how the growing corporatisation of higher education, of which Marcuse was aware in 1960, has indeed spread tentacles across the sector. The perceived waste of human capital in the liberal arts has been either recycled into more 'useful' courses or disposed of. Cunningham's view is that, as Marcuse predicted, the drive to develop online education can arguably be seen as another route to seal the packaging of educational content as a product for students as consumers, so much so that the consumer and campus culture are indistinguishable. The halcyon days of free education have been replaced by a narrowing of access due to lack of means.

Cunningham's conclusion is bleak but understandable: even though critical theory is still taught, it is largely devoid of praxis and often delivered online in digitally standardised curricula. Marcuse would find it empty of the dynamic which he felt it had the potential to bring to student life. Like Marcuse, however, Cunningham sees some evidence of counterculture: citing the Occupy Movement as one candle in the darkness of the pervasive atmosphere which is antithetical to critical thought. Self-exile beckons for

those who, like Marcuse before them, seek to step outside to look within with fresh eyes.

There are indicators everywhere we look of the dominant capitalist culture which makes us so wrapped up in our daily existence and desire for material goods that we fail to see the possibility of any other existence. Indeed, we are led to crave the same dimension. Marcuse's One Dimension flattens our capacity for imagining another kind of existence and suppresses our instinctive desires. Whether it is the subliminal appeal of an advertising jingle or the promise of a higher salary if we put all our energies into STEM, we are persuaded that our present should be used to build our future. However the vision is as narrow as a tunnel. The light at the end is that of unexamined material prosperity: there are few unexpected rays lighting the corners of our imagination to help us to reach out to change our perspective. After all, evidence of a different light source might encourage us to look for another way out.

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