



## Marcuse, Herbert (1898-1979)

by Jeffrey Escoffier

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German-born philosopher Herbert Marcuse was one of the leading theorists of the New Left in Europe and the United States in the late 1960s. Much like Michel Foucault in a later generation, Marcuse had an enormous influence on theories of sexual liberation, particularly in the early post-Stonewall gay movement and on the left.

Many young people in the 1960s adopted Marcuse-like sexual politics as the basis for the counter-culture's radical transformation of values. By exploring drugs, music and sex, they sought to experience what Marcuse described as an "erotic sense of reality."

Marcuse's book *Eros and Civilization* (1955), a synthesis of the thought of Sigmund Freud and Karl Marx, also played an influential role in the writing of early proponents of gay liberation, such as Dennis Altman and Martin Duberman, and it influenced radical gay groups such as the Gay Liberation Front's Red Butterfly Collective.

Born on July 19, 1898 in Berlin, Marcuse grew up in a comfortable upper-middle class Jewish neighborhood. In 1916, at the height of World War I, he was forced to complete his Gymnasium (that is, private high school) studies in an accelerated wartime program in order to be drafted into the Imperial German Army.

A year later, he joined the Social Democratic Party (Germany's socialist party). With Germany's defeat in 1918, Marcuse joined the revolt staged by workers and soldiers to protest the government's disastrous management of the war and the collapse of the German economy. He served briefly on the Soldier's Council in Berlin.

The Republic founded in Weimar after the overthrow of the Kaiser failed to solve the political and economic problems created by the war. Marcuse withdrew from the daily politics of the revolutionary upheavals and enrolled in Humboldt University in Berlin. He soon transferred his studies to the University of Freiberg in order to study with the eminent German existentialist philosopher Martin Heidegger.

In the years between 1920 and 1932, he moved in leftist intellectual circles. Among his friends were the German literary critic Walter Benjamin and the philosopher Max Horkheimer.

In 1932, he joined the Marxist-influenced Institute for Social Research at the University of Frankfurt. The following year the Nazi party came to power and closed the Institute, whereupon it moved to the United States and re-opened at Columbia University in New York City.

During the 1940s, Marcuse, like a number of other German émigré intellectuals, worked for several United States intelligence agencies. After he left government service, he taught at Columbia, Harvard, Brandeis, and the University of California, at both the San Diego and the Santa Cruz campuses.

Beginning in the late 1930s, Marcuse became interested in the relation of freedom and happiness. In an

essay called "On Hedonism" (1938), he developed the argument that without the freedom to satisfy one's needs and to act in order to achieve self-fulfillment, true happiness was impossible. If freedom is not possible because of social and economic conditions, then these conditions must be changed in order to achieve increased happiness and freedom.

During the early 1950s Marcuse returned to this line of thought in *Eros and Civilization*. In it he offered a dramatic re-interpretation of Freud's theory of repression and criticized Freud's stress on the genital organization of sexuality and on heterosexual intercourse. According to Freud, adult sexual development is a progression from oral and anal eroticism in infancy to the final adult stage of genital sexuality. In response, Marcuse proposed sexual liberation through the cultivation of a "polymorphous perverse" sexuality (which includes oral, anal, and genital eroticism) that eschews a narrow focus on genital heterosexual intercourse.

Marcuse believed that sexual liberation was achieved by exploring new permutations of sexual desires, sexual activities, and gender roles--what Freud called "perverse" sexual desires, that is, all non-reproductive forms of sexual behavior, of which kissing, oral sex, and anal sex are familiar examples.

Marcuse was himself heterosexual, but he identified the homosexual as the radical standard bearer of sex for the sake of pleasure, a form of radical hedonism that repudiates those forms of repressive sexuality organized around genital heterosexuality and biological reproduction. "Against a society which employs sexuality as a means for a useful end," Marcuse argued, "the perversions uphold sexuality as an end itself . . . and challenge its very foundations."

Marcuse also rejected Freud's conservative view of the value of sublimation. Instead, he argued for the possibility of what he called "non-repressive sublimation"--a form of sublimation that diverted libidinal energies to social activities without narrowly focusing on heterosexual genital sexuality and procreation. This kind of "non-repressive sublimation" would also allow for new ways of organizing workplaces as well as the creation of new kinds of libidinal communities.

Marcuse, like other leading theorists of sexuality, such as Freud and Wilhelm Reich, argued that homosexuality was a form of sexuality of which everyone was capable--that in fact, everyone was fundamentally bisexual. Gay liberationists such as Carl Wittman, Martha Shelley, and others also believed that homosexuality was a universal human predisposition.

Dennis Altman's *Homosexual: Oppression and Liberation* (1971), one of the earliest theoretical discussions of gay liberation and sexual politics, reflected the same assumption and relied extensively on Marcuse's work. Gay liberation, Altman noted, was "not only for those of us who are homosexuals, who are finding the courage and self-assurance to come out in public, but indeed . . . for everyone else."

Like Marcuse, Altman also emphasized "polymorphous perversity," the undifferentiated ability to take pleasure from all parts of the body. "Anatomy," Altman noted, "has forced the homosexual to explore the realities of polymorphous eroticism." Thus, homosexual sex represented an expression of pleasure and love "free of any utilitarian ends."

The Red Butterfly Collective, a Marxist faction of the Gay Liberation Front, also echoed Marcuse. The group stressed the importance of a democratic socialist perspective. "Human liberation," it noted in its comment on Carl Wittman's path-breaking *Gay Manifesto* (1969), "in all its forms, including Gay Liberation, requires effective self determination, i.e. democracy, in all spheres of social life affecting the lives of people as a whole." The group adopted as its motto the final line from the "Political Preface" of the 1966 edition of *Eros and Civilization*: "Today the fight for life, the fight for Eros is the *political* fight."

After the publication of *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse experienced serious misgivings about sexual liberation as it played out in America's advanced industrial society. He was increasingly concerned that it

was impossible to achieve sexual liberation in an advanced capitalist society.

In *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), his most influential book of the 1960s, he argued that the unsublimated (or "de-sublimated") sexuality released by the sexual revolution was channeled into commercialized forms of advertising and entertainment and into institutionalized forms of aggression, and that it was, in fact, isolated from broader forms of erotic life.

Sexuality freed from the constraints of repression and sublimation, Marcuse argued, was exploited by capitalist businesses that harnessed the liberated--"de-sublimated"--libidinal energies to increase productivity and to generate increased consumption through the use of sex appeal in marketing, rather than by encouraging new social forms of erotic communities or pleasant and fulfilling work environments.

Although Marcuse had made his home permanently in the United States, he returned to Europe frequently. It was on a trip to Europe in the spring and summer of 1979, during which he lectured on feminism, the ecology movement, and socialism, that he died at the age of 81.

The rise of a political perspective that stressed homosexual identity made Marcuse's emphasis on the fundamental importance of human bisexuality politically irrelevant. It is extremely difficult to mobilize those who experience homosexual desires but do not identify as homosexuals--largely because they infrequently act on their homosexual desires, are often not comfortable with them, or in many cases not even conscious of them. Thus, the liberationist perspective, influenced by Marcuse, was not able to provide a framework that could effectively facilitate the organization of "an interest group" among those who shared similar sexual desires.

Finally, many lesbians and gay men, in addition to many heterosexuals, believed neither in bisexuality nor in the reality of polymorphous desire. The gay rights or "identitarian" approach emerged as the dominant political-intellectual perspective because it was compatible with the American emphasis on "civil rights," and also because it provided a viable basis for community organizing and development in the tradition of ethnic group politics. Hence, Marcuse's influence declined as the gay and lesbian rights movement embraced identity politics.

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### **About the Author**

**Jeffrey Escoffier** writes on glbtq history, politics, culture, sexuality, music, and dance. One of the founders of *OUT/LOOK: National Lesbian and Gay Quarterly*, he has published widely. Among his books are *American Homo: Community and Perversity* and a biography of John Maynard Keynes in the Chelsea House series on the Lives of Notable Gay Men and Lesbians. He co-edited (with Matthew Lore) Mark Morris' *L'Allegro, il Penseroso ed il Moderato: A Celebration*. His most recent book is *Sexual Revolution*, an anthology of writing on sex from the 1960s and 1970s. He is currently working on a book on sexual politics and writing about the production of pornography.