# *The Failure of the New Left?**

by Herbert Marcuse

Before discussing the reasons for the failure of the New Left, we must address two questions: first, who and what this New Left is, and second, whether it has in fact failed.

To begin, some comments on the first question. The New Left consists of political groups that are situated to the left of the traditional communist parties; they do not yet possess any new organizational forms, are without a mass base and are isolated from the working class, especially in the United States. The strong libertarian, anti-authoritarian moments that originally defined the New Left have vanished in the meantime or yielded to a new "group-authoritarianism." Nevertheless, that which distinguishes and essentially characterizes this movement is the fact that it has re-defined the concept of revolution, bringing to it those new possibilities for freedom and new potentials for socialist development that were created (and immediately arrested) by advanced capitalism. As a result of these developments, new dimensions of social change have emerged. Change is no longer defined simply as economic and political upheaval, as the establishment of a different mode of production and new institutions, but also and above all as a revolution in the prevailing structure of needs and the possibilities for their fulfillment.

This concept of revolution was part of the Marxian theory from the outset: socialism is a qualitatively different society, one in which people's relationships to one another as well as the relationship between human beings and nature is fundamentally transformed. Pressured by the economic power of capitalism, however, and forced into co-existence, the socialist countries seem to have been damned over time to an almost exclusive emphasis on developing the means of production, on expanding the productive sector of the economy. This priority has necessarily perpetuated *the individual's subjugation to the exigencies of his/her work* (a subjugation that, under certain circumstances, can be "democratic" and can mean a more rational and more efficient form of production, as well as a more equitable distribution of goods).

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The premise that a surplus of material goods is the pre-condition for socialism means postponing the revolutionary transformation of society until doomsday *or* harboring the undialectical hope that a new quality of social life and interaction will evolve as a by-product of the quantitative growth in the economy. The emergence of the New Left in the 1960s challenged quite vigorously this concept of socialism and the strategies it involved. A gradual shift in the focal point of the revolt grew out of the experience of contradiction between the overwhelming productivity of monopoly capitalism on the one hand and the powerlessness of the large socialist and communist apparatus to transform it into the productivity of revolution on the other.

The movement mobilized and organized forces that the traditions of Marxist theory and praxis had ignored for the most part up until then. It represented an attempt to totalize opposition — in counter-offensive against the totalization of repression and exploitation in monopoly capitalism. As the manipulation of needs by the capitalist power apparatus became more evident and far-reaching, revolutionizing those needs in the individuals who reproduce the status quo appeared increasingly vital: rebellion and change in human existence both in the sphere of production and in the reproductive sphere, in the infrastructure and the "superstructure." The movement took the form, then, of a cultural revolution from the very beginning; it conceived of the revolution of the 20th century as one in which not only political and economic demands, but also radically other desires and hopes would be articulated: the desire for a new moral sense, for a more human environment, for a complete "emancipation of the senses" (Marx), in other words, a liberation of the senses from the compulsion to perceive people and things merely as objects of exchange. "Power to the imagination!" The New Left was concerned with the emancipation of imagination from the restraints of instrumental reason. In opposition to the alliance between realism and conformity, the forces of the New Left created the slogan: "Be realistic, demand the impossible." This is where the strong aesthetic component of the movement originated: art was seen as a productive emancipatory force, as the experience of another (and ordinarily repressed) reality.

Was all of that the expression of romanticism, or indeed elitism? Not at all. The New Left was simply ahead of the objective conditions, insofar as it articulated goals and substantive challenges that advanced capitalism had made possible but had channeled or suppressed up until then. This insight and concept were illustrated in strategy as well: there is an inner connection between the struggle of the New Left against outmoded forms of opposition and the oppositional tendencies of class struggle that gained ground within the working class itself: autonomy versus authoritarian-bureaucratic organization. Since the 1960s, the occupation of factories as well as concepts of self-determination in production and distribution have become meaningful once again.

Now we come to the second point concerning whether the New Left has really failed. This question has to be answered on several different levels. In part, the movement was co-opted or openly suppressed by the establishment; in part it destroyed itself by failing to develop any adequate organizational forms and by allowing internal splits to grow and spread, a phenomenon that was linked to anti-intellectualism, to a politically powerless anarchism and a narcissistic arrogance.

The suppression of the movement by the existing power structures took many forms. It was violent, but also, so to speak "normal": infallible, scientific mechanisms of control, "black lists," discrimination at the workplace, an army of spies and informers — all of these things were set up and mobilized as instruments of repression, and their effectiveness was enhanced by the Left's continued isolation from the rest of the populace. This isolation has its roots in the social structure of advanced monopoly capitalism, a structure that has long since integrated large portions of the working class into the system. Of course, the domination of politically anti-revolutionary unions and reformist workers' parties presents an additional problem. Such tendencies and problems reflect the relative stability of capitalism with its foundations in neo-colonialism and neo-imperialism and its overwhelming concentration of economic and political power.

Because of the enormous conglomeration of power that is the capitalist totality, revolts against the system were necessarily taken up and carried out by minority groups that exist outside or on the margins of the material production process. In this context, one can indeed speak of "privileged" groups, of an "elite" or perhaps of an "avant-garde." On the other hand, it was precisely these privileges — the distance from or the lack of integration into the production process — that hastened the development of a radical political consciousness, that transformed the experience of alienation into a rebellion against the obsolescence of the existing material and intellectual culture.

Of couse, it is for this very reason that the revolt did not completely succeed; the counter-cultures created by the New Left destroyed themselves when they forfeited their political impetus in favor of withdrawal into a kind of private liberation (drug culture, the turn to guru-cults and other pseudo-religious sects), of an abstract anti-authoritarianism and a contempt for theory as a directive for praxis, of the ritualization and fetishizing of Marxism. A premature disillusionment and resignation was expressed in all such forms of withdrawal.

The New Left's insistence on the subversion of experience and individual consciousness, on a radical revolution of the system of needs and gratifications, in short, the persistent demand for a new subjectivity lends psychology a decisive political significance. The manipulative social controls that have now mobilized even the unconscious for the maintenance of the status quo make psychoanalysis an object of extreme interest once again. Only the liberation of repressed and sublimated impulses can shatter the

established system of desires and needs in the individual and create a place for the desire for freedom. Of course, the mere recognition and validation of these impulses cannot fulfill this function; the process of release must lead to criticism, to self-criticism of needs in reaction to socially manipulated and internalized desires; such internalized desires and needs continue to act as barriers to liberation, for their gratification guarantees the repressive reproduction of the commodity world. It is the critical analysis of needs that constitutes the specifically social dimension of psychology.

Certainly, the psyche also has a super- or, to be more precise, a sub-social dimension of instinctive needs that are common to all social formations: the dimension of primary sexuality and destruction. The conflicts that have their roots in this sphere would exist even in a free society: jealousy, unhappy love, and violence cannot simply be blamed on bourgeois society; they express the contradiction inherent in the libido between ubiquity and exclusiveness, between fulfillment in variation or change and fulfillment in constancy. However, even in this dimension the manifestations of instincts and the forms that their gratification take are largely societally determined. Even here, the general manifests and works itself out in the particular; of course, here, the universal is not the social or the societal in individuals, but rather the primary structuring of instincts in socially determined human beings.

Beyond this primary dimension is the realm of psychic (and physical) conflicts and disturbances that are of a specifically social nature, determined in their particular manifestations and substance by the social system and its mechanisms of repression and de-sublimation. Certainly, the difficulties between the sexes, between generations and in self-definition (identity crises), all difficulties that are very much in discussion at the moment, belong to this category — phenomena that are often too quickly classified as individual alienation. In this psychic realm, society and its reality principle constitute the commonality and are that which is central in the particular conflicts and disturbances that emerge; therapy, then, becomes a matter of political psychology: the politicization of consciousness and of the unconscious, and the counter-politicization of the super-ego are political tasks.

The close structural relationship between these two realms lends itself to the interpretation of important political problems as private problems of the psyche. The result is the transference of the political into the private sphere and the sphere of its representatives and analysts. (The unorthodox use of the concept "transference" is legitimate in the sense that the satisfaction of repressed impulses follows from such a transfer: the repression or transformation of the radical political impulses of the counter-culture after their supposed failure, for example: in this transformation they take on the character of infantile desires.)

The insight that "Depth Psychology" is decisive in the concept of advanced monopoly capitalism has been very important for the New Left.

The New Left understands the nature of integration in this society as a mechanism that depends primarily on the internalization of social controls by individuals, who then learn to reproduce the existing system and their own domination. Social reproduction, in other words, is guaranteed in large part through the systematic manipulation of libidinal needs and gratifications: through the commercialization of sexuality (repressive de-sublimation) and the unleashing of primary aggression, not only in imperialist wars (the My Lai massacre, etc.), but also in the intensified criminality and brutality of everyday life. As political therapy and education, then, nonconformist psychology serves the politicized psyche. The privatization and the conformist business of psychology are increasingly confronted with attempts at a radical therapy: the articulation of social repression still active on the deeper levels of individual existence.

Back to the New Left. In spite of everything, I think it is wrong to speak of its "failure." As I have tried to show, the movement is rooted in the structure of advanced capitalism itself; it can retreat in order to form itself anew, it can, however, also become the victim of a neo-fascist wave of repression.

For all that, there are indications that the "message" of the New Left has spread and been heard beyond its own spheres. There are, of course, reasons for that. The stability of capitalism has been upset, and indeed on an international scale; the system exposes more and more of its inherent destructiveness and irrationality. It is from this point that protest grows and spreads, even if it is largely unorganized, diffuse, unconnected and still without any evident socialist aims at first. Among workers, the protest expresses itself in the form of wildcat strikes, absenteeism and in undercover sabotage, or appears in flare-ups against the union leadership; it appears as well in the struggles of oppressed social minorities and finally, in the women's liberation movement. It is obvious that there is a general disintegration of worker morale, a mistrust of the basic values of capitalist society and its hypocritical morality; the overall breakdown of confidence in the priorities and hierarchies set by capitalism is apparent.

There is a very plausible explanation for the fact that the deeply-rooted social dissatisfaction that I have tried to indicate remains, in spite of everything, unarticulated, unorganized, and limited to small groups. Unfortunately, the great mass of the population equates every socialist alternative either with Soviet Communism or with a vague utopianism. Obviously there is a widespread fear of a possible change in society so radical that it could fundamentally transform traditional ways of life, could undermine the puritanical morality that is now hundreds of years old and end the alienation in our lives. These are conditions that have long been accepted or forced on people; we have been taught that lifelong drudgery and oppression are unchangeable, that they are, in fact, nothing short of religious law. Subjugation to a constantly expanding production machine has been seen as the precondition for progress.

It is possible that this oppression was really necessary for a time in order

to win the struggle against economic lack, to hasten the mobilization of the work force and the domination of nature; in fact, technical progress led to an enormous upswing in the development of the means of production and to constantly growing accumulation of societal wealth. On the other hand, however, these achievements were used in increasingly brutal ways to perpetuate shortages, to maintain oppression, to rape nature and to manipulate human needs — all of this with the single goal of perpetuating the prevailing mode of production and the existing social hierarchy or expanding their basis.

Certainly today it is abundantly clear that the triumphs of capitalism cannot continue within this repressive framework: the system can now develop only if it destroys the means of production, even human life itself, on an international scale. It is true that capitalism has elevated its own negation to a principle. Against this backdrop, the historical significance of the New Left becomes much clearer. The 1960s mark a turning-point in the development of capitalism (possibly in that of socialism as well); and it was the New Left that put an all-encompassing, if forgotten and suppressed dimension of radical social change on the agenda; it was the New Left that inscribed on their banners — even if in a chaotic and somewhat immature form — the idea of a revolution in the 20th century that would be specific to its time and distinct from all preceding revolutions. This revolution would be appropriate to the conditions created by late capitalism. Its bearers would be an expanded working class with a changed social existence and different consciousness, an expanded working class that would include large segments of the once independent middle classes and intelligentsia. This revolution would find its impetus and origins not so much in economic misery, but in revolt against imposed needs and pleasures, revolt against the misery and the insanity of the affluent society. Certainly, late capitalist society also reproduces economic pauperization and the crudest forms of exploitation, and yet, it is clear that the forces of radical change in highly-developed capitalist countries are not recruited primarily fom the "proletariat," and that their demands are oriented toward qualitatively different ways of life and qualitatively different needs.

The New Left *totalized* the rebellion against the existing order in its demands and its struggle; it changed the consciousness of broad sectors of the population; it showed that life without meaningless and unproductive work is a possibility, life without fear, without the puritanical "work ethic" (that has, for a very long time, not been a work ethic at all, but simply an ethic of oppression), life without rewarded brutality and hypocrisy, life finally devoid of the artificial beauty and actual ugliness of the capitalist system. In other words, the New Left has made that which has long been abstract knowledge concrete with its assertion that "changing the world" does not mean replacing one system of domination with another, but rather a leap to a qualitatively new level of civilization where human beings can develop their own needs and potential in solidarity with one another.

How, then, should the New Left prepare itself for such a radical transformation? (Given the limitations of space, I cannot really take up the problem of organization here, but will necessarily limit myself to a few tentative and general remarks.)

First of all, we have to be very clear about the fact that we live in an epoch of preventive counter-revolution. Capitalism is prepared both for civil and imperialist war. Because of capitalism's global machinery of control, the New Left — isolated from the conservative mass of the population — is left for now with the minimal-strategy of the united front: the cooperation of students, militant workers and left-liberal (even unpolitical) persons and groups. Such a united front is faced with the task of organizing protests against certain especially brutal acts of aggression and suppression by the regime. In general, the prevailing integration seems to preclude the formation of radical mass-parties, at least for the time being; the primary emphasis of radical organization would be, then, on local and regional bases (in the factories, offices, universities, apartment complexes); the task would include articulating the protest and mobilizing for concrete actions. Radical organization would not be concerned with organizing actions for the transition to socialism; nothing has hurt the Marxist groups in the New Left more than their language of reified and ritualized propaganda that assumes the existence of precisely that revolutionary consciousness it should be developing itself. The transition to socialism is not now on the agenda; the counter-revolution is dominant. Under these circumstances, a struggle against the worst tendencies becomes the focal point. Capitalism exposes itself daily in deeds and facts that could serve the ends of organized protest and political education: the preparation of new wars and interventions, political assassinations and attempted assassinations, brutal violations of civil rights, racism, intensified exploitation of the work force. The struggle will ordinarily emerge first in bourgeois-democratic forms (the election and support of liberal politicians, the distribution of suppressed information, the protest against environmental pollution, boycotts, etc.). Demands and actions that have been legitimately condemned in other situations as reformist, economistic, bourgeois-liberal politics can have a positive importance right now: late capitalism boasts a diminished tolerance threshold.

The expansion of the potential forces of revolution corresponds to the totalization of the revolutionary potential itself. I have indicated that in its heroic phase, the New Left was permeated with the conviction that the revolution of the 20th century would advance into dimensions that leave behind all that we know of earlier revolutions. On the one hand, it will mobilize "marginal groups" and social sectors that have not been politicized up until now; on the other hand, this revolution will be more than an economic and political revolution; it will be above all cultural. The vital need to revolutionize those values that have characterized class society are articulated in this new type of revolution.

In this context, the Women's Liberation Movement could become the "third force" of the revolution. It is clear, of course, that women do not constitute a separate "class"; they belong to all social sectors and classes, and the opposition of the sexes is biologically rather than class based; at the same time, of course, this opposition unfolds within a socio-historical context.

The history of civilization is the history of male domination, of patriarchy. Women's development has been determined and limited not only by the demands of the slave-owners, the feudal and bourgeois societies, but also and equally so by specifically male needs. It is clear that the male-female dichotomy grew into the opposition masculine-feminine. At the same time that women were being integrated on an ever-expanding scale into the process of material production as objects of exploitation and representatives of abstract work (unequal equality of exploitation), they were still expected to embody all those qualities of pacification, humanness, and a self-sacrifice that cannot develop in the capitalist work world without undermining its repressive basis, specifically the functioning of human relationships according to the laws of commodity production. For that reason, the domains and the particular "aura" of the feminine had to be strictly separated from the production sphere: "femininity" became a quality that was validated only within the four walls of the private dwelling and in the sexual sphere. Naturally, even this privatized sector remained part of the structure of male domination. This division and allocation of human resources was ultimately completely institutionalized and reproduced itself from generation to generation. Of course, these antagonistic social conditions then took on the appearance of a "natural" opposition: the opposition between innate qualities as the basis for a supposedly natural hierarchy, the domination of the masculine over the feminine.

We are at a moment in history when the aggressiveness and brutality of male-dominated society has reached a destructive high point, which cannot be offset through the development of the means of production and the rational domination of nature. The revolt of women against the roles forced upon them necessarily takes the form of a negation in the context of the existing society: it is the struggle against male domination waged on all levels of material and intellectual culture.

The negation is, of course, still abstract and incomplete at this point; it is a first and indeed essential step toward liberation; it is in no way liberation itself. Were the emancipatory impulse to remain on this level, the radical potential of this movement for the building of an alternative socialist society would be suppressed — in the end, the movement would have achieved nothing more than equality of domination.

The system itself would change only when women's opposition to patriarchy became effective on the basis of society: in the organization of the production process, in the nature of work and in the transformation of needs. The orientation of production toward receptivity, toward the

enjoyment of the fruits of laboring, toward an emancipation of the senses, toward pacification of society and nature would remove the foundation of masculine aggression in its most repressive and most profitable, productive form, namely in the reproduction of capitalism. What has been considered the *feminine* antithesis to masculine qualities in patriarchy, in reality a repressed social, historical alternative, would be the socialist alternative: the end to destructive and self-accelerating productivity, in order to create those conditions under which people are able to enjoy their sensuality and their intellect, and trust their emotions.

Would that be a "feminine socialism"? I think the expression is misleading. Ultimately, a social revolution that does away with male domination would end the allocation of specifically feminine characteristics to the woman as woman, would bring these qualities into all sectors of society, and develop them in work as well as in free time spheres. In that case, the emancipation of women would also be the emancipation of men — certainly a necessity for both.

In this stage of capitalism, the increasingly frenetic spiral of progress and destruction, domination and subjugation can only be brought to a halt if the radical Left succeeds in keeping these new dimensions of social change open, in articulating and mobilizing the very vital need for a qualitatively different way of life. We can discern the beginnings of a strategy and organization that reflect these necessities — the beginnings of a language adequate to these tasks, one that attempts to free itself from reification and ritualization. The New Left has not failed; failure characterizes those hangers-on who have fled from politics.

The New Left runs the risk — as does the Left generally — of being victimized by the reactionary-aggressive tendencies of late capitalism. These tendencies grow more severe as crisis spreads and forces the system to seek a way out through war and the suppression of opposition. The necessity of socialism is confronted with that of fascism once again. The classical alternative "socialism or barbarism" is more urgent today than ever before.

*Translated by Biddy Martin*