

Love and Refusal:

Contrasting Dialectical Interpretations and its Implications in the Works of Erich Fromm and
Herbert Marcuse, 1941-1969

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Introduction

In the mid-1950s Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse intellectually sparred with one another throughout several issues of the leftist journal, *Dissent*. The debate was so deeply personal that years later, when the two former colleagues found themselves riding on the same train, they rode in silence, and refused to acknowledge one another.¹ Conventional wisdom surrounding the polemical *Dissent* debate and Fromm and Marcuse's relationship in general perceives that the debate itself caused this rupture between them. Perhaps had the debate never occurred, the logic goes, the two could have had a relatively amicable relationship. To be sure, the debate, which took place from the summer of 1955 into the winter of 1956, has been rightly noted for its causticity and incivility. But the polemics of the debate itself can only go so far in understanding the depth of their intellectual differences and the resentment which Marcuse and Fromm harbored for each other.

While it clearly took on personal overtones, Fromm and Marcuse's dispute has almost solely been discussed as an intellectual disagreement of the relationship between Critical Theory and psychoanalysis, or scholars have minimized their differences altogether. However, I argue that the deterioration of their relationship, along with the particular ferocity of the debate itself, is indicative of a fundamental disparity in their diagnosis of modern society and the potential of liberation from its domination. This thesis was inspired, in part, by a desire to understand Marcuse and Fromm's opposing notions of freedom, which are never referenced within the debate. My research shows that far from being inconsequential, their divergent historical analyses are woven throughout their ideas on many different subjects across several decades. Compared to Fromm, Marcuse offers a far more pessimistic indictment of society, often arguing

¹ Stuart Jeffries, *Grand Hotel Abyss* (New York: Verso Books, 2016), 294.

that if hope is to be found anywhere, it is only in the smallest chance that the prevailing social order can be entirely demolished. Though his pessimism, somewhat ironically, actually contributes to the fact that he becomes a more influential figure among the New Left in the 1960s. Fromm, on the other hand, finds radical and subversive practices in the lives of everyday individuals, through acts of love and creativity, he argues, existence can be given meaning, and the anxieties of capitalism quelled. These differences are lent an even greater significance when properly contextualized historically, and especially within the lens of their competing dialectical interpretations of history, society, and freedom. In this thesis, I argue that their contrasting opinions on the possibility for political change are rooted in their dialectical methods and interpretations.

Marcuse and Fromm were part of a much larger community of German Jewish intellectuals who went into exile after the collapse of the Weimar Republic. For them, World War Two and the atrocities of the Holocaust sparked a necessary reconsideration of the Western intellectual tradition. For example, Theodor Adorno, the leading thinker of the purportedly Marxist Frankfurt School remarked in 1944, “In the most general sense of progressive thought, the enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant.”² In the minds of Adorno and many other Marxist thinkers, Marx’s theories had failed to save the Weimar Republic from fascism, as the failed German revolution of 1919 exhibited. The Bolshevik revolution in Russia, rather than delivering liberty, simply subjugated its people to a violent bureaucracy. And Western capitalist societies continued to exploit and alienate individuals. Adorno coined the term “Negative Dialectics” to help explain this seemingly hopeless situation.

² Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Verso Books, 2002), 3.

In contrast to Marx's optimistic belief in the inevitability of revolutionary change, Adorno offered a critique of capitalist society in which neither revolution nor political change were possible, let alone inevitable. The philosopher Karl Popper noted that "Marx's own condemnation of our society makes sense. For Marx's theory contains the promise of a better future. But the theory becomes vacuous and irresponsible if this promise is withdrawn, as it is by Adorno..."³ In the works of Adorno there was little potential for a better future.

Fromm and Marcuse, who were once both members of the Frankfurt School came out of this same tradition of Critical Theory and German Jewish intellectualism. They are both also responding to the same historical developments. But, unlike Adorno, the works of Fromm and Marcuse do not entirely withdraw the promise of a better future. In fact, Fromm and Marcuse are often considered relatively optimistic, especially when compared to the Frankfurt School and other critical theorists. Moreover, Adorno's prominence within the School has come to define its legacy in the minds of critics and supporters alike. His extraordinary pessimism left little room for political action, and consequently, so often the Frankfurt School is considered an amalgamation of aloof scholars with little concern for political participation or revolutionary action.⁴ But while both Fromm and Marcuse built from Adorno's theoretical work and the dialectical tradition, and while they shared his history of exile, they crafted a distinctive critical theory that permitted for the possible realization of new political potentialities, even as they thoroughly disagreed as to the methods and conditions under which such realization could occur. Aside from comprehending the theoretical gap between Marcuse and Fromm, I will attempt to expand our understanding of the relationship between Critical Theory and emancipatory politics.

³ Karl Popper, *The Myth of the Framework* (London: Routledge, 1994), 80

⁴ Jeffries, 8

Hegel's Dialectical Method

In order to understand the historical intellectual differences between Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse, one must understand dialectical analysis and the importance of dialectics to Critical Theory. Dialectics are often understood as originating in the works of the Ancient Greeks. Plato's version of dialectics, for instance, was a verbal argument where one side presents a certain view, or thesis, and that view is then subsequently challenged by an opposing side, which presents an antithesis. In response, the initial side adopts a more sophisticated position: the dialectic is the process by which throughout the argument the views expressed become increasingly more sophisticated.⁵

Hegel's dialectic was also a contradictory process between two opposing sides, but unlike Plato's dialectic which was focused on the process of argumentation, for Hegel the dialectic could be applied to "every logical concept."⁶ Reason, for instance, necessarily generates contradictions, and therefore could be understood dialectically. Hegel argued that the dialectical process consisted of three different stages, or "moments." The first moment is the moment of "fixity" in which any given concept has an apparent stable definition or determination (some call this thesis).⁷ The second he calls the "dialectical," or "negatively rational" moment (antithesis). At this moment in the process, the initial determination "passes through its opposite" due to its own "restrictedness," not entirely unlike Plato's own application of the dialectic to a verbal dialogue. However, for this process of negation Hegel uses the word *aufheben*, which, according to him, means both to cancel and to preserve; thus, whatever concept is at hand both negates

⁵ Julie E. Maybee, "Hegel's Dialectics" *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. Edward Zalta (Winter 2016 edition). <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2016/entries/hegel-dialectics>

⁶ Ibid

⁷ Ibid, though it must be noted that the familiar interpretation of the Hegelian Dialectic (thesis - antithesis - synthesis) is a disputed interpretation. While many of Hegel's dialectical interpretations fit this characterization, others do not. For the sake of simplicity, I will put these terms in parentheses in order to clarify and emphasize the basics of his dialectic, though I acknowledge that the use of these terms may oversimplify Hegel's thought.

itself and preserves itself. The third moment he calls the “speculative” or “positively rational” moment (synthesis); it is the negation and unification of the contradiction itself. In other words, the speculative moment is the “positive result of the dissolution” of the prior two determinations. Hegel argues that this result “is conceived as it is in truth, namely, as a *determinate* negation; a new form has thereby immediately arisen.”⁸ Because it “cancels” out the prior contradiction Hegel argues it is a negation, but at the same time it takes on a new form, and thus takes on a positive character—it has a “content.” For Hegel, the determinate result is the “true result” because “it is a new concept but one higher and richer than the preceding—richer because it negates or opposes the preceding and therefore contains it, and it contains even more than that, for it is the unity of itself and its opposite.”⁹ Indeed, Hegel necessarily believed that the dialectical process must reach an inevitable, and “better” end: history is an unfolding of dialectical processes reaching toward “self-knowledge,” which he called the “Absolute Spirit.”¹⁰

The “critical” nature of Hegel’s dialectic, which many scholars have remarked upon (including Marx, Marcuse and Adorno) comes from understanding concepts according to “negative” logic; in terms of what it is not. When a concept opposes, or negates another concept it contains that concept, as well as itself. Put simply, one may understand the color “blue” in relation to that which is not blue; the color blue is given meaning not only through its own “blueness” but also for the fact that it is not, for instance, orange. For Hegel, a concept is defined as much by what it is, as well as by what it is not, and especially by what it opposes.¹¹ For this reason, Hegel’s philosophy was considered a “negative philosophy.”¹²

⁸ Ibid

⁹ Ibid

¹⁰ Jeffries, 143

¹¹ Ibid

¹² Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution; Hegel and The Rise of Social Theory. With a new pref. A note on dialectic, by the author* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1960), vii

Standing Hegel on His Head

It is often argued that Marx's re-interpretation of the Hegelian dialectic "stood Hegel on his head."¹³ But Marx saw it differently, and argued that Hegel's version of dialectics is already "standing on its head" and therefore it "must be turned right side up again, if you would discover the rational kernel within the mystical shell."¹⁴ Indeed, Marx believed that the "mystifying" side of Hegel's dialectic was the part which he got wrong, for in its mystified form the dialectic "seemed to transfigure and to glorify the existing state of things."¹⁵ For Hegel, dialectical thought begins with just that- thought- whereas for Marx dialectics must originate not in the minds of individuals, but in the material world itself; hence why Marx's dialectic has since become known as "dialectical materialism." Marx's interpretation of the dialectical method implies the "inevitability" of its process just as much as the Hegelian dialectic implies its determinate end, but Marx renders the process explicitly political. He substitutes class struggle for Hegel's mystical notions of Spirit and Idea; he replaces the "synthesis" of Absolute Spirit with the liberation of humanity that can only occur with the realization of a communist society.

Moreover, this dialectical progress functioned rather similarly as it did for Hegel; as the deficiencies within capitalism begin to show, it reaches a "crisis" and the conditions it creates can cause, in Marx's view, a revolution or "negation." However, crucially for Marx this rests not on a conceptual interpretation but a concrete one, even a sociological one. In other words, the contradictions within capitalism do not negate themselves because of theoretical flaws but material flaws; the tangible, observable conditions which result from its own contradictions

¹³ Karl Marx, "Afterword to the Second German Edition," in *Marx's Capital*. London: Electric Book Company, 2000. Accessed April 2019. ProQuest Ebook Central., 34

¹⁴ Ibid, 34

¹⁵ Ibid, 34

become intolerable for people and then revolution becomes the only logical possible outcome. While Marx emphasized the importance of “proletarian consciousness,” that is, in short, those who suffer under capitalism must become aware of their own oppression and their position within society, he argued that such consciousness can only arise out of experiencing conditions—it cannot come originate from abstract philosophical ideas alone.

The Frankfurt School and Negative Dialectics

The Frankfurt School was a school of thought that came out of the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, founded in 1923. At one point or another its formal members included Max Horkheimer (who served as director of the Institute from 1930 until 1953), Theodor Adorno, Otto Kirchheimer, Franz Neumann, Jurgen Habermas, and, of course, Herbert Marcuse and Erich Fromm, though Fromm was officially removed from the Institute in 1939 due to ideological differences. Since the School was almost entirely comprised of Jewish thinkers and self-declared Marxists, once the Nazis came to power the members went into exile, first to Geneva, before eventually taking up residence at Columbia University in 1934.

Members of the school are most famous for creating and developing the philosophical approach known as “Critical Theory.” Max Horkheimer broadly defined a theory as critical insofar as it aims to “liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them.”¹⁶ In the words of Martin Jay, who authored a history of the School and its affiliates, “At the very heart of Critical Theory was an aversion to closed philosophical systems. To present it as such would therefore distort its essentially open-ended, probing, unfinished quality.”¹⁷ Nevertheless, critical

¹⁶ Max Horkheimer, *Critical Theory: Selected Essays* (New York: Continuum, 1972), 244.

¹⁷ Martin Jay, *The Dialectical Imagination: a History of the Frankfurt School and the Institute of Social Research, 1923-1950*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 41

theorists had many shared aspects to their thought, as Jay emphasizes; “Critical Theory, as its name implies, was expressed through a series of critiques of other thinkers and philosophical traditions. Its development was through dialogue, its genesis as dialectical as the method they purported to apply to social phenomena.”¹⁸ Often, critical theorists presented a Marxist background, many saw themselves as continuing, or responding to, the legacy of Hegel and Marx, and as a result, they often used a dialectical approach to forge many of their ideas.¹⁹

Perhaps the most specific and important legacies that came out of the school was the intellectual reconsideration of both Marx and Enlightenment-era thought as a whole while maintaining a Marxist critique of capitalism.²⁰ Critical theorists have become known for abandoning traditional Marxism, as they argued that the proletariat could no longer be counted on for revolution. In fact, many wondered if revolution could, or should, occur at all. Yet, they did not abandon the dialectical tradition set before them by Hegel and Marx.

Theodor Adorno’s version of dialectics, negative dialectics, removed the teleological aspect of dialectics, without removing its determinative character. As he succinctly states in his 1966 book *Negative Dialectics*, “*Negative Dialectics* is a phrase that flouts tradition. As early as Plato, dialectics meant to achieve something positive by means of negation... This book seeks to free dialectics from such affirmative traits without reducing its determinacy.”²¹ In other words, for Adorno history unfolded in contradictory ways, as it did for Hegel and Marx. However, this process of unfolding (or negation) was not progressing toward a “positive” end, or necessarily an end at all, as it did for these earlier thinkers. Instead, Adorno was suspicious of totality and

¹⁸ Ibid, 41

¹⁹ Rolf Wiggershaus, *The Frankfurt School: Its History, Theories and Political Significance* trans. Michael Robertson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994), 1-7

²⁰ Ibid, 5

²¹ Theodor Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), xix.

revolution, the two animating concepts in Marx's and Hegel's thought. He ultimately concluded that the "whole is the false"²² that indeed one is living, in the words of the Frankfurt School scholar Stuart Jeffries, in "a total system of delusion."²³ Negative dialectics serve as the basis of Critical Theory for many of its adherents. Its "purpose" (if it had one) was not to establish a philosophical doctrine, but to serve as a critique of other systems of philosophy and demonstrate their deficiencies. At best, it could only offer glimpses of insight outside of one's otherwise delusional existence.²⁴

Herbert Marcuse

Literature on the Frankfurt School often differentiates between the first-generation and second-generation Critical Theorists.²⁵ Of the first-generation, Marcuse was one of the last to formally join the Institute for Social Research. Recruited as a political philosopher, by the time he joined in 1933 the Institute had already fled to Geneva in order to avoid the Nazi threat. He is also one of the few critical theorists who did not go back to living in Europe, along with Fromm. Marcuse ended up living most of his life in the United States. In part because of the publication of his most famous work, *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse became known as the "Father of the New Left." Though Marcuse humbly insisted that "It would have been better to call me not the father, but the grandfather, of the New Left."²⁶ Yet, Marcuse's affinity for the movement was certainly reciprocated, as the Professor Marshall Berman's recollection of a concert at Brandeis University in the 1960s shows:

²² Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (New York: Verso Books, 1978), 50.

²³ Jeffries, 328

²⁴ Jeffries, 328-330

²⁵ Wiggershaus, 1

²⁶ Tom Bourne, "Herbert Marcuse: Grandfather of The New Left," *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning* 11:6 (1979): 36-64, doi: 10.1080/00091383.1979.10569693

Word suddenly came up the line: ‘Marcuse’s here!’ At once there was a hush, and people divided themselves up to clear a path. A tall, erect, vividly forceful man passed down the aisle, smiling here and there to friends, radiant yet curiously aloof, rather like an aristocrat who was a popular hero as well... The students held their breaths and gazed at him in awe. After he had got to his seat, they relaxed again, flux and chaos returned.²⁷

The irony of treating Marcuse like an aristocrat aside, Marcuse had a profound impact in the minds of counter-cultural activists. Indeed, as I will discuss in further depth in Chapter Three, he was a mentor for Angela Davis, the Black political activist, academic, political theorist and member of the Communist Party.

Davis wrote the preface for the third volume of Marcuse’s collected papers, *The New Left and the 1960s*, and offered insight into what may be one of his most important legacies. She wrote personally, “I have often publicly expressed my gratitude to Herbert Marcuse for teaching me that I did not have to choose between an academic and a political vocation that entailed making interventions around concrete social issues” even as Theodor Adorno characteristically told her that her desire to work directly in radical movements was “akin to a media studies scholar deciding to become a radio technician.”²⁸ Marcuse’s sympathy for radical protest movements would later cause a rift in his relationship with Adorno, but it also indicated Marcuse’s unique role as a theorist rooted in the German intellectual tradition and a supporter of the American countercultural movement. He often articulated complex and seemingly pessimistic theories, while at the same time he found hope in the oppositional movements comprised of ordinary students and activists. Davis and others believed that Marcuse offered a specific type of optimism, one that, writing in 2005, made her nostalgic “because so few people seem to believe that anybody has any revolutionary potential left.”²⁹ According to Davis, then,

²⁷ Jeffries, 310

²⁸ Angela Davis, preface to *The New Left and the 1960s*, ed. Douglas Kellner (New York: NY, Routledge, 2005), vii-xiv.

²⁹ Ibid, viii

Marcuse was not only a relatively optimistic thinker in respect to the Frankfurt School, but within the entire intellectual and political left of the late twentieth century.

Marcuse's legacy as a critical theorist is far from uniformly agreed upon however. He's been accused of being a "pre-Marxist" an "anti-Marxist" or just not a Marxist at all.³⁰ Berman, a Marxist thinker himself, was among an abundant number of thinkers who believed that Marcuse's pessimism was beyond redemption, and that he postulated a theory in which "no real change was possible."³¹ Yet, while Marcuse condemned society in its entirety, he also articulated optimistic, if utopian, alternatives to that society. His unique combination of pessimistic sociopolitical critique, on the one hand, with the fact that he maintained the potential for idealistic alternatives on the other, is a significant factor in his appeal to New Left activists.³² Though Marcuse's critics often dismiss him as a cynic, in doing so they ignore the hope contained within his theories. Similarly, I argue, alongside other writers including Stuart Jeffries, Douglas Kellner, and Rolf Wiggershaus, that he nonetheless remained a Marxist theorist.^{33 34 35}

Even though Marcuse is often understood in the context of the 1960s student movement, his contribution to dialectical thought is crucial to understanding both his intellectual legacy, and my argument. Adorno may have coined the term "negative dialectics" but as Stuart Jeffries demonstrates, "It was Marcuse who realised and theorised, even before Adorno, the power of negative thinking."³⁶ In *Reason and Revolution* (1941), his first book published in the United States, Marcuse wrote that negative thinking is the "driving power" of dialectical thought, used

³⁰ Douglas Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse and The Crisis of Marxism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 5

³¹ Jeffries, 310

³² Kellner, 288

³³ Jeffries, 9-10

³⁴ Wiggershaus, 104

³⁵ Kellner, 5

³⁶ Jeffries, 146

to determine the inadequacy of the prevailing reality.³⁷ His version of dialecticism is similar to Adorno's, and often offers a comparable pessimism, for he states "On theoretical as well as empirical grounds, the dialectical concept pronounces its own hopelessness."³⁸ Like Adorno, Marcuse believes that dialectical, and thus negative thinking, reveals "the radical falsity of the established forms of life," and that humans are not free but instead exist "in conditions of alienation, exist as other than they are."³⁹ On the basis of dialectical logic, he condemns the prevailing social order as a totality; facts, empirical observations, science and technology only exist within "stages of a single process," and are therefore subjective.⁴⁰ For Marcuse, society and capitalism are "negative" because they are repressive. However, unlike Adorno, Marcuse believes that dialectical analysis can serve a "liberating function" — one is not destined to live an alienated life in perpetuity. The internal contradictions which dialectical analysis unveils, Marcuse hopes, can lead to "the explosion and catastrophe of the established state of affairs."⁴¹ Which is, in simple terms, the negation of the negative (society). But if his theory implies any action, it is only with his vague, yet remarkably famous concept of "The Great Refusal," which he only describes as a refusal to "play the game" in which "the dice are loaded."⁴² The Great Refusal, despite its vagueness, is a wholly dialectical concept- it is a great negation.⁴³

³⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, viii-ix

*the new preface to this book, which this quote is pulled from, was written in 1960, however since Marcuse is merely reflecting on what he wrote in 1941 it is still most useful to understand in the context under which he first developed and explicated on his dialectical theory. In fact, if a more in-depth explanation of Marcuse's dialectical method is desired, this preface "A Note on Dialectic" serves as a useful introduction to Marcuse's comprehension of dialecticism.

³⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1964), 253.

³⁹ Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, xiii

⁴⁰ *Ibid*, viii

⁴¹ *Ibid*, ix

⁴² *Ibid*, x

⁴³ Jeffries, 319, as Jeffries points out, many scholars have noted the vagueness of "The Great Refusal."

Erich Fromm

Fromm was also a “first-generation” member of the Frankfurt School. Recruited as a psychoanalyst, Fromm formally joined in 1930, a few years before Marcuse, and therefore was able to live and work in Frankfurt before being forced into exile. Once in the United States, Fromm set himself apart from his reclusive colleagues by engaging with other faculty at Columbia University and forming relationships with New York psychoanalysts.⁴⁴ While many of his colleagues, including Adorno, did not particularly like life in the United States and isolated themselves, Fromm was comfortable in America, he learned to write English quicker and with greater ease, and he readily integrated into American society.⁴⁵ He even somewhat embraced American popular culture, though he remained decidedly critical of American society. In part because of this, along with financial problems at the Institute and intellectual differences, Fromm was removed from the Institute in 1939. Soon after, he became involved with a group of Neo-Freudians, including Harry Stack Sullivan and Karen Horney, both of whom Marcuse will later explicitly criticize in the *Dissent* debate.⁴⁶ Eventually, in 1950, he moved to Mexico, though he continued to spend most of his time working and teaching in the United States.⁴⁷

Fromm’s legacy is far more obscure than Marcuse’s, especially in regard to his association with the Frankfurt School. Despite the fact that Fromm is a lesser known figure within the School, prior to his dismissal he played a more significant role, in intellectual terms as well as material terms, than both Adorno and Marcuse.⁴⁸ Crucially, he helped relocate and re-

⁴⁴ Lawrence J. Friedman, *The Lives of Erich Fromm: Love’s Prophet* (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2013), 76.

⁴⁵ Jeffries, 291

⁴⁶ Friedman, 76-77

⁴⁷ Jeffries, 294

⁴⁸ Neil McLaughlin, "Origin Myths in the Social Sciences: Fromm, the Frankfurt School and the Emergence of Critical Theory." *The Canadian Journal of Sociology / Cahiers Canadiens De Sociologie* 24, no. 1 (1999): 109-139. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3341480>. [hereafter abbreviated as “Origin Myths”]

establish the Institute at Columbia University.⁴⁹ Initially, Fromm was recruited for his psychoanalytic work which offered an intellectual marriage between Marx and Freud. Though the ideological rift between Fromm and the rest of the School has been duly noted, many scholars have emphasized the similarities between Fromm's thought and the other critical theorists, as well as the more likely financial component which contributed to his termination.⁵⁰ His affiliation with the Frankfurt School, even after his departure, is hardly debatable, and Fromm is still considered a critical theorist by nearly all scholars within the field.⁵¹

Like Marcuse, Fromm is also known for his influence as a "public intellectual" in the 1960s, and he appealed to many student activists, though he did not do so to the same extent as Marcuse.⁵² Unlike other critical theorists, Fromm was active in electoral politics, and forged relationships with many different politicians. He was also an active member of the Democratic Socialist party in the United States, he helped found and fund Amnesty International, and he frequently spoke before the Foreign Relations Committee in the U.S. Senate. According to his biographer, Lawrence Friedman, President Kennedy even read his most respected book, *Escape From Freedom*. At the same time, Fromm "lived his life as a radical intellectual, creating and promoting powerful critiques of market culture, consumerism and mass dynamics of authoritarianism and narcissism."⁵³ In a way, Fromm attempted to balance serious intellectual work, rooted in a Marxist critique of capitalism, while remaining politically active within the

⁴⁹ Friedman, 46

⁵⁰ McLaughlin, "Origin Myths," 118

Horkheimer, and Adorno especially, leveled several charges against Fromm. In short, Adorno accused Fromm of "adhering to a mixture of social democracy and anarchism," and lacking a concept of dialectics.

⁵¹ Ibid, 118-119

⁵² Neil McLaughlin, "The Fromm-Marcuse Debate and The Future of Critical Theory," in *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Theory*, ed. Michael J. Thompson (New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 499 [hereafter abbreviated as "The Fromm-Marcuse Debate"]

⁵³ Ibid, 498

confines of governmental institutions. His reputation as an optimist, in that way, is more than appropriate.

Dialectics informed much of Fromm's intellectual work, as it did for Marcuse and many other critical theorists. Yet, Fromm's relationship to the dialectical method is far less explicit, and he does not postulate a "negative dialectic."⁵⁴ As the German psychoanalyst, and Fromm's estate manager, Rainer Funk, details, Fromm rarely mentioned dialectics explicitly in his work, and, unlike Marcuse, never wrote on his specific interpretation of dialectical thought.⁵⁵

Nevertheless, Fromm remains a dialectician.⁵⁶ In one of the few works where Fromm does mention dialecticism, *Escape From Freedom* (which is also widely considered his most intellectually significant work) he provides important insight into his dialectical interpretation, which he explicates through his concept of "negative" and "positive" freedom, "freedom from" and "freedom to," respectively. Freedom, according to Fromm, develops in contradictory ways. It is simultaneously a process of "growing strength and integration, mastery of nature, growing power of human reason, and growing solidarity with other human beings" as well as a process of "growing isolation, insecurity" and "feelings of one's own powerlessness and insignificance as an individual."⁵⁷ Like Marx, Fromm believed that these contradictions were intolerable and thus, ideally, the "economic, social and political conditions" will develop in such a way that realizes "positive freedom"; the freedom to live in "active solidarity with all men and his spontaneous activity, love and work, which unite him again with the world... as a free and independent individual."⁵⁸ Unlike Marx, however, Fromm argued that the resolution of these contradictions

⁵⁴ Friedman, 61

⁵⁵ Rainer Funk, "Erich Fromm's Concept of Man and Society in the Tradition of Dialectical Thinking" *Lecture at Università degli Studi di Firenze, Facoltà di Scienze Politiche* (1986), 5.

⁵⁶ *Ibid*, 1

⁵⁷ Erich Fromm, *Escape From Freedom* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1941), 35-36.

⁵⁸ *Ibid*, 36

will not necessarily materialize with the development of communist society (though it ideally would).⁵⁹ In fact, the intolerability of these contradictions may lead to an “escape.” Fascism, for Fromm, is one way in which individuals sought to escape the burden of the dialectical nature of freedom. Moreover, Fromm’s notion of positive freedom conflicts with Marcuse’s, who argued that freedom is “the continuous negation of that which threatens to deny (*aufheben*) freedom. Thus, freedom is essentially negative.”⁶⁰ In another sense, freedom is only “freedom from toil” and “freedom from repression” according to Marcuse.⁶¹ This different interpretation of freedom informs much of their contrasting dialectical interpretations of history as a whole.

The *Dissent* Debate

Initially the debate was received by the readers of *Dissent* as a dramatic occurrence, and in many ways, it was.⁶² The debate was defined by scathing personal condemnations, and harsh accusations of conservatism, nihilism, and conformism. As much as it was a dense intellectual disagreement between two theorists, it was also teeming with reciprocated personal attacks between two former colleagues. To be sure, even if one sees the debate as overstated (which many recent scholars do) both Marcuse and Fromm saw their academic careers and even social lives drastically change as a result; the former was thrust into relative fame and popularity, in part because of the debate and in part due to his extremely well-received publication of *One-Dimensional Man*, while the latter slipped into academic obscurity. Fromm’s reputation simply could not withstand Marcuse’s accusations of revisionism and conservatism, and, in the words of the Fromm scholar Neil McLaughlin, became a “forgotten intellectual.” McLaughlin asserted

⁵⁹ Ibid, 54

⁶⁰ Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, ix

⁶¹ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 223

⁶² McLaughlin, “The Fromm-Marcuse Debate,” 485

that “When the social protest movements of the 1960s created a large market for critical theory among radical students and intellectuals, this critique of Fromm was popularized by Herbert Marcuse and then accepted by a generation of New Left scholars.”⁶³ Even as Fromm went on to sell millions of copies of his books a clear consensus had emerged proclaiming Marcuse the victor. A slew of leftist scholarship for decades to come recapitulated and amplified Marcuse’s position against Fromm, and Fromm’s relationship with many New York intellectuals were even severed as result.⁶⁴ Thus, Fromm himself recognized he had “lost” at least in the court of academic opinion.⁶⁵

In 1986, however, the philosophy professor John Rickert wrote “The Fromm-Marcuse Debate Revisited,” a brilliant work that defended Fromm against Marcuse’s attacks, and argued that Fromm’s theories were not conformist. By methodically dissecting their arguments, Rickert argued that Fromm’s position was far sounder and more logical, and it indicated a more nuanced and accurate interpretation of Freud. During the next few decades that followed, in part because of Rickert’s work, Marcuse’s claims against Fromm have been almost entirely dismissed, while Fromm’s condemnation of Marcuse as an irredeemable pessimist has been met with a similar level of skepticism.⁶⁶ In the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Arnold Farr writes that “The Fromm/Marcuse debate represents an unfortunate moment in the history of critical theory where two major thinkers spoke right past each other.”⁶⁷ Fromm’s biographer similarly argued in 2013 that Marcuse’s arguments did not “nullify” Fromm’s position.⁶⁸ Neil McLaughlin, in his 2017 essay, took Rickert’s argument a step further, and argued that the differences between Fromm

⁶³ McLaughlin, “Origin Myths,” 121

⁶⁴ McLaughlin, “The Fromm-Marcuse Debate,” 487

⁶⁵ Ibid, 487

⁶⁶ McLaughlin, “The Fromm-Marcuse Debate,” 499

⁶⁷ Arnold Farr, “Herbert Marcuse” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* ed. Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2019 edition). <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/marcuse/>

⁶⁸ Friedman, 198

and Marcuse are insignificant. He asserted that “the consensus within so much of contemporary psychoanalysis has moved so far away from libido theory, the death instinct and theories of primal hordes” that the terms which Marcuse and Fromm debated are no longer relevant.⁶⁹ He eventually concluded:

Critical theorists today reading Fromm and Marcuse would do well to emphasize their commonalities not their polarized and personal conflict. Moving beyond the Fromm–Marcuse debate will help focus our energies on synthesizing a new critical theory by engaging the greatness and the limitations of both thinkers.⁷⁰

Despite the fact that the psychoanalytic dispute between Marcuse and Fromm has been scrutinized by a number of scholars, if not entirely nullified, the debate is still heavily featured in biographies on Marcuse, Fromm and the whole Frankfurt School. In Fromm’s biography, *The Lives of Erich Fromm*, for instance, it is frequently mentioned throughout the book, often in terms of the lasting damage it did to Fromm’s quest for academic respectability and his personal relationship with Marcuse.⁷¹ In Stuart Jeffries’ *Grand Hotel Abyss*, he similarly noted the harm it caused to Marcuse and Fromm’s relationship, but he also remarked that the debate was odd given the apparent intellectual similarities between the two.⁷² In Rolf Wiggershaus’ *The Frankfurt School*, he emphasized the long-term impact it had on the entire School; by Adorno’s death in 1969, he argued, the School had become so fractured due to disputes such as the one between Fromm and Marcuse that it had effectively disintegrated.⁷³ Yet, in works on Marcuse alone the conflict between them is referenced less often, perhaps because it had far less impact on Marcuse’s life and work.⁷⁴ For example, in Douglas Kellner’s *Herbert Marcuse and The Crisis of Marxism* their conflict is only alluded to once, and only to provide context for the epilogue of

⁶⁹ McLaughlin, “The Fromm-Marcuse Debate,” 497

⁷⁰ Ibid, 497

⁷¹ Friedman, xxiii, 184, 191-198, 208, 220, 373, 389

⁷² Jeffries, 291-294

⁷³ Wiggershaus, 653-654

⁷⁴ McLaughlin, “The Fromm-Marcuse Debate,” 486

Eros and Civilization, which had first ignited the dispute (the debate itself is not mentioned at all).⁷⁵ In fact, Fromm is discussed several times throughout the text, but almost always to note that they often wrote about the same topics and exhibited certain intellectual similarities.⁷⁶

The work of Rickert and McLaughlin is particularly important for recognizing both the overstated legacy of the debate, and the fact that Fromm and Marcuse's psychoanalytic disagreement is largely unfounded. Moreover, I agree with McLaughlin that the specific terms which they debate are almost entirely irrelevant to the field of psychoanalysis, as well as to Critical Theory. The Fromm-Marcuse debate is not helpful for understanding the intellectual differences between the two men. Yet, the debate's aggressive causticity indicates that there were important opposing theories between them, even if their opposition was misplaced within the debate itself. By contextualizing the way in which we understand these two thinkers outside of the debate and psychoanalysis, and within their conception of dialecticism, their differences become in fact, that much more pronounced.

In order to make my argument I have structured my thesis into three chapters. In the first chapter I acknowledge the mostly shared critique of capitalist society offered by Marcuse and Fromm, and then I present a detailed analysis of their dialectical methods, highlighting the different ways they interpret the development of capitalist society and its repression. In the second chapter I look at the implications of their competing dialectical methods, which reveals the incompatibility of their theoretical solutions as well as their notions of political emancipation. In the third and final chapter I examine the ways in which Fromm and Marcuse both engaged with the political world around them. I argue that this engagement is not only indicative of their role as outliers within the Frankfurt School, but also serves as the manifestation and

⁷⁵ Kellner, 191

⁷⁶ Kellner, 111-112, 126, 162-163, 267

representation of their dialectical thought. For both men dialecticism informed not only their contrasting theories for action and their critique of capitalist society, but their concrete political endeavors.

Chapter 1: Origins of Disagreement and The Dialectic of Reason

In 1941, Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse each published their first books in English. At the time, they were part of a large disparate community of German Jewish emigres living in exile, many in the United States, and many of whom were engaged in a heated debate about how the atrocities of totalitarianism could have occurred. At the point *Escape From Freedom* and *Reason and Revolution* were published the Third Reich had nearly entire control over the European continent- only Great Britain and an ever-shrinking portion of the Soviet Union remained as the last opponents to the Nazi juggernaut. Understanding this context is important for understanding the implications of their writing; Marcuse and Fromm were writing both to interpret and critique capitalist society and on the origins of European fascism, two phenomena which they saw as indelibly related. Their dialectical notions of history led them both to offer an indictment of modernity and capitalist society, which destroyed human relationships, isolated and alienated individuals, and objectified human beings. Modernity and capitalism were, at least in part, to blame for fascism. However, their dialectics also differed from each other, which led them to a disparate historical interpretation of fascism and analysis of the modern concept of "Reason." For Marcuse, reason led to the increasing rationalization and mechanization of society, in turn, it helped pave the way for totalitarian, technocratic control. Fromm argued contrastingly, that although capitalism and enlightenment thought created the conditions which gave fascism its appeal, fascism was a reaction to Enlightenment ideals such as reason, free thought, and individuality.

Following the end of World War Two, Theodor Adorno famously wrote, "there can be no poetry after Auschwitz."⁷⁷ Especially for German Jewish intellectuals, World War Two marked a

⁷⁷ Robert Kaufman, "Poetry's Ethics? Theodor W. Adorno and Robert Duncan on Aesthetic Illusion and Sociopolitical Delusion." *New German Critique*, no. 97 (2006): 73-118. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27669156>.

decisive shift in the ways in which they assessed concepts of modernity and Enlightenment era values. While many were reluctant to entirely abandon Enlightenment traditions, the barbarism of the Third Reich, which came out of the relatively liberal Weimar Republic, demanded an explanation. Perhaps, they wondered, fascism was not an aberration from the Enlightenment tradition, but it's almost inevitable apotheosis. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, published in 1944, Adorno questioned what may be the highest Enlightenment ideal; that of reason. Reason, for all of its purported objectiveness and logic, was also cold and calculating; Adorno argued that the functionalization of reason became a "purposiveness without purpose" which then "could be harnessed to any end."⁷⁸ Harbored within this concept of reason is the consideration of "human actions and desires exactly as if I were dealing with lines, planes, and bodies."⁷⁹ Consequently, the totalitarian order was able to put this into effect "in utter seriousness... Its canon is its own brutal efficiency."⁸⁰ In the enlightenment process, subjective morals and values came to be seen as sentimental, even superstitious, in favor of efficiency, logical calculations, and over-rationalization. Fascism, along with modernism and capitalism, was the product of reason, and therefore reason alone could not help explicate the horrors of Nazism, nor the hardships endured under capitalism.

Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse also theorized on the role of reason and Enlightenment values within modern society. In many ways they found common ground through the ways in which they criticized modernity, and capitalist society and its resilience, even as their exact language and dialectical methods differed. At the core of both their critiques, like many

*sometimes Adorno's quote is translated as "to write a poem after Auschwitz is barbaric" or "writing poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric".

⁷⁸Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 69

⁷⁹ Ibid, 67

⁸⁰ Ibid, 67-68

Marxists before them, is the concept that humankind is alienated under capitalism. Douglas Kellner, a Marcuse scholar, states that “the thrust of Marcuse’s analysis is that people are increasingly alienated from their fundamental potentiality for creative individuality.”⁸¹ Indeed, this idea is almost exactly the same as Fromm’s argument in *Escape From Freedom*, where he insists that civilization still does not allow for “the full realization of the freedom of personality.”⁸²

An essential problem of modern capitalism and modern thought, for both men, was that even though it espoused notions of individuality, this individuality was both flawed and illusory. Fromm saw the isolation, aloneness, and fear that was derived from capitalistic individuality, and Marcuse believed that positivistic notions of an individual able to “rise above” the repressive conditions before them was naive at best, and conformist at worst, akin to the “bootstrap mentality” that pervades throughout capitalist society. Moreover, they both believed that there existed a pervasive element of conformity, particularly within American capitalism, which precipitated a lack of authentic individuality. Fromm called this “automaton conformity”; it led individuals to “fall in step like a marching soldier or a worker on the endless belt.”⁸³ One felt “compelled to conform to seek his identity by continuous approval and recognition of others.”⁸⁴ Marcuse similarly argued that the individual is reduced under capitalism; concepts of choice are in fact preconditioned and restricted by capitalist society; one can merely choose between “Ford or General Motors, Wheaties or Cheerios.”⁸⁵ The few choices one does have is so often between material items that are nearly indistinguishable from each other.

⁸¹Kellner, 247

⁸² Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, 104

⁸³ Friedman, 111

⁸⁴ Ibid, 111

⁸⁵ Kellner, 248

This illusion of individuality brings with it grave consequences for Fromm and Marcuse. Fromm warned that “... although there are true individuals among us, this belief is an illusion in most cases and a dangerous one for that matter, as it blocks the removal of those conditions that are responsible for this state of affairs.”⁸⁶ Marcuse similarly argued that individualistic notions of the “productive realization of the personality, of care, responsibility, and respect for one's fellow men, of productive love and happiness” is impossible within capitalist society, a society “of total alienation, dominated by the commodity relations of the ‘market.’”⁸⁷ To Marcuse, pretending otherwise is not only fallacious, but can in fact be repressive, for the encouragement of those values is its own form of repression in capitalist society.⁸⁸

The touchstone of their shared critique of modernity rests on what they deem as the “unfreedom” of capitalist society, even though they disagreed on the nature of freedom. Along with the illusion of choice, both Fromm and Marcuse bore witness to the oppressive nature of facts, common sense, and science, which restricts freedom of thought and action. Fromm argued that throughout history Western society has increasingly won freedoms from traditional “external restraints.”⁸⁹ This led to the establishment of such concepts as the freedom of religion and freedom of speech, which are according to Fromm, “negative” freedoms. However, while these freedoms are notable gains, Fromm observed that “new enemies of a different nature have arisen.”⁹⁰ For example, though society has established freedom of religion, “the modern individual has lost to a great extent the inner capacity to have faith in anything which is not provable by the method of the natural sciences.”⁹¹ Similarly, he recognized the repressive

⁸⁶ Ibid, 186

⁸⁷ Marcuse, “The Social Implications of Freudian Revisionism,” *Dissent* (Summer 1955): 231

⁸⁸ Herbert Marcuse “Repressive Tolerance” in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* ed. Robert Paul Wolff (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1965), 83-84

⁸⁹ Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, 10

⁹⁰ Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, 104

⁹¹ Fromm, *Escape From Freedom* 105

“anonymous authorities” of common sense and public opinion, which prevents individuals from thinking originally, or differently from what “everybody else thinks and says.”⁹² For Fromm, an essential problem modernity posed was the lack of these “positive freedoms,” freedoms that would otherwise enable us to “realize our own individual self.” While some people, he argued, advocate for increasing and granting more negative freedoms, such freedoms merely remove external restraints on the individual, they do not allow for individuals to act freely in terms of their own ability to think and act spontaneously and originally.⁹³

Although Marcuse did not agree with Fromm’s emphasis on the necessity for positive freedom, he did recognize the repressive nature of “facts.” Throughout much of his writings Marcuse expressed opposition to facts, science, and empiricism, which he labels “positivistic.” In fact, he described his version of negative dialectics as in direct opposition to those positive facets of modernity, saying “the power of negative thinking is the driving power of dialectical thought, used as a tool for analyzing the world of facts in terms of its internal inadequacy.”⁹⁴ In this world, common sense and science are elevated above criticism, and echoing Fromm’s theory, Marcuse argued acts as repressive tools of modern capitalist society. The result of this, for both men, is that modern society, and the rationalism that pervades throughout prevents actual freedom of thought and inquiry; one can critique the “prevailing social order” only on “factual” terms, that is, especially for Marcuse, on its own terms.

As a result of this lack of authentic freedom, in Marcuse’s words, humanity is living in a “state of privation that forces the subject to seek remedy.”⁹⁵ For both Fromm and Marcuse, these remedies were often obtained in insufficient and capitalistic ways, often by embracing the total

⁹² Ibid, 105

⁹³ Ibid, 106

⁹⁴ Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, viii

⁹⁵ Ibid, 66

commodification of not only “things” but of human relationships, and even one’s own self. By seeking certain remedies, the harmful effects become only further exacerbated. Marcuse believed, for instance, that we not only fetishize commodities but we actually commodify ourselves; “the people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment.”⁹⁶ Modern capitalism, to Marcuse, does not permit individuals to realize the full potential of their personality, instead it only offers a sense of identity and false individualism through commodification, which helps to assuage discontent. Though we may not be free, the argument goes, at least we have nice things.

Fromm was equally concerned with the “remedies” which individuals sought to mitigate the ills of capitalism— *Escape From Freedom* was almost solely concerned with describing this phenomenon. For Fromm, the problems of negative freedom are dialectical; it simultaneously reduces individual agency but it also further isolates and alienates individuals. One is simultaneously alone in the world, but still utterly powerless, subjected to forces beyond their control. Consequently, humans attempt to “escape” from this freedom. In 1941, Fromm explicitly argued that fascism offered one such escape. But free market capitalism also offers its own form of escape, again through total commodification. For example, one may adapt to the market economy “by becoming detached from authentic emotions, truth, and conviction.” Fromm contended, similarly to Marcuse, that for this person “everything is transformed into a commodity, not only things but the person himself, his physical energy, his skills, his knowledge, his opinions, his feelings, even his smiles.”⁹⁷ Both Fromm and Marcuse maintained that capitalism is hostile to traits such as love, creativity, and authentic individuality. But

⁹⁶ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 9

⁹⁷ Fromm, *The Sane Society*, (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1955), 141ff

capitalism offers solutions, however insufficient, to its own repressiveness, in this case by commodifying human relationships.

Toward a Critique of Fascism and Reason

In the 1950s and 1960s Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse would come to contemplate and diagnose the problems faced by democratic societies in the postwar era. Yet, in the 1940s, they were emphasizing what they saw as an especially grave consequence of modernity and capitalism; the rise of fascism. Like Adorno and other critical theorists, they understood fascism's rise in dialectical terms, history was not a random sequence of events but a constant development of its own contradictions. Crucially, however, Fromm and Marcuse interpreted this dialectical process in vastly different ways. For Marcuse, fascism was not a complete betrayal of liberal, modern Western ideas and institutions, including capitalism and bourgeois democracy, but was in fact a "determinate" result of its own legacy; a product of "Reason." For Fromm, fascism was a reaction to the dialectical tension that resulted from the "positive" and "negative" character of freedom. Reason, for Fromm, was a positive outcome of the freedoms established by the enlightenment. Fascism, on the other hand, was a rejection of reason.

In the preface, Fromm explained the thesis to *Escape From Freedom*, which he reiterated many times throughout his book:

It is the thesis of this book that modern man, freed from the bonds of pre-individualistic society, which simultaneously gave him security and limited him, has not gained freedom in the positive sense of the realization of his individual self; that is, the expression of his intellectual, emotional and sensuous potentialities. Freedom, though it has brought him independence and rationality, has made him isolate and, thereby, anxious and powerless. This isolation is unbearable and the alternatives he is confronted with are either to escape from the burden of his freedom into new dependencies and submission, or to advance to the full realization of positive freedom which is based upon the uniqueness and individuality of man.⁹⁸

⁹⁸ Fromm, *Escape from Freedom*, viii

Fromm was particularly concerned with the psychological effects of the dialectical nature of freedom; the ability for humans to reason, which he significantly emphasized, on the one hand, and the anxiety humans experience as a result on the other. Negative freedom, that is the severing of external restraints, can precipitate both sentiments. The isolating character of negative freedom, which Fromm argued is the only way Enlightenment thinkers often understand freedom, causes people to seek refuge from its harmful effects. This “escape” can take many forms, and his historical analysis showed that such escapes vary depending on the historical setting. During the renaissance and early capitalism, for example, society was upended, and the lower classes in particular found themselves uncertain of their role in the world. As a result, Fromm argued that many found comfort in the “authoritarianism” offered by Luther and Calvin; the Protestant Reformation, he reasoned, like the rise of Nazism, provided security through submission.⁹⁹

In fact, the ways in which mankind repeatedly attempts to escape the burden of negative freedom is historically and dialectically homologous, he insisted, for instance, “Once man was ready to become nothing but the means for the glory of a God who represented neither justice nor love, he was sufficiently prepared to accept the role of a servant to the economic machine- and eventually a ‘Fürher.’”¹⁰⁰ Therefore, the destruction of human relationships under capitalism, its previously mentioned “commodification,” and its competitive nature pitted humans against each other. As Fromm argued, “All human relationships were poisoned by this fierce life-and-death struggle for the maintenance of power and wealth.”¹⁰¹ Once these relationships were

⁹⁹ Lutheranism and Calvinism, which Fromm compares to Nazism, demanded obedience, and the complete submission to God’s will. Calvinism in particular demanded an “escape from freedom” through the idea of predetermination, which completely removed any possible feelings of doubt, one is born either damned, or saved.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 111

¹⁰¹ Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, 48

sufficiently poisoned the conditions were manifest— put simply, humanity’s willingness to submit to the unfreedom and inhumanity of capitalism in turn facilitated an eventual submission to fascism.

However, Fromm also diverged somewhat from Adorno’s dialectical analysis of Enlightenment and fascism, as well as Marcuse’s. Even though the Enlightenment laid the foundations for fascism, primarily as it contributed to the expansion of capitalism, for Fromm, fascism was also a reaction against the Enlightenment. Hence his dialectical interpretation; the conditions which the Enlightenment helped to create, in the name of freedom, were both positive and negative. Though man became isolated, man also became “rational” and “responsible.”¹⁰² Fascism was a response not to the “positive” character of freedom, but to its “negative” character, and as a result, fascism rejected entirely the positive character of freedom, which in many ways Fromm defines in accordance with Enlightenment ideals. As Fromm himself points out, he defined it in accordance with many of the values espoused by humanist philosophy, values such as “human dignity, individuality, and strength.”¹⁰³ Fascism, of course, remains in opposition to those values.

Thus, the Enlightenment, and even capitalism, is not *entirely* bad, it is only bad insofar as it helped engender feelings of isolation and powerlessness (negative freedom). The reverse is also true; it is good insofar as it helped increase positive freedom. He argued, “...capitalism not only freed man from traditional bonds, but it also contributed tremendously to the increasing of *positive freedom*, to the growth of an active, critical, responsible self.”¹⁰⁴ The severing of primary, external ties, allowed individuals to develop their capabilities to reason, which for

¹⁰² Ibid, 49

¹⁰³ Ibid, 48

¹⁰⁴ Ibid, 108, emphasis in original text

Fromm was an important historical and psychological development.¹⁰⁵ Fascism is an abandonment of this ability to reason because it requires “blind obedience to a leader.”¹⁰⁶ Reason itself is not fascism’s cause, but in fact one of the few beneficial, indeed “positive,” consequences of the Enlightenment and capitalism. In Fromm’s thought, fascism is a reaction to this development of reason, rather than its culmination; Fascism accentuated the negative, rather than the positive.

Marcuse postulated a different diagnosis of fascism, however, and instead argued that fascism arose not out of a deficiency of positive freedom, but in part because of a nineteenth century philosophical inclination toward positivism and empiricism, which resided on Enlightenment notions of “reason.”¹⁰⁷ In fact, his entire conception of “negative dialectics” was in opposition toward the positive/positivist way of thinking he believed was rooted in the Enlightenment. For Marcuse, and much of the Frankfurt School, positivistic “ideologies”¹⁰⁸ were also affirmative ideologies because any criticism that results from them are only done so in accordance with a perceived reality. This “factual” reality, in dialectical terms, is only a “stage of a single process— a process in which subject and object are so joined that truth can be determined only within the subject-object totality.”¹⁰⁹ In other words, positivism and “positive thinking” is also undialectical thinking, it ignores the subjectivity that “constitutes the objective world” through ignoring dialectical and historical processes, but more importantly through

¹⁰⁵ Ibid, 35

¹⁰⁶ Ibid, 211

¹⁰⁷ Positivism is defined as “a philosophical system that holds that every rationally justifiable assertion can be scientifically verified or is capable of logical or mathematical proof, and that therefore rejects metaphysics and theism.” Marcuse argues that positivism was defined in opposition to Hegel’s “negative” philosophy, which was seen as metaphysical.

¹⁰⁸ Marcuse, and much of the Frankfurt School saw positivism, empiricism, positive philosophy, and even science as subjective ideologies.

¹⁰⁹ Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, vii

failing to realize “that which is real opposes and denies the potentialities inherent in itself.”¹¹⁰

Moreover, this positivity renders negative thinking as merely “speculative,” unrealistic, or even utopian.¹¹¹

Indeed, positive thinking, to Marcuse, is “not merely immoral; it is false.”¹¹² It is faulty thinking namely because it ignores the potentials which “common sense” and the established facts rule out. It is immoral because it leads to a “distrust of all values which transcend the facts of observation.”¹¹³ Yet, it is also immoral for very tangible reasons, Marcuse argued that fascist interpretations of Hegel, for instance, were made possible due to positive flaws in Hegel’s own philosophy. He claimed:

Dialectical thought has not hindered Hegel from developing his philosophy into a neat and comprehensive system which, in the end, accentuates the positive emphatically. I believe it is the idea of Reason itself which is the undialectical element in Hegel’s philosophy. This idea of Reason comprehends everything and ultimately absolves everything, because it has its place and function in the whole, and the whole is beyond good and evil, truth and falsehood. It may even be justifiable, logically as well as historically, to define Reason in terms which include slavery, the Inquisition, child labor, concentration camps, gas chambers, and nuclear preparedness.¹¹⁴

For example, Marcuse believed that the Italian fascists leaned towards Hegel’s position in efforts to achieve “an efficient bureaucracy, a centralized administration, a rationalized industry, and a complete military preparedness...” which Marcuse defines as “positive” tasks.¹¹⁵ In the context of 1941, the danger of positivity lies in excusing, even providing the justification for fascism and totalitarianism.

Hegel’s concept of reason was especially problematic to Marcuse. Often it takes on both an ambiguous and objective character. Marcuse argued that Hegel believed in the existence of

¹¹⁰ Ibid, x

¹¹¹ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 172

¹¹² Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, xiii

¹¹³ Herbert Marcuse, “Some Implications of Modern Technology” in *Studies in Philosophy and Social Science* 9, no. 3 (1941): 145

¹¹⁴ Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, xii

¹¹⁵ Ibid, 403

“objective concepts and principles” that “denote universally valid conditions and norms.” The totality of these concepts, according to Marcuse, Hegel called reason.¹¹⁶ Indeed, reason can then justify both liberation and enslavement. In fact, reason forms the basis for positivist ways of thinking, and in practical terms, the rationalization and mechanization of society. Under capitalism, reason justified the rational and technical organization of society in the name of efficiency, and as a result Marcuse argued, submission to this society became the only reasonable act. In one essay written in 1941 he observed:

The system of life created by modern industry is one of the highest expediency, convenience and efficiency. Reason, once defined in these terms, becomes equivalent to an activity which perpetuates this world. Rational behavior becomes identical with a matter-of-factness which teaches reasonable submissiveness and thus guarantees getting along in the prevailing order.¹¹⁷

For Marcuse, this technical reason eventually came to justify the worst endeavors of the Third Reich, which was sustained “by the ingenious manipulation of the power inherent in technology: the intensification of labor, propaganda, the training of youths and workers, the organization of the governmental, industrial and party bureaucracy — all of which constitute the daily implements of terror — follow the lines of greatest technological efficiency.”¹¹⁸ This was made possible due to the simultaneous rise of positivism which “promoted the march of free thought, especially in the natural sciences.”¹¹⁹ Reason “as the developing and applied knowledge of man — as ‘free thought’ — was instrumental in creating the world we live in” and as such it was also “instrumental in sustaining injustice, toil and suffering.”¹²⁰ In a way, the reification of reason as an ambiguous and idealistic term under capitalism came to render it yet another repressive tool of the prevailing social order, a justification of injustice and the objectification of humans.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 7

¹¹⁷ Marcuse, “Some Social Implications of Modern Technology,” 145

¹¹⁸ Ibid, 139

¹¹⁹ Reason and Revolution, 327

¹²⁰ Ibid, xiii

In his analysis of reason, however, Marcuse remained a dialectician. He argued, somewhat paradoxically, that reason does not abdicate “its claim to confront reality with the truth about reality.”¹²¹ In fact, “Reason and Reason alone, contains its own corrective.”¹²² It is difficult to understand the forcefulness of Marcuse’s critique of reason in light of his simultaneous reverence for it, but his position is useful for understanding not only his dialectical methods but also the crucial differences between his thought and Fromm’s. Marcuse’s dialectical interpretation of reason shows that it is not only contradictory, but also that reason itself tends toward its own negation. Fascism is the perfect example of the contradictory tendency of reason, for that which is “reasonable” becomes increasingly “unreasonable.” Marcuse argued: “Faced with fascist barbarism, everyone knows what freedom means, and everyone is aware of the irrationality in the prevailing rationality.”¹²³ The apparent rationality of totalitarian society is rendered irrational as it slips into barbarism.

Of course, according to Marcuse, the only way to determine its unreasonableness is through the use of reason itself. Reason cannot be substituted for “extrarational” standards but instead must be driven “to recognize the extent to which it is still unreasonable.”¹²⁴ Hegel’s (and other thinker’s) use of reason then, was only flawed insofar as they “accepted the specific historical form of reason reached at his time as *the* reality of Reason.”¹²⁵ In other words, reason itself is not spurious, but the context is in which it is “defined and proclaimed.”¹²⁶ Because it was defined, indeed advanced by the prevailing social order, it became itself repressive; an accessory “to the enslavement of man.”¹²⁷

¹²¹ Ibid, xii

¹²² Ibid, xiii

¹²³ Marcuse, “Some Social Implications of Modern Technology,” 159

¹²⁴ Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, xiii

¹²⁵ Ibid, xiii

¹²⁶ Marcuse, “The Social Implications of Freudian Revisionism,” 233

¹²⁷ Ibid, 233

If we follow Marcuse's logic, Fromm's use of reason was equally flawed. As Fromm himself pointed out, society and his conception of reason are compatible, society can even promote reason.¹²⁸ But in Marcuse's negative dialectical terms, so long as "the negative," that is, the negation of freedom by repressive society, persists, its purported values will necessarily be repressive as well. Moreover, the critical nature of reason, that is the "negative" aspect to it and the aspect to it which Marcuse values, is "incompatible" with the prevailing social order. In order to make it compatible critical reason must become technical reason, or "positive" reason. In Marcuse's thought capitalist society cannot encourage critical, or "negative" reason, for that would necessitate its destruction; it can only exist in opposition to repressive society.

For Marcuse, Fromm's conception of reason was necessarily the acceptance of its traditional definition because Fromm argued that capitalism, for all of its brutality, still provoked the growth of an individual's capacity to reason, not as an opposing force, but as a supportive force. In Marcuse's terms, Fromm's conception of reason erred in its positivism. It is perhaps less surprising then, that Marcuse would wield his own dialectical logic against Fromm in the *Dissent* debate, arguing that Fromm fails to acknowledge the "totality" of technocratic rational society, and as a result adheres to the conformist notion "accentuate the positive."¹²⁹ In light of both men's aforementioned position on individuality, in which the individual is incapable of transcending societal conditions, encouraging the individual to reason without removing the repressive conditions which prevent him from doing so is "faulty logic" and merely lends a fictitious legitimacy to the social order. In Marcuse's view, Fromm was abandoning this dialectical position.

¹²⁸ Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, 13, 36, 106,

¹²⁹ Marcuse, "Some Social Implications of Freudian Revisionism," 233

Marcuse's dialectical position will eventually come to serve as the thesis of *One-Dimensional Man*, where he wrote "technical progress, extended to a whole system of domination and coordination, creates forms of life (and of power) which appear to reconcile the forces opposing the system and to defeat or refute all protest in the name of the historical prospects of freedom from toil and domination."¹³⁰ In light of this, there is a tension within Marcuse's thought which Fromm avoided: Marcuse's own use of reason, if he is right, must be compatible with this system of domination. Perhaps one of the most famous Marcuse critics, Alasdair MacIntyre, astutely wrote:

The central oddity of *One-Dimensional Man* is perhaps that it should have been written at all. For if its thesis were true, then we should have to ask how the book came to have been written and we would certainly have to inquire whether it would find any readers. Or rather, to the extent that the book does find readers, to that extent Marcuse's thesis does not hold.¹³¹

Fromm's own position is then lent a significant legitimacy; in many ways Marcuse is the foil to his own argument, the embodiment of critical reason in a society that, according to him, is incompatible with critical reason. Of course, this tension is a dialectical one, even if it is apparently paradoxical. Still, if Fromm appears somewhat less critical of capitalist society — a charge Marcuse levied against him in the *Dissent* debate — for Fromm admitted to both its negative and positive aspects, he also offered a dialectical analysis that avoids this contradiction. Moreover, in Fromm's own analysis of Reason, he criticized capitalist society without arguing against the very tool he wields to articulate his criticism. Indeed, he showed how, at the same time, modern society can both impede on individual reason and promote individual reason, whereas Marcuse believes reason itself is dialectical, and thus flawed, and even repressive. In the next chapter, I demonstrate how Marcuse will attempt to reconcile this contradiction using

¹³⁰ Alasdair MacIntyre, *Herbert Marcuse* ed. Frank Kermode (New York: The Viking Press, 1970), 70

¹³¹ *Ibid*, 70

negative dialectics to offer a “chance for alternatives” while Fromm, using his own version of dialectics, will attempt to offer solutions that mitigate the harmful effects of negative freedom, and thereby emphasize positive freedom and the individual’s capacity to reason.

Chapter 2: Potentialities at Conflict

In the last chapter I established that despite sharing a broad critique of modernity and late capitalist society, Erich Fromm and Herbert Marcuse offered conflicting interpretations of human history, freedom, and especially reason. In this chapter, I argue that as a result of the differences in how they interpreted the dialectical progress of history they arrived at vastly different “answers” and prescriptions for human action to combat the perceived ills of capitalism. While they both attempted to paint a picture of a better future, the pictures appear spectacularly different. The fact that Marcuse and Fromm even endeavored to answer this question actually reveals them as outliers within the Frankfurt School; few Frankfurt School thinkers dared to imagine the possibility for a better future, let alone imagine what that future could look like. As leading thinkers of the Frankfurt School, Adorno and Horkheimer undoubtedly rejected the potential for revolutionary change, and even the notion that action (individual or collective) could curb the harmful effects of capitalism. Although that pessimism also influenced Marcuse in particular, it did not prevent him from articulating a relatively optimistic alternative for capitalist society, although his alternative demanded an absolute departure from capitalism. This departure Marcuse called The Great Refusal, and in alignment with his negative dialectics, called for an absolute negation of the present society. Fromm, because he saw dialectics in a more traditional way that hearkened back to Hegel and Marx, with the positive existing within the negative, he instead argued to emphasize the possibility for positive freedom and change in small and incremental ways. Similarly, his belief in the Enlightenment concept of reason lends him to offer solutions rooted in Enlightenment notions. He did not necessarily argue to totally dispose of capitalism, but instead to embrace the contradictory elements within capitalism, the anti-capitalist and the human aspects of society.

Spontaneous Activity, Love and Happiness

Fromm's argument finds its earliest formulations in 1941, in *Escape From Freedom*. Fromm had originally intended *Escape From Freedom* to serve as an analysis and a diagnosis, rather than a solution, or prescription. Allegedly, he based his writing on "painstaking observations" and he never meant to design nor argue for a particular political or social order.¹³² Nevertheless, he drew conclusions that brought with them implications for human action and serve as the germ for his prescriptive theories which he thoroughly detailed about fifteen years later in *The Sane Society* (1955), and *The Art of Loving* (1956).

In *Escape From Freedom* Fromm concluded that positive freedom would at its best, allow for man's "active solidarity with all men and his spontaneous activity, love and work, which unite him again with the world, not by primary ties but as a free and independent individual."¹³³ Under capitalism, love, fulfilling work, and especially spontaneous activity are restricted. Indeed, there are many methods, according to Fromm, that can be applied in order to facilitate an increase of positive freedom and thereby allow for spontaneous activity. However, throughout *Escape From Freedom*, Fromm holds that in order to create a society that encourages the aforementioned values, one must simply begin to act spontaneously, insofar as they are able to. Such action does not require a grand altering of the social order; it does not require revolution.¹³⁴

Fromm argued that the restriction of spontaneous activity was one of the most harmful effects of capitalist society. It is unsurprising, then, that Fromm believed its encouragement

¹³² Henry S. Kariel, "The Normative Pattern of Erich Fromm's *Escape from Freedom*," *The Journal of Politics* 19, no. 4 (1957): 640 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2126955>.

¹³³ Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, 36

¹³⁴ Kariel, 640

could serve as the solution to “the problem of freedom.” He claimed, “The basic dichotomy that is inherent in freedom- the birth of individuality and the pain of aloneness- is dissolved on a higher plane by man’s spontaneous action.”¹³⁵ Importantly, he described this in dialectical terms; spontaneous action is the resolution of otherwise irresolvable contradictions, since it allows humans to act as individuals without isolating them. Spontaneous action, in simple terms, is the dialectical synthesis of modern individuality and the isolation it engenders. While Fromm is hesitant here to articulate how one achieves this resolution of thesis (individuality) and antithesis (aloneness), he did put forth the notion that spontaneous activity manifests itself most clearly in love:

Spontaneous activity is the one way in which man can overcome the terror of aloneness without sacrificing the integrity of his self; for in the spontaneous realization of the self man unites himself anew with the world - with man, nature, and himself. Love is the foremost component of such spontaneity; not love as the dissolution of the self in another person, not love as the possession of another person, but love as spontaneous affirmation of others, as the union of the individual with others on the basis of the preservation of the individual self.¹³⁶

Fromm will later dedicate an entire book to this concept of love, which he held throughout his career as the most “vital act of rebellion.”¹³⁷ But, there is another component for spontaneous activity that is crucial to understanding his solution: work.

Work has always played a unique role in the theories of professed Marxists. At once both the subject of obvious criticism, for all of its oppression and alienation, it was also seen as necessary to a communist society, and even more necessary for human fulfillment. Marx himself believed as much, and Fromm remained far more loyal to that concept than other members of the Frankfurt School. He argued:

Work is the other component [of spontaneous action]; not work as a compulsive activity in order to escape aloneness, not work as a relationship to nature which is partly one of dominating her,

¹³⁵ Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, 261

¹³⁶ Ibid, 261

¹³⁷ Fromm, Erich Fromm, “The Human Implications of Instinctivistic ‘Radicalism’” *Dissent Magazine* (Fall 1955), 348 [hereafter abbreviated as “The Human Implications”]

partly one of worship of and enslavement by the very products of man's hands, but work as creation in which man becomes one with nature in the act of creation.¹³⁸

Of course, this kind of unalienated, fulfilling work is entirely different from that which most of us know today, but it is not completely foreign to us either. In *The Sane Society*, Fromm further developed this idea. He admitted, for example, “most of us assume that the kind of work current in our society, namely, alienated work, is the only kind there is...” but he asked his reader to observe children, and acknowledge other kinds of work to convince us “that we long to spend our energy on something meaningful, that we feel refreshed if we can do so, and that we are quite willing to accept rational authority if what we are doing makes sense.”¹³⁹ As a matter of fact, Fromm will only further embrace this reverence for work, in 1961 he wrote in *Marx's Concept of Man*:

Man is alive only inasmuch as he is productive, inasmuch as he grasps the world outside of himself in the act of expressing his own specific human powers, and of grasping the world with these powers. Inasmuch as man is not productive, inasmuch as he is receptive and passive, he is nothing, he is dead.¹⁴⁰

His conviction expressed here plays a fundamental role in constructing his vision for alternatives. In fact, *The Sane Society* reads more like an immediate blueprint for action than it does a critical condemnation of modern society.

In the last section of his book, “Roads to Sanity” Fromm argued that “the only constructive solution is that of Socialism” which required for him, a complete “reorganization of our economic and social system” to create “a social order in which human solidarity, reason and productiveness are furthered rather than hobbled.”¹⁴¹ Of course, the type of socialism Fromm envisioned is vastly different from that of Stalinism, or authoritarian communism, which Fromm

¹³⁸ Ibid, 263

¹³⁹ Erich Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 298-299

¹⁴⁰ Erich Fromm, *Marx's Concept of Man: Including 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts'* (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 26

¹⁴¹ Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 277

repeatedly reminded his reader of throughout *Sane Society*. Instead, he called his vision “socialist humanism.”¹⁴² Indeed, he is equally critical of the brand of communism practiced in the Soviet Union at the time as he is of capitalism in the west, if not more so.

Despite arguing for, or at least implying that, a new social order is necessary to realize socialist humanism, he dedicated a sizable portion of his book toward articulating “practical suggestions” and what he called a “political transformation.”¹⁴³ Nearly all of the suggestions he made are possible under the confines of capitalism, and Marcuse will eventually argue, in the *Dissent* debate, they are even supported by and supportive of capitalist values.¹⁴⁴ For example, Fromm asserted pointedly that in order to increase workers participation, and thus alleviate some of the harmful effects of alienation, workers should organize and buy up stocks of their own company, or have their labor union leaders buy stocks on their behalf.¹⁴⁵ Their work, in Fromm’s view, would then become immediately more fulfilling, since workers would have a stake in their own firms success, and reap a portion of the profits they helped generate (rather than working for a fixed wage).¹⁴⁶

Fromm similarly invited his readership to hearken back to the early American town hall. In an almost Rousseauian way, he advocated for “Town Meetings,” which without going into superfluous detail, would be comprised of five hundred or so local residents. Fromm reasoned:

In such small groups the issues at stake can be discussed thoroughly, each member can express his ideas, can listen to, and discuss reasonably other arguments. People have personal contact with each other, which makes it more difficult for demagogic and irrational influences to work on

¹⁴² Jeffries, 293

¹⁴³ Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 321, 339

¹⁴⁴ Jeffries, 293

¹⁴⁵ Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 321

¹⁴⁶ Today we know these companies as ESOPs, Employee-Stock Ownership Plans, and while one could see the allure they offered Fromm, in many ways Marcuse foresaw how easily capitalism would co-opt this concept. In a recent Jacobin Magazine article, author Sam Gindin shows how companies use ESOPs to tighten control over their workers and weaken labor unions. Gindin argues that, in Marxian terms, ESOPs merely give workers back a portion of what they gave up in the first place from their extracted labor value and offer them little power over the workplace itself. From Sam Gindin, “Chasing Utopia,” *Jacobin Magazine*, 10 March 2016. <https://www.jacobinmag.com/2016/03/workers-control-coops-wright-wolff-alperovitz/>

their minds... the individual citizen must be in the possession of vital facts which enables him to make a reasonable decision.¹⁴⁷

The decisions each town arrives at, through face-to-face interactions, would then be communicated to nationally elected representatives, which would share equal power in the decision making. Fromm believed these changes would humanize American democracy, since it would require human interaction and deliberation as the condition for all decisions, the decision would then be communicated from “below to above” which would result in an overall more democratic process, as well as a more social and less alienating process.

Fromm argued the efficacy of such meetings would be reliant on the availability of “factual information” and so, perhaps surprisingly, he advocated for establishing a “politically independent cultural agency” made up of “personalities from the fields of art, sciences, religion, business, politics, whose outstanding achievements and moral integrity are beyond doubt...”¹⁴⁸ Their political positions, Fromm conceptualized, would vary, but they would be able to agree on “objective” facts. These proposals have led even the most generous readers of Fromm to fault him for offering sketchy proposals at best, and Marcuse would later take it several steps further and argue his proposals are far from radical, and merely provide credence for capitalist society.¹⁴⁹

Still, the proposals Fromm offered are in general alignment with his broad critique of capitalist society. After all, Fromm’s dialectical analysis of capitalism concluded that although it isolated and alienated mankind it also empowered mankind, and contributed to the “growth of an active, critical, responsible self.”¹⁵⁰ As such, his ideas were based on the perceived unlikeliness

¹⁴⁷ Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 341

¹⁴⁸ Ibid, 342

¹⁴⁹ McLaughlin, “Origin Myths,” 124

¹⁵⁰ Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, 108

of establishing a truly, completely, socialist society in the near future, and instead were meant to accentuate the positive freedoms which capitalism brought about and thereby temper its more negative freedoms.

Marcuse's Problem With Affirmation

There are several aspects of Fromm's suggestions that remain at odds with much of Marcuse's theories. For instance, Fromm's belief that a Town Meeting would strengthen and humanize American democracy is problematic from Marcuse's dialectical position because it is merely reliant on facts, which Marcuse believed to be subjectively determined by the prevailing social order.¹⁵¹ In the case of Fromm's Town Meeting, such a democratic program is not only insufficiently critical but is affirmative of the prevailing order. According to Marcuse, if a behavior or mode of thought "surrenders to the immediate facts, it repels recognition of the factors behind the facts, and thus repels recognition of the facts, and of their historical content."¹⁵² For Marcuse, Fromm ignored the dialectical process, because facts are arbitrarily determined only within a "stage" of development, and this stage determines their character and function; to ignore this historical reality is tantamount to an endorsement of capitalism and repressive society.¹⁵³ Within this framework, Marcuse concluded that even apparently objective facts are both oppressive and "ideological," and it is the task of Critical Theory to make their political and repressive nature apparent.¹⁵⁴ Indeed, the value of Critical Theory for Marcuse rests on its "explosive" content, that is if it remains in total opposition to the prevailing social order;

¹⁵¹ Marcuse *Reason and Revolution*, viii

*Previously cited, but as a reminder, Marcuse argued, "the power of negative thinking is the driving power of dialectical thought, used as a tool for analyzing the world of facts in terms of its internal inadequacy."

¹⁵² Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 97

¹⁵³ Marcuse, *Reason and Revolution*, viii

¹⁵⁴ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 107

Fromm's Town Hall is wholly antithetical to Critical Theory and dialectical thinking because it "stabilizes" accepted facts "within the repressive whole" which in turn yields itself to "this whole."¹⁵⁵ It is unsurprising that Marcuse explicitly criticized Fromm in the *Dissent* debate, even if he wrongly rooted that criticism in psychoanalysis; a theory which accepts the given facts must be conformist in nature.

Marcuse's rejection of Fromm's theories within the *Dissent* debate is mostly rooted in psychoanalysis, however, they also both alluded to the concept of dialectics intermittently throughout. For example, in what may be one of his most forceful rebukes of Fromm, Marcuse argued that, "in an anti-liberal society, individual happiness and productive development are in contradiction to society; if they are defined as values to be realized within this society, they become themselves repressive."¹⁵⁶ If we apply this logic to Fromm's overarching solutions, the problem with his attempt to emphasize productive love and fulfilling work is that, in Marcuse's view, it doesn't adequately take into account the context in which those values are being proclaimed, namely, the context of capitalism. Marcuse further, and more specifically, inveighed:

Fromm revives all the time-honored values of idealistic ethics as if nobody had ever demonstrated their conformistic and repressive features. He talks of the productive realization of the personality, of care, responsibility, and respect for one's fellow men, of productive love and happiness as if man could actually practice all this and still remain sane and full of "wellbeing" in a society which Fromm himself describes as one of total alienation, dominated by the commodity relations of the "market."¹⁵⁷

Again, while he was specifically referring to Fromm's interpretation of certain psychoanalytic concepts, his critique is derived from his dialectical understanding of society. The consequences for Marcuse are expressed in clear, though implicit, dialectical terms; happiness and love are

¹⁵⁵ Ibid, 107

¹⁵⁶ Herbert Marcuse "The Social Implications of Freudian Revisionism," 225

¹⁵⁷ Ibid, 231

proclaimed in such a way that “leaves the negative where it is—predominant over the human existence.”¹⁵⁸ In other words, Marcuse believed Fromm’s approach overemphasizes an individual’s ability to overcome the conditions of repressive society, which does not allow for “authentic” happiness or love, because they are incompatible with capitalism.¹⁵⁹ Instead, society defines these terms (happiness, love, responsibility) in such a way that renders them compatible with itself. Therefore, to practice happiness or love within its established definitions only authenticates society and its repression. Because Fromm’s solutions (such as his town hall or Employee-Stock Ownership Plans) accepts the established definitions, it will not negate the capitalist order and would thereby do nothing to liberate humanity. In concrete terms, for Marcuse, compulsion to partake in a town hall is hardly a liberating concept. In fact, a few years after the *Dissent* exchange, in 1958, the American philosopher Isaiah Berlin echoed and clarified Marcuse’s position by arguing against the “positive” notion of liberty, because it relies on “compulsion,” and risks becoming authoritative.¹⁶⁰ Even if Fromm’s ideas are far from authoritative, at best, according to Marcuse, they would merely lead to a “smoother functioning of the established society” rather than a departure.¹⁶¹

In all fairness to Fromm, Marcuse’s polemical attack on him is now widely considered gratuitous. Although parts of *The Sane Society* appear more suited for a political platform (a harsh insult for a member of the Frankfurt School) rather than a book of Critical Theory, it remains an undeniably forceful critique of capitalist society.¹⁶² Marcuse has been faulted for

¹⁵⁸ Herbert Marcuse, “A Reply To Erich Fromm,” *Dissent Magazine* (Winter 1956), 81
<https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/reply-erich-fromm>.

¹⁵⁹ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 5

¹⁶⁰ Ian Carter, “Positive and Negative Liberty.” *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Ed. Edward Zalta (Summer 2018 edition). <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/liberty-positive-negative/#TwoAttCreThiWay>

¹⁶¹ Marcuse, “A Reply To Erich Fromm,” 81

¹⁶² McLaughlin, Neil. "Origin Myths in the Social Sciences: Fromm, the Frankfurt School and the Emergence of Critical Theory." *The Canadian Journal of Sociology* 24, no. 1 (1999): 109-139.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/3341480>. p. 124

failing to acknowledge the many denunciations of capitalism which Fromm made throughout *Escape From Freedom*, and *The Sane Society*.

But, I am convinced that Marcuse did not acknowledge those criticisms on the grounds that Fromm made them in such a way that, from his perspective, are more aligned with a philosophical tradition that was hostile toward Critical Theory and negative thinking in general. Perhaps, one that reminded Marcuse of “positive” philosophy or “positivism.” In *One-Dimensional Man*, which came out nearly a decade after the Fromm-Marcuse debate, Marcuse stated:

To the degree to which the given reality is scientifically comprehended and transformed, to the degree to which society becomes industrial and technological, positivism finds in the society the medium for the realization (and validation) of its concepts - harmony between theory and practice, truth and facts. Philosophic thought turns into affirmative thought; the philosophic critique criticizes *within* the societal framework and stigmatizes non-positive notions as mere speculation, dreams, or fantasies.¹⁶³

Fromm’s construction of the “road to sanity” sought to harmonize theory and practice and find reconciliation between truth and facts. However, the obvious realizability of Fromm’s design, which attracted many young radicals to him, became not an advantage but a fault in his work.¹⁶⁴ Though it remained critical of society, and even capitalism, because its solutions were compatible with that same very society rendered it at odds with the negative thinking that Marcuse championed. One could make the argument here that the fact Fromm even offered practical solutions at all left him little chance of avoiding Marcuse’s wrath.

Of course, if Marcuse was opposed to practical political solutions of any sort, in the name of negative thinking, then his own theories appear useless, or just become criticism for the sake of criticism. Like Karl Popper’s condemnation of Adorno and Horkheimer, he too appears only

¹⁶³ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 172

¹⁶⁴ McLaughlin, “Origin Myths,” 123

to revile contemporary society without offering hope for a better future, or at least one that seems presently attainable. As it happens, Fromm argued exactly that. Fromm wrote that if one is to take Marcuse's positions seriously "than any person who has integrity and is capable of love and happiness, in present-day capitalistic society, must either become a martyr or insane."¹⁶⁵ In short, Marcuse espoused a nihilistic philosophy.

Their theoretical differences come back again to their divergent interpretation of how history functions dialectically:

It is amazing that Marcuse should neglect his own dialectical position to the extent of drawing a black and white picture, and forget that the alienated society already develops in itself the elements which contradict it. To equate a rebel with a martyr in Western capitalistic society is rather unrealistic, unless somebody is so deeply conformist that to be a rebel to him means to be a martyr. If Marcuse were right, then indeed we would have to arrive at the conclusion that there is no place for love and happiness whatsoever in capitalistic society. The only difference between the average man and the "radical thinker," then, is that the average man is an opportunistic automaton without knowing it, while the radical thinker is the same, but knowing it.¹⁶⁶

In other words, though Fromm agreed with Marcuse that capitalist society is one of alienation and isolation, as a result of his positive-negative dialectic, Fromm concluded the values that contradict alienation (solidarity, fulfilment, etc....) still find themselves within capitalism. Fromm merely wanted to emphasize those values. Marcuse, in contrast, believed that positive thinking, indeed anything apparently affirmative would, in fact, insidiously fortify capitalist civilization and its resilience. In some ways, their argument evokes the rather tired one of "reform versus revolution." Fromm believed that Marcuse's dialectics require the complete dehumanization of man before liberation can occur, whereas he maintained that "to study the conditions of love and integrity means to discover the reasons for their failure in capitalistic society; that the analysis of love is social criticism; that to attempt to practice these virtues

¹⁶⁵ Erich Fromm, "The Human Implications," 348

¹⁶⁶ Ibid, 348

amounts to the most vital act of rebellion.”¹⁶⁷ Though he was critical of capitalism, Fromm held on to the belief that the practice of love, happiness, fulfillment, and solidarity was ultimately possible within a capitalist society. In fact, he argued that because society inhibits their realization, to attempt to practice these virtues is not conformist but, on the contrary, “amounts to the most vital act of rebellion.”¹⁶⁸ Ultimately, this leads Fromm to conclude that Marcuse’s position was an “example of human nihilism disguised as radicalism”¹⁶⁹ a title which Marcuse proudly accepted, “‘Nihilism,’ as the indictment of inhuman conditions, may be a truly humanist attitude— part of the Great Refusal to play the game, to compromise with the bad ‘positive.’ In this sense, I accept Fromm’s designation of my position as “human nihilism.”¹⁷⁰ With that, Marcuse introduced what will later become the name for his “solution” for how one could respond to the all-encompassing degradation of capitalist society; The Great Refusal.

The Great Refusal

For much of his career Marcuse was reluctant to offer prescriptions for what one should do with his particularly negative analysis, a fact which he receives a fair amount of criticism for.¹⁷¹ Yet, as the fifties turned into the sixties, Marcuse began to see the possibilities for radical social change. In fact, he placed far more faith in the student movement of the sixties than did any other member of the Frankfurt School.¹⁷² Although Marcuse remained a fairly pessimistic thinker, and relative to Fromm much more pessimistic, the liberation struggles of the sixties caused him to challenge his colleagues within the Institute for Social Research to “confront the

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 348-349

¹⁶⁸ Fromm, “The Human Implications,” 349

¹⁶⁹ Ibid, 349

¹⁷⁰ Marcuse, “A Reply to Erich Fromm,” *Dissent* (Summer, 1956), 81

¹⁷¹ Kellner, 320

¹⁷² Jeffries, 4

critical theory of society with the task of re-examining the prospects for the emergence of a socialist society qualitatively different from existing societies, the task of redefining socialism and its preconditions.”¹⁷³ Marcuse’s belief in the potential for a radically different society repeatedly holds that such a society must be a complete departure from the one that exists. In that way, his imagined alternatives mirror the premise for his negative dialectics: he continued to reject “positivistic” notions and only supported absolute systemic change.

Marcuse endeavored to describe his vision as “utopian” and attempted to rescue the word from adverse connotations. In words that borrow from his critique of positivism, Marcuse declared:

I will not be deterred by one of the most vicious ideologies of today, namely, the ideology which derogates, denounces and ridicules the most decisive concepts and images of a free society as merely ‘utopian’ and ‘only’ speculative. It may well be that precisely in those aspects of socialism which are today ridiculed as utopian, lies the decisive difference, the contrast between an authentic socialist society and the established societies, even the most advanced industrial societies.¹⁷⁴

His belief in the potential for an alternative society is one that, at its core, holds onto the possibility for the complete negation of the established society. If positive philosophy can be faulted for the fact that it only makes criticisms that accept the values of the prevailing social order, a positive philosophic solution similarly only offers solutions under those same conditions. Marcuse’s alternative, in that way, is entirely a negative alternative, since it seeks to “transcend” what the given facts and common sense put forth; it seeks to transcend what one may consider possible.

Moreover, Marcuse’s belief in the realizability of an entirely new society was reliant on his own theory of the historical dialectic, which led him to conclude that society tends toward its

¹⁷³ Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), ix

¹⁷⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *Five Lectures* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1970), 62

own negation. For example, early in his career in 1941 Marcuse argued that technical progress serves a dialectical function, “Technics by itself can promote authoritarianism as well as liberty, scarcity as well as abundance, the extension as well as the abolition of toil.”¹⁷⁵ Marcuse saw technology as an oppressive and dehumanizing force; its perceived neutrality merely further subjected individuals to an increasingly efficient and decreasingly human enterprise.¹⁷⁶ Likewise, as history unfolds the contradiction within technological progress, like the contradiction within Reason, becomes ever more exacerbated. Indeed, writing in 1964, Marcuse observed that men and machinery were increasingly organized in the name of “rational” efficiency, which dehumanized them, but that same time led to a higher standard of living. Moreover, Marcuse believed technology held the promise that mankind could be free from alienated labor altogether.¹⁷⁷ The possibility, then, for a “pacified existence” through technical means actually resides on the technological process itself. Marcuse argued, “the range of verifiability in this sense grows in the course of history. Thus, the speculations about the Good Life, the Good Society, Permanent Peace, obtain an increasingly realistic content; on technological grounds, the metaphysical tends to become physical.”¹⁷⁸ Marcuse went on to say:

... “neutral” scientific method and technology become the science and technology of a historical phase which is being surpassed by its own achievements- which has reached its own negation. Instead of being separated from science and scientific method, and left to subjective preference and irrational, transcendental sanction, formerly metaphysical ideas of liberation may become the proper object of science. But this development confronts science with the unpleasant task of becoming *political*- of recognizing scientific consciousness as political consciousness, and the scientific enterprise as political enterprise. For the transformation of values into needs, of final causes into technical possibilities is a new stage in the conquest of oppressive, unmastered forces in society as well as in nature. It is an act of *liberation*.¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁵ Marcuse, “Some Implications of Modern Technology,” 139

¹⁷⁶ Ibid, 141

¹⁷⁷ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 229-230

¹⁷⁸ Ibid, 230

¹⁷⁹ Ibid, 233 (emphasis in original text)

The act of liberation here is the complete negation of technical rationality, and even that of “positivistic” science, for they would no longer serve the purportedly “objective” ambitions of the established social order, but the purposes, indeed “values” of humankind. Marcuse offered an example of how science and technology can serve human liberation:

...what is calculable is the minimum of labor with which, and the extent to which, the vital needs of all members of a society could be satisfied- provided the available resources were used for this end, without being restricted by other interests, and without impeding the accumulation of capital necessary for the development of the respective society... that is, quantifiable is the possible reduction of anxiety, the possible freedom from fear.¹⁸⁰

Indeed, although his ideas remain undoubtedly a vast departure from the ways in which science and technology are often utilized, the possibility for freedom from scarcity and repression appear possible, at least from an organizational perspective.

Perhaps the most important historical shift that permits Marcuse to entertain utopian possibilities is that he had hoped to find a “revolutionary subject” within the civil rights movement and student activism of the 1960s. I will discuss this further in the next chapter, but it is important to briefly mention that, in *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse wrote that the social order could be destroyed as a result of acts by people of color who “have the most real need for ending intolerable conditions and institutions.”¹⁸¹ Indeed, students and other activists in the 1960s, to Marcuse, were the “new proletariat,” or, rather, a proletarian surrogate. Echoing Marx, he argued that “their opposition is revolutionary even if their consciousness is not.”¹⁸² To be sure, his newfound hope remained dialectical; the conditions were intolerable enough at this time, and the protests sufficiently “negative” that perhaps capitalism had reached its “determinate negation”; its own oppressiveness causing its downfall. Still, Marcuse admitted that

¹⁸⁰ Ibid, 232

¹⁸¹ Ibid, 256

¹⁸² Ibid, 256

revolutionary change at this time had “nothing but a chance.” True to his pessimism, Marcuse asserted “The critical theory of society possesses no concepts which could bridge the gap between the present and its future; holding no promise and showing no success, it remains negative.”¹⁸³ Even as Marcuse articulated a more hopeful position, he remained uncertain about its efficacy.

In an effort to rectify their relationship, Marcuse asked Fromm to review *One-Dimensional Man* before it was published in 1964. Fromm refused initially, and remarked to one friend that “our right-wing enemies” are the only ones who would benefit if he attacked Marcuse as Marcuse attacked him.¹⁸⁴ Eventually though Fromm did carefully read *One-Dimensional Man*, and in another letter, Fromm echoed many of the same general sentiments he articulated in the debate, mainly that Marcuse revealed an “alienation and despair masquerading as radicalism.”¹⁸⁵ Fromm saw Marcuse’s remedy as merely a symptom of his “nihilism”; the only way out for Marcuse was complete destruction of society as we know it. Moreover, there are certain aspects of Marcuse’s utopian vision that appear at odds with Fromm’s thinking, namely, in the way which freedom would manifest in Marcuse’s thought. We know, for instance, that Fromm and Marcuse conceive of freedom differently; Marcuse sees it only as a negative freedom (from anxiety and repression), whereas Fromm sees it as positive (freedom to spontaneously act, love, and work). Marcuse’s utopian vision, then, may further isolate mankind in Fromm’s view, since it does not clearly require human solidarity. At best, it only implies it.

¹⁸³ Ibid, 257

¹⁸⁴ Friedman, 197

¹⁸⁵ Friedman, 197

Chapter 3: The Great Refusal and The Third Way

In 1962 the Hungarian Marxist philosopher, Georg Lukács, accused Adorno, alongside other members of the Frankfurt School of taking up residence in “the Grand Hotel Abyss.” This hotel was “equipped with every comfort, on the edge of an abyss, of nothingness, of absurdity... The daily contemplation of the abyss between excellent meals or artistic entertainments can only heighten the enjoyment of the subtle comforts offered.”¹⁸⁶ In short, Lukács charged them with bourgeois hypocrisy; they theorized about capitalism and its ailments while simultaneously enjoying every luxury it had to offer. They had much to say, and yet they did nothing. One could even argue, as many have, that their theories actually justified their inaction. Though in many regards this rang true of Adorno and some of his other colleagues, it did not for Fromm and Marcuse. Both men enjoyed bourgeois comforts, but they were nevertheless decidedly politically active.¹⁸⁷ As outliers, Fromm and Marcuse participated in various concrete political acts, for Fromm, the connection between his theory and practice is more straightforward than it is for Marcuse, whose theory existed in some tension with his political participation, sometimes even in contradiction. Nonetheless, there is a significant continuity between their dialectical theories and their *praxis*; for Fromm and Marcuse their actions were motivated by their ideas.

It is particularly interesting to compare the lives of Fromm and Marcuse, for aside from the fact that they were both far more politically active than their colleagues, their competing philosophies translated into competing lifestyles. As Stuart Jeffries points out in homage to Marcuse’s role in the student movement of the sixties, “After all, if we learned one thing from the 1960s, it was that the personal is the political.”¹⁸⁸ As it happens, Fromm was actively

¹⁸⁶ Georg Lukács, *The Theory of The Novel: A Historico-philosophical on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1971), 22

¹⁸⁷ Jeffries, 4

¹⁸⁸ Jeffries, 312

involved in traditional democratic politics throughout his life in the United States. In accordance with his belief that there are acts we can take to alleviate the harmful effects of capitalism, Fromm played an active role within the left-wing of the Democratic party.¹⁸⁹ Marcuse, of course, did not sully himself by participating in the American political machine. And yet, he was a leading figure of the New Left movement in the 1960s, even directly acting as a mentor to the famous activist and political theorist Angela Davis. This was similarly aligned with his belief that the closest thing to a “revolutionary vanguard” the U.S. had were people of color and others excluded from the democratic establishment. Some tarred the critical theorists with accusations of hypocrisy, and there are definitive inconsistencies between Fromm and Marcuse’s theories and their political action. Yet, I argue that their theories informed much of their action. Moreover, because Fromm and Marcuse postulated vastly different dialectics, they participated in politics in vastly different ways; Fromm’s belief that capitalism is able to promote both positive and negative freedom encouraged him to advocate for essentially reformist policies, while Marcuse sought out a new, total revolution, a faith he eventually placed in the countercultural movement of the sixties.

Fromm And Fascism

In 1941 Fromm and Marcuse were both preoccupied with developing theories on fascism. This preoccupation extended to their acts; while they remained critical of capitalism both prioritized the fight against fascism above all else. After they published their first works in English they would not go on to publish significant works again until the 1950s, during which time they took on various roles, in Marcuse’s case including governmental roles, to combat the

¹⁸⁹ McLaughlin, “The Fromm-Marcuse Debate,” 498

Third Reich. For Marcuse and Fromm everything was subordinated to the urgency presented by Nazism in the forties.

Fromm's role in anti-fascist work was more personal than professional, as he never held a role within the government, as Marcuse had. Though he dedicated a significant amount of work to diagnosing fascism, throughout the thirties and forties he focused most of his time and money on helping his friends and family who were otherwise unable to leave Nazi Germany. As I mentioned, he theorized that love- healthy, and productive love- was the most radical act one could participate in. Ideal love was the opposite of capitalism and fascism, and so, at the height of the Nazi's power, Fromm devoted himself to rescuing those he loved. After fleeing to the United States, he sent sizable portions of his rather modest salary to his mother, Rosa, on a monthly basis. Eventually, following Kristallnacht, he arranged for her to move to England, and finally in 1941 to the United States, which was quite difficult given the circumstances and it ultimately cost Fromm thousands of dollars throughout the process.¹⁹⁰ Fromm extended these same efforts to other family members as well, including his cousin Heinz Brandt, who was arrested in 1934 for his role in the Communist Party and anti-Nazi underground (not to mention his Jewishness), and his aunt Gertrud Brandt. He also corresponded with the Krause family, which included his Aunt Sophie, his uncle David, his cousin Charlotte, his other aunt and uncle Martha and Bernhard, and his mentors Salman Rabinkow and Peter Glück, only to name a handful of the many Jews whom Fromm assisted throughout the horrors of the holocaust.¹⁹¹

Fromm's assistance varied in both effort and success. For instance, while he sent plenty of money to the Brandts, and exhausted nearly every possible method to secure Heinz's release

¹⁹⁰ Kristallnacht, or the Night of Broken Glass, occurred on November 9th, and involved widespread vandalism, and destruction of Jewish homes, businesses, and synagogues. Thousands were arrested and sent to concentration camps, and about one hundred Jews were killed.

¹⁹¹ Friedman, 70-76

and emigration, he played a more limited role in the Krause's family plight, despite Sophie's many letters and pleas.¹⁹² Heinz Brandt survived the holocaust, despite being forced to walk the "Death March" from the concentration camp Auschwitz to Buchenwald. Though Fromm never secured his freedom, Brandt later remarked that he survived due to "luck" facilitated by Fromm.¹⁹³ His Aunt Sophie and Uncle David were not so lucky, though many other family members and friends eventually found themselves in Palestine, Brazil, the United States and Cuba, among other places. Despite all of these personal difficulties, in *Escape From Freedom* Fromm remains a proponent of nonviolent action throughout. He argued, "...freedom is not less endangered if attacked in the name of anti-fascism or in that of outright fascism."¹⁹⁴ For Fromm, one must defend freedom above all else, violent action in the name of anti-fascism is not justifiable, and the restriction of another's freedom for the same reason is equally illegitimate. This view will inform much of Fromm's political action in the fifties and sixties, as I will discuss in more depth.

Fromm was also removed from the Frankfurt School in 1938. This expulsion occurred, at least in part, due to some of the same intellectual differences outlined in this paper. As Fromm's biographer points out, Theodor Adorno grew increasingly hostile to much of Fromm's thought, contrary to Fromm, "Adorno was postulating a 'negative dialectic' in which the freedom of the individual resided in instinctual resistance 'outside' the existing social and political order."¹⁹⁵ While Marcuse was the first to theorize on negative dialectics, Adorno, before Marcuse, saw how incompatible Fromm's ideas were with negative dialectics. Still, Fromm found a new cohort of intellectuals, comprised of the neo-Freudians Harry Stack Sullivan, Clara Thompson, Karen

¹⁹² Friedman, 73

¹⁹³ Friedman, 72

¹⁹⁴ Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, 5

¹⁹⁵ Friedman, 61

Horney, and Margaret Mead, who offered more optimistic theories— and as a result, would later fall under Marcuse’s explicit ire in the *Dissent* debate. These intellectuals offered Fromm a sexually progressive community, as both heterosexual and same-sex affairs were common between members, though with the likely exception of Fromm himself.¹⁹⁶

As much as *Escape From Freedom* was written following “a decade of dialogue with tough-minded Frankfurt Institute colleagues,” it was also written in this context: his friends and family living in Nazi Germany pleading for his assistance, his expulsion from the Frankfurt School, and his newfound vibrant community of intellectuals, Mead, Horney, and Sullivan.¹⁹⁷ Indeed, as Fromm was working on *Escape From Freedom*, he was also working almost daily to secure emigration for one person or another, and he corresponded with many different distressed people just as frequently.¹⁹⁸ This lent an undeniably personal element to *Escape From Freedom*; for Fromm fascism was not simply an obscure political ideology but a very real threat to himself and his loved ones. Before it was complete, Fromm explained it to a friend, saying “the theme which is nearest to my heart and which is the leitmotif of the book is the problem of freedom and anxiety or the fear of freedom or the escape from freedom.”¹⁹⁹ His relationship with Heinz Brandt, for example, helped Fromm develop theories of positive freedom, and according to him were important in nearly all of his ideas on authoritarianism.²⁰⁰ The simultaneous urgency and optimism of *Escape From Freedom* can also be explained in part by the upbeat letters he received from his aunt Sophie, who before being murdered by the Nazis wrote a series of letters that read positive sentiments such as, “We have had a good life and beautiful life because we

¹⁹⁶ Friedman, 78

¹⁹⁷ Ibid, 198

¹⁹⁸ Ibid, 76

¹⁹⁹ Ibid, 97

²⁰⁰ Ibid, 72 (from Fromm, “Heinz Brandt as Man of Faith” (1963))

have good children and grandchildren that we can be proud of” and “how nice it was that we were so lucky to know so many good people and dear people in our life.”²⁰¹ If Sophie Krause could remain optimistic while facing her untimely death because of fascism, surely one could remain optimistic under Western capitalism. Similarly, the freedom and spontaneity which he saw practiced by Sullivan, Horney, and the other neo-Freudians became the embodiment of Fromm’s notion of productive freedom from authority, defined by unconventional love and free sexual expression.²⁰²

Erich Fromm and Democratic Socialism

Throughout the fifties and sixties Erich Fromm was increasingly attracted to political action in his own right, though this action was geared toward his vision of “humanistic socialism” which he espoused most clearly in *The Sane Society*. Intellectually, Fromm was concerned with “organizational forms and procedures that would enable a society’s transition into democratic socialism.”²⁰³ His actions indicate that he genuinely believed in these “reformist” acts (positive acts, to Marcuse) and their potential to increase positive freedom. Importantly, Fromm worked toward this goal within both the Soviet Bloc as well as the United States. In the former, Fromm collaborated with Marxist dissidents to articulate what he called a “third force” which was intended to offer alternatives to the alienation prevalent in the Soviet Union, without embracing western capitalist exploitation.²⁰⁴ ²⁰⁵ In the latter, Fromm donated to and was active in political parties and organizations, such as the American Socialist Party and

²⁰¹ Ibid, 74

²⁰² Friedman, 97

²⁰³ Friedman, 198

²⁰⁴ Friedman, 238-245

²⁰⁵ McLaughlin, “The Fromm-Marcuse Debate,” 498

Amnesty International, as well as individual political campaigns, including those of Adlai Stevenson and Eugene McCarthy's presidential campaigns, he funded and co-founded SANE (National Committee for A Sane Nuclear Policy), he testified multiple times before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and he fostered relationships with a number of American politicians.²⁰⁶

After the *Dissent* debate, Fromm only became increasingly involved in American politics. Indeed, though Fromm "lost" the debate with Marcuse, he went on to sell millions of his books, and for perhaps the first time in his life Fromm had plenty of money.²⁰⁷ His political action, more often than not, led him to donate to various causes and campaigns, and this in turn led him to develop relationships with American politicians. For the sake of brevity, I will not detail all of his relationships, but the most notable- and odd- is that of his friendship with Arkansas Senator J. William Fulbright. The two influenced each other in a variety of ways—Fromm even assisted with developing campaign themes for Fulbright, suggesting that he could appeal to Arkansas voters with "concepts of individualism" and "the importance of values to live what one professes as against being subject to the manipulation of the big machine."²⁰⁸ According to Lawrence Friedman, Fromm made substantial contributions to Fulbright's campaign, and Fulbright even read the *Dissent* debate, remarking that if it had taken place in the senate, Fromm would have won.²⁰⁹

Fromm's relationship with Fulbright is useful for understanding Fromm's larger role in American politics and the apparent sacrifices he had to make in order to lessen the adverse effects of capitalism. Indeed, Fulbright was a staunch segregationist (a point which Friedman

²⁰⁶ Friedman, 198-211

²⁰⁷ Ibid, 199

²⁰⁸ Ibid, 208

²⁰⁹ Ibid, 208

fails to mention) who signed the “Southern Manifesto,” though Fromm continued to support him enthusiastically, mostly because of his “progressive” foreign policy.²¹⁰ A generous interpretation of Fromm’s kinship with Fulbright is that Fromm understood the confines of the society he was operating under; it is better to have a more progressive senator from Arkansas who is against McCarthyism, and later the war in Vietnam, even if that man is a segregationist, than a potentially more conservative, militaristic politician. Of course, not all of Fromm’s political support went to segregationists, but it is difficult to imagine Herbert Marcuse making the same concessions. Fulbright, Adlai Stevenson, and Eugene McCarthy were hardly anti-capitalists, let alone “humanist socialists.” And yet, Fromm’s vision of dialectics allows for such compromises: if revolution is not immediate, it is worthwhile to emphasize and strengthen positive freedoms, which entails supporting those who have the power to do so (though one would think such freedoms would necessarily be extended to all people, regardless of race).

In some ways, Fromm was also admired by a number of student activists in the 1960s, though he was far less interested in the student movement than Marcuse, and devoted most of his time to institutional politics.²¹¹ By the end of the sixties, though Fromm became increasingly involved in the peace movement, he was unable to develop the same relationship with students that Marcuse had, in no small part due to the fact that Marcuse better accounted for race and colonialism in his writing.²¹² His steadfast support for Eugene McCarthy, who after losing his bid for president distanced himself from the peace movement, may also have played a significant role.²¹³ Indeed, his initial support for McCarthy, not unlike Marcuse’s support for student

²¹⁰ The *Declaration of Constitutional Principles*, often referred to as the “Southern Manifesto” was a document signed in 1956 by over 100 congressmen representing a variety of states. The document is most notable for its opposition to racial integration of public spaces.

²¹¹ Ibid, 271

²¹² McLaughlin, “The Fromm-Marcuse Debate” 499

²¹³ Friedman, 274

activism, displayed itself in Fromm's work; in 1968 he turned a memo he had written for McCarthy's campaign into a book titled *The Revolution of Hope*, which would go on to heavily influence McCarthy's platform.²¹⁴ Given that, along with the students uneasiness toward "politics as usual" it is easy to see why students generally gravitated toward Marcuse, and, in turn, why Fromm never quite embraced the New Left.

There is, however, another aspect to Fromm's thought that greatly influenced his political action. As I mentioned earlier, Fromm believed in nonviolence and what he called "radical" reform. In *The Sane Society*, he stated, "So-called 'radicalism'... believes that we can solve problems by force, when observation, patience and continuous activity is required."²¹⁵ Fromm postulated that patience and nonviolent action is far more productive than violence, which can either be ineffective, or lead to disastrous consequences, such as the Bolshevik revolution resulting in the violent and authoritarian USSR. Above all else, for Fromm, freedom ought to be protected and it cannot be denied in the name of any political position, whether that position is fascist, anti-fascist, or even socialist.²¹⁶ His faith in nonviolence and the ideal of freedom explains his work within the peace movement, but it also illustrates the fact that his institutional political work found its groundings in his own theories. Moreover, his work, like his theories, become quite incompatible with Marcuse's, though Marcuse is often left reconciling his own political action within his intellectual work.

Marcuse's Contradictions

²¹⁴ Friedman, 271

²¹⁵ Fromm, *The Sane Society*, 273

²¹⁶ Fromm, *Escape From Freedom*, 5

Marcuse, not unlike the concepts he often sought to apply the dialectical method to, also demonstrated his own internal contradictions. For instance, he predicated his theory on notions of “refusal” and yet, after publishing *Reason and Revolution*, Herbert Marcuse went to work for the Office of Strategic Services (OSS), the precursor to what would later become the CIA. Hired as a political analyst, Marcuse worked to provide “insight into the enemy’s political culture” alongside other Frankfurt School members, Franz Neumann and Otto Kirchheimer.²¹⁷ Marcuse was responsible for examining the political developments of countries involved in the war, specifically in central western Europe. After the war ended his research unit in the OSS was transferred to the State Department, where he was instructed to, in his own words, “identify groups in Germany with which one could work towards reconstruction after the war; and to identify groups which were to be taken to task as Nazis.”²¹⁸ Marcuse, along with Neumann and Kirchheimer, were to determine which Germans could be trusted, and which should be tried for war crimes. They also attempted to counter the trend towards anti-Communism, which was becoming increasingly problematic. Henry Pachter wrote, “Franz Neumann and Herbert Marcuse bombarded Secretary of War Stimson with plans for a post-war Germany that would give democratic socialism a chance; they probably prevented the worst stupidities an occupation regime is capable of.”²¹⁹ In his work for the American government, Marcuse rationalized it through his own theoretical values, albeit in a less “nihilistic” manner than his intellectual work. Moreover, Marcuse’s efforts in favor of democratic socialism abroad in the forties is not dissimilar to Fromm’s own work in both the West and the Eastern bloc in the fifties and sixties.

²¹⁷ Jeffries, 253

²¹⁸ Kellner, 149

²¹⁹ Henry Pachter “On Being an Exile” in *The Legacy of the German Refugee Intellectuals* ed. Robert Boyers (New York: Schocken Books), 36

Perhaps unsurprisingly, according to Marcuse, he was criticized by leftists for what they saw as his role as a “CIA agent” and de facto “agent of imperialism.”²²⁰ In all fairness, the CIA is hardly the embodiment of the ideals of Critical Theory, let alone of communism. Yet Marcuse argued in response, “If critics reproach me for that, it only shows the complete ignorance of these people, who seem to have forgotten that the war then was a war against fascism and that, consequently, I haven’t the slightest reason for being ashamed of having assisted in it.”²²¹ Most scholars of Marcuse recognize that his role within the OSS was an important one, and that his contributions were both tangible and aligned with his anti-fascist theories. In fact, true to his nature, Marcuse was perhaps the most skeptical of his government employment. In an interview with Jurgen Habermas only a year before his death, he was asked whether he made any significant difference; “On the contrary” he replied, “Those whom we had listed first as ‘economic war criminals’ were very quickly back in the decisive positions of responsibility in the German economy.”²²² Marcuse may have recognized the importance of fighting fascism, but he had no illusions about the bureaucratic organization he worked for. His reflections on his work within the OSS demonstrate a palpable tension, for he acknowledges the shortcomings of the American government, though justifies his work through the primary goal of fighting fascism. Even for Marcuse compromises could be made when faced with dire circumstances.

Still, alongside Marcuse’s work for the American government, many of Marcuse’s critics have argued that another apparent contradiction between Marcuse’s thought and action is his embrace of bourgeois culture and lifestyles. After all, he did grow up in a wealthy, upper-middle class household, to a Jewish family well integrated into German society. As Stuart Jeffries puts

²²⁰ Kellner, 149

²²¹ Herbert Marcuse and Karl Popper, *Revolution or Reform? A Confrontation* (Chicago: Precedent Publishing, 1985), 56

²²² Kellner, 149

it, he was dependent on his father's commerce “but queasy about becoming contaminated by its spirit.”²²³ Marcuse certainly developed, in the words of Martin Jay, a “taste for the finer things in life.”²²⁴ Even when Marcuse was arguing with Adorno about the importance of the student movement, he made sure to invite the beleaguered and sick man to join him on vacation, insisting that “daily swimming in the Mediterranean and French cuisine aid mental and bodily recuperation.”²²⁵ His step-son, Osha Neumann (who was the son of Marcuse’s late colleague Franz Neumann and Inge Neumann, his second wife) recalled that his childhood was “very repressive. Herbert, in terms of his personal life, insisted on a level of distance and a level of bourgeois order in his life that was very protective of him. I remember him telling me very approvingly of Thomas Mann, who at least according to Herbert, would get up every morning and put on a jacket and tie and then sit down at his desk and then write books about people led by passion.”²²⁶ For all of his polemics against bourgeois society Marcuse undoubtedly enjoyed at least some of what it had to offer.

Along with his bourgeois proclivities, Marcuse, for all of his radical political theories, had a well-documented affinity for “higher” European culture, which he believed could provide an opposition to the existing order, for “contains the rationality of negation,” even if that order could accommodate and whither its criticism.²²⁷ Accordingly, he also demonstrated a disdain for low-brow culture; Marcuse, for instance, regarded jazz as Adorno did, “as part of the culture industry that kept the status quo in place.”²²⁸ Marcuse’s bourgeois inclinations undoubtedly

²²³ Jeffries, 17

²²⁴ Jay, 22.

²²⁵ Theodor Adorno and Herbert Marcuse, *Correspondence on The German Student Movement*, 130.

https://platypus1917.org/wp-content/uploads/archive/rgroups/2006-chicago/leslieesther_adornomarcusenewleft.pdf

²²⁶ David Allyn, *Make Love Not War: The Sexual Revolution, an Unfettered History*, (London: Taylor & Francis, 2001), 203.

²²⁷ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 61-63

²²⁸ Jeffries, 322

infiltrated his thought— even the term, “The Great Refusal” originated from the surrealist André Breton. In his work, Marcuse sought a group that could replace the proletariat as a revolutionary catalyst, allegedly because of his own experience with the actual proletariat’s failures in Weimar Germany. But for him that was often articulated most likely as an intellectual elite, privileged students, or, at best, people of color and other disenfranchised people.²²⁹ He never permitted the possibility for the traditional Marxist proletarian revolution, and at the same time, he unabashedly enjoyed exclusive bourgeois luxuries, luxuries which the proletariat could not enjoy. In the sixties, though, Marcuse attempts to resolve his own internal contradictions, in several different ways.

The Intersection of Dialectics and Political Action

In many respects, Marcuse’s work in the sixties denotes a significant departure from his theories, much to Adorno’s displeasure. As I mentioned earlier, Marcuse was the only member of the Frankfurt School who embraced the student movement and believed that if any revolutionary change was possible perhaps it was to be achieved by the student protestors in the sixties. his colleague Theodor Adorno called the police on protestors who had occupied a room in the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, Marcuse wrote to him disappointingly, “I still believe that our cause (which is not only ours) is better taken up by the rebellious students than by the police, and, here in California, that is demonstrated to me almost daily (and not only in California).”²³⁰ Indeed, while Adorno and Habermas accused the students of “left-fascism,” and Adorno argued the student movement could never bring about a “social intervention” Marcuse

²²⁹ Kellner, 313

²³⁰ Adorno and Marcuse, *Correspondence on the German Student Movement*, 125

demurred, and hopefully remarked, “I certainly do believe that the student movement does have the prospect of ‘effecting a social intervention.’”²³¹

Marcuse’s hearty embrace of the protest movements in the 1960s is especially notable given his relative pessimism which I detailed in the previous chapter. To be sure, Adorno thought as much and angrily wrote to him:

You object to Jürgen [Habermas]’s expression ‘left fascism’, calling it a *contradictio in adjecto*. But you are a dialectician, aren’t you? As if such contradictions did not exist—might not a movement, by the force of its immanent antinomies, transform itself into its opposite?²³²

To Adorno and other critics, Marcuse was abandoning his dialectical position in favor of *praxis*, embodied by the students. But Marcuse argued that, on the contrary, his faith in the students was rooted in his understanding of dialectical and historical progress. Throughout the sixties he increasingly entertained the idea that the prevailing order had possibly reached its “determinate negation” and the students’ actions were sufficiently negative to precipitate its total destruction.²³³ While he sometimes entertained notions of an intellectual dictatorship, Marcuse expressed hope in *One-Dimensional Man* that the social order would be upended by:

The substratum of outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colours, the unemployed and the unemployable. They exist outside the democratic process; their life is the most immediate and the most real need for ending intolerable conditions and institutions.²³⁴

Many students fit this description, including his own, and as such were uniquely positioned to “negate” repressive society. Moreover, their tactics were “extra-parliamentary,”²³⁵ their opposition “hits the system from without” and “violates the rules of the game, and in doing so, reveals it as a rigged game.”²³⁶ While far from perfect, in many ways student protests were

²³¹ Ibid, 133

²³² Ibid, 128

²³³ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 233

²³⁴ Ibid, 256

²³⁵ Adorno and Marcuse, *Correspondence on the German Student Movement*, 130

²³⁶ Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 257

sufficiently negative for Marcuse. If Fromm's theories in the fifties were "reformist" or "positive" to Marcuse, the students offered a negative optimism, one that could sufficiently disrupt the status quo.

Marcuse's theoretical evolution was also noted by activists such as Angela Davis. Davis, the famous African-American activist and Marcuse's student, for instance notes his views on culture changed, and claimed that Marcuse began to "recognize we shouldn't be concerned with high versus low culture. We should be concerned with the work that culture does."²³⁷ She argued the change that occurred within Marcuse's thought came about, at least in part, as a result of his experience working with student activists. According to Davis, "... Marcuse's thought revealed how deeply he himself was influenced by the movements of his time and how his engagement with those movements revitalised his thought."²³⁸ His faith in this movement increasingly influenced his work throughout the 1960s, adding a new optimistic character to his dialectical thought. To be sure, Marcuse had considerable influence on student activists, who treated him as a celebrity and, in France in 1968 held up a banner that read "Marx, Mao, Marcuse," in admiration of this "revolutionary trinity."²³⁹ After all, Marcuse's notion of The Great Refusal, which he first articulated in the mid-1950s, seemed to embody the efforts of the New Left which had sought to replace the traditional leftist emphasis on working class politics in favor of a total revolt against all of society, against its racism, its imperialism, its militarism and its technocratic

²³⁷ Jeffries, 322

*It ought to be mentioned that she certainly understood the importance of "low-brow" culture to working-class Black women; in the nineties she wrote *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism* which argued that blues singers such as Billie Holiday provided an anti-bourgeois cultural space for "community-building" among working-class Black women.

²³⁸ Davis, xii

²³⁹ Jeffries, 4

oppression.^{240 241} From the hippies to the student protestors, The Great Refusal appeared to be put into practice on a grand-scale in the 1960s.

The New Left and the counter-cultural movement was clearly influenced by Marcuse, but Marcuse was also influenced by them. For instance, he felt comfortable offering a glimmer of hope in *One-Dimensional Man*, a hope he hardly allowed to permeate his work and criticism of Fromm in the fifties, in part because of student activism. He then went onto tackle specific political ventures, including the war in Vietnam, American intervention in Latin America, and the oppression of Black people in the American south.²⁴² He began producing politically pointed works, a notable departure from his philosophical work which rarely mentioned specific political aspirations. For example, his 1965 essay “Repressive Tolerance,” argued for, in the words of Douglas Kellner, “intolerance toward towards the established society and its racism, militarism and imperialism...”²⁴³ Marcuse expressed a disdain for institutional politics, “the exercise of political rights... in a society of total administration serves to strengthen this administration by testifying to the existence of democratic liberties which, in reality, have changed their content and lost their effectiveness.”²⁴⁴ One can almost imagine Marcuse directing his words toward Fromm for his engagement with senators and governmental institutions.

Significantly, Marcuse also began writing about race issues, a topic he rarely discussed until the sixties. In 1969 he wrote “An Essay on Liberation” in which he argues:

While it is true that the white man is guilty, it is equally true that white men are rebels and radicals. However, the fact is that monopolistic imperialism validates the racist thesis: it subjects ever more nonwhite populations to the brutal power of its bombs, poisons, and moneys; thus making even the exploited white population in the metropolises partners and beneficiaries of the global crime. Class conflicts are being superseded or blotted out by race conflicts: color lines

²⁴⁰ Jeffries, 319

²⁴¹ Theodore Roszak, *The Making of A Counter Culture: Reflection on the Technocratic Society and Its Youthful Opposition* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1968), 1-42

²⁴² Kellner, 282

²⁴³ Ibid, 282

²⁴⁴ Herbert Marcuse “Repressive Tolerance,” 84

become economic and political realities – a development rooted in the dynamic of late imperialism and its struggle for new methods of internal and external colonization.²⁴⁵

Critical theory is often noted for its totalizing condemnation of society; “the whole is the false” and all those who live under capitalism suffer under capitalism. Yet, Marcuse’s argument shows the potential for critical theory to account for race in its doctrine. White people may suffer under capitalism and imperialism, but they are also guilty and benefit from its violence. Meanwhile his newfound interest in imperialism finds its roots in the New Left movement. His ideas can be situated within the burgeoning number of writers such as Fanon and Sartre, who were increasingly critiquing imperialism. Sartre wrote, for instance, in 1964 “mechanization engenders technology-driven unemployment: agricultural labourers are replaced by machines. This would be of considerable but limited importance if Algeria had any industry. But the colonial system denies it any.”²⁴⁶ In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse’s primary concern was the effect of technology on the individual. Yet, by the mid-1960s, other intellectuals have shown that colonized people had a very different relationship to technology and capitalism as a whole. The fact that Marcuse had shifted his focus from the “technocracy” to include analyses on imperialism is emblematic of the fact that he was participating in a much larger conversation, inspired and advanced by the New Left. In fact, it is because of colonized peoples exclusion from technocratic oppression that Marcuse argues they are uniquely situated to “negate” advanced industrial society. Moreover, though Marcuse had largely abandoned Marx’s class analysis decades prior to writing “An Essay on Liberation,” his acknowledgement that other divisions, particularly racial divisions, had taken its place represents a striking theoretical refinement. The

²⁴⁵ Herbert Marcuse, “An Essay on Liberation,” 57-58

²⁴⁶ Sartre, *Colonialism and Neo-Colonialism* trans. Azzedine Haddour, Steve Brewer, and Terry McWilliams (New York: Routledge, 2001), 39

proletariat was not replaced solely by the “intelligentsia” as Marcuse long theorized, but by oppressed people of color and colonized people abroad.²⁴⁷

However, in perhaps his most notable intellectual departure, Marcuse advocated for political violence. He observed in “Repressive Tolerance” that violence was perpetuated regularly “by the police, in the prisons and mental institutions, in the fight against racial minorities” and abroad in the imperial wars waged in the name of democracy.²⁴⁸ In the face of this violence, Marcuse argues, there is no alternative but to engage in anti-colonial, anti-capitalist, and anti-fascist violence:

In terms of historical function, there is a difference between revolutionary and reactionary violence, between violence practiced by the oppressed and by the oppressors. In terms of ethics, both forms of violence are inhuman and evil— but since when is history made according to ethical standards? To start applying them at the point where the oppressed rebel against the oppressors, the have-nots against the haves is serving the cause of actual violence by weakening the protest against it.²⁴⁹

Marcuse’s piece was thus quite politically charged, much to the delight of radical students and to the ire of the academic establishment and ordinary Americans- in fact he was accused of “corrupting the youth” by other intellectuals and received several death threats throughout the sixties.²⁵⁰ And yet, Marcuse was no stranger to wielding political violence; in Berlin in 1918 Marcuse had joined a communist civilian defense force, and was assigned to shoot at right-wing snipers.²⁵¹ It is remarkable that Marcuse’s peers were so appalled at his justification of political violence given the fact he had actively engaged in such violence decades ago. However, the fact that Marcuse was, in the sixties, developing a more elaborate political theory in which violence was justified due to the asymmetry of power between the oppressed and the oppressors remains

²⁴⁷ Marcuse, “An Essay on Liberation,” 70-71

²⁴⁸ Marcuse “Repressive Tolerance,” 102

²⁴⁹ Ibid, 103

²⁵⁰ Kellner, 284-285

²⁵¹ Jeffries, 58

indicative of his larger theoretical evolution. Crucially, as he increasingly modified his theories he never abandoned the principles which he had based his prior theories, and presumably, actions upon. Dialectics, for instance, continued to feature heavily in his work, even as he confronted new political and historical questions.

Marcuse's work throughout the sixties demonstrate that he was particularly keen on applying dialectical logic to prevalent political situations. For instance, Marcuse justified his opposition to exercising political rights by arguing that "within a repressive society, even progressive movements threaten to turn into their opposite to the degree to which they accept the rules of the game."²⁵² Here Marcuse reiterated a common dialectical concept of his. In simple terms, if a progressive movement acts within the legal and institutional confines of society it may be rendered no longer progressive (it will be negated) by the more comprehensive "negation," which is all of repressive society. Not only are reform movements ineffectual, they can actually become repressive themselves. Conversely, affecting political change from outside of the political system has its own dialectical logic:

Dialectics of democracy: if democracy means self-government of free people, with justice for all, then the realization of democracy would presuppose abolition of the existing pseudo-democracy... the fight for democracy thus tends to assume anti-democratic forms, and to the extent to which the democratic decisions are made in "parliaments" on all levels, the opposition will tend to become extra-parliamentary. The movement to extend constitutionally professed rights and liberties to the daily life of the oppressed minorities, even the movement to preserve existing rights and liberties, will become "subversive" to the degree to which it will meet the stiffening resistance of the majority against an "exaggerated" interpretation and application of equality and justice.²⁵³

On the one hand, Marcuse's argument is that in order to establish an authentic democracy a complete negation (abolition) of the current structure is required. On the other hand, as the contradictions within the current democratic system become exacerbated through supposedly

²⁵² Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance," 83

²⁵³ Marcuse, "An Essay on Liberation," 65-66

“anti-democratic” efforts, which in reality are working toward democratic goals such as equality and freedom, the current system will become even *less* democratic, as it is faced with its own internal contradictions. As this procedure unfolds, more democratic movements will become “subversive” insofar as they are rendered increasingly, and more obviously, incompatible with the prevailing “democratic” system. While Adorno implied that there is essentially no way to “act” dialectically, Marcuse argued on the contrary that dialectical logic necessitates extra-democratic action, and to act within democratic institutions is to ignore the dialectical reality, which consequently, promotes the repression of the prevailing society. This logic also serves to reason Marcuse’s defense of violent action aside from his own experience with it; violent revolutionary action is quite extra-democratic. As Angela Davis so aptly remarked about Marcuse, “He emphasized the important role of intellectuals within oppositional movements, which, I believe, led more intellectuals to frame their work in relation to these than would otherwise have done so.”²⁵⁴ Marcuse, then, was framing his work in relations to the movement and proliferation of ideas that Critical Theory had previously left unaccounted for.

Although the Frankfurt School rarely involved themselves with direct political action, extra-democratically or otherwise, both Marcuse and Fromm were certainly exceptions to this rule, with Marcuse’s activism and Fromm’s role in the left-wing of the democratic party. Both men even retained an optimism, exhibited by their unique political activities in the sixties, that confirmed their roles as outliers within the field of critical theory. Yet, while in both cases this was rooted in a dialectical understanding of history, Marcuse and Fromm’s analyses and political activities differed substantially. Marcuse sought out those who were excluded from the social order and would thus be positioned in such a way to sufficiently negate it. His involvement with

²⁵⁴ Davis, xii

the New Left led him to increasingly account for colonialism and racism, and he believed that participation within the system is tantamount to its endorsement. He argued that violence can serve righteous political purposes and was certainly far better than accepting institutionalized violence. Fromm, on the other hand, sought out ways to emphasize positive freedoms. Often Fromm worked within the system of institutional politics, and he demonstrated a willingness to make compromises in order to ensure his message would be received by the people who had power to respond. He adhered to his nonviolent doctrine throughout. Their actions, in many ways, serve to exhibit the culmination of the distinction between their notions of dialecticism.

Epilogue: Love and Refusal in the 21st Century

In the last few years there has been a notable surge of writing on Critical Theory and the Frankfurt School. Stuart Jeffries' work, *Grand Hotel Abyss*, which I cite several times throughout this thesis, was only published in 2016. In 2013, Lawrence J. Friedman wrote his biography on Erich Fromm. In 2014, Stephen Whitfield wrote an article for *Dissent* (of all places) analyzing Marcuse's legacy in the twenty-first century.²⁵⁵ Following the election of Donald Trump to the American presidency, *The New Yorker* published a piece titled "The Frankfurt School Knew Trump Was Coming."²⁵⁶ And of course, conservatives and progressives alike have traced the notion of "cultural Marxism" to thinkers such as Adorno and Marcuse, either to lament or celebrate them and their influence on young activists today. Despite all of this, understanding Critical Theory, decades after its inception, is no easy feat. Understanding Fromm and Marcuse's contribution to Critical Theory, however, may help us.

In 2005 Angela Davis wrote that "the overarching themes of Marcuse's thought are as relevant today on the cusp of the twenty-first century as they were when his scholarship and political interventions were most celebrated."²⁵⁷ She then went on to posit important questions about how one can begin to understand Marcuse's relevance today: "How do we draw upon Marcuse's critical theory in our attempt to develop new vocabularies of resistance today, vocabularies that effect a rupture with the equation of equation of affirmative action and 'reverse racism,' vocabularies that reflect a utopian vision of a society without prisons, at least without the monstrous, corporatized system that we call the prison industrial complex?"²⁵⁸ We can

²⁵⁵ Stephen Whitfield, "Refusing Marcuse: 50 Years After *One-Dimensional Man*" *Dissent* (Fall 2014). <https://www.dissentmagazine.org/article/refusing-marcuse-fifty-years-after-one-dimensional-man>

²⁵⁶ Alex Ross, "The Frankfurt School Knew Trump Was Coming" *The New Yorker*, December 5, 2016.

²⁵⁷ Davis, xi

²⁵⁸ Davis, xiii

similarly ask questions of Fromm; how do we draw upon his theories to understand our own responsibilities within capitalist society? How do activists incorporate his steadfast adherence to nonviolent action into their own work? Can political reform also be radical? In a larger sense, Fromm and Marcuse offer us a different set of options and ways to engage with politics. Indeed, their condemnation of the liberal bourgeois order seems as if it is lent a newer relevance in the twenty-first century, as news articles and scholarly works are published almost daily claiming that liberalism is in crisis. Given the resurgence of far-right politics, Fromm's work on the appeal of authoritarianism to individuals and Marcuse's argument that fascist tendencies exist, indeed thrive, within "enlightened" capitalist society seem as if they could have been written today.

However, attempting to apply theories written decades ago is always a problematic endeavor. Even as Davis argues for Marcuse's relevance she warns, "He, more than anyone, insisted on the deeply historical character of theory," adding:

It would certainly militate the spirit of his ideas to argue that his work contains the solution to the many dilemmas facing us as scholars, organizers, advocates, artists, and, I would add, as marginalized communities, whose members are increasingly treated as detritus and relegated to prisons, which, in turn, generate astronomical profits for a growing global prison industry.²⁵⁹

Again, this warning can be equally applied to Fromm, who rarely accounted for race, gender, and sexuality in his writings. He spoke of radical, anti-capitalist love, but he did not demonstrate the many different forms such love can take. As for Marcuse, his almost dogmatic disdain for institutional politics itself seems outdated, as more women, people of color, queer people and even socialists are seeking political office, many victoriously. Whether or not the procurement of power for those who have been historically stripped of it will lend itself to a radical alteration of society, of course, remains to be seen. Marcuse, I am sure, would be wary.

²⁵⁹ Ibid, xiv

There is also a deep historical misjudgment in the works of Fromm and Marcuse.

Marcuse sanguinely believed that the countercultural movement signified the dialectical negation of the social order. If one is to take his dialectical position seriously, this must be recognized as a miscalculation of the historical forces, for society did not reach its determinate negation.

Capitalism reigns, perhaps more forcefully than ever before. Some even blame Marcuse for the countercultural movement's failure, as Cohn-Bendit, a leader of the 1968 French revolt remarked, "We read too much Marcuse when instead we should have been reading Arendt."²⁶⁰

Perhaps, in light of my thesis, one could just as easily argue that they should have been reading Fromm. And yet, Fromm's own historical calculation is not any more accurate than Marcuse's. Fromm argued that despite certain setbacks, society is always progressing, and always procuring more freedoms for more people. In the fifties, notions of benevolent capitalism rang true, as many more people had access to middle class lifestyles, social security, and time for leisure. As McLaughlin rightly pointed out, Fromm was wrong in believing that this affluence would be the new normal for modern industrial societies. His general faith in democracy, and the eventual realization of socialist humanism, while understandable given the historical context, was ultimately misplaced.

Despite the obvious shortcomings of their works, I believe that Fromm and Marcuse still offer pertinent theories. Even as Adorno's total indictment of western civilization has come to define Critical Theory, Fromm and Marcuse offer us a more optimistic interpretation. They even demonstrate how one can participate in capitalist society (or from the outside) while still articulating the deficiencies of that same society. They explore ways in which oppositional politics can manifest, an endeavor that Adorno and Horkheimer, for instance, never embark

²⁶⁰ Whitfield

upon. As Fromm and Marcuse show us, one does not have to accept the conditions imposed upon them, and intellectuals and academics can apply their theories to political activism. In that way Marcuse and Fromm predicted, arguably more than any other critical theorist, the modern relationship between academic and political work.

The purpose of writing this thesis was never to indicate the superior thought of one theorist over the other, and it certainly was not to show that Marcuse was right all along in his indictment of Fromm. Rather, it was to emphasize the historical intellectual differences between these two thinkers and offer a new aspect to Critical Theory that has been underemphasized. One can accept the ideas and condemnations of society offered by Critical Theory while still partaking in political acts. It does not have to be, as regarded by many, a theory for the hopeless and disillusioned. Recent attempts, such as McLaughlin's, to accentuate the similarities between these two very different critical theorists is not helpful to modern readers of Critical Theory, even as it importantly shifted the academic conversation away from the psychoanalytic argument of the Fromm-Marcuse debate. We can acknowledge the vast intellectual differences between Fromm and Marcuse while still admitting that both remain relevant, even decades after their writing. In fact, the equation of Marcuse's thought to Fromm's, aside from its inaccuracy, is also consequential. The centuries-long debate between reform and revolution, for instance, platitudinous as it may be, brings with it serious ramifications, and it is just as applicable today as it was one hundred years ago. Should one find meaning within capitalist society, through love and work, or dedicate their life to disrupting the status quo? Should one make compromises in the hopes of affecting some change, or adhere steadfastly to their values, acknowledging that no change may come of it? Is society utterly irredeemable? These are some of the questions Marcuse and Fromm address in their works, and, as I demonstrated, they answered them quite

differently. To treat these vastly different ideas as if they are inconsequential is a disservice to Fromm and Marcuse as much as it is to modern readers of Critical Theory.

The title of this thesis, “Love and Refusal” is quite plainly a summation of Fromm and Marcuse’s different answers to the problems posed by modern society. “Love is the only sane and satisfactory answer to the problem of human existence” Fromm wrote in 1956. For Marcuse, writing in 1964, if such an answer exists it is only through the actions of “those who, without hope, have given and give their life to the Great Refusal.”²⁶¹ In their own way, these two ideas offer hope to the reader who subscribes to their critique of modern society. Marcuse and Fromm reassure us. Under capitalism you may be inconsequential, but it does not have to be so. Perhaps above all else, Marcuse and Fromm’s idealistic imagination of what society can look like reminds those disheartened by capitalism, racism, imperialism, and even fascism today, that there are alternatives. How can these alternatives be realized? Fromm and Marcuse gave us a few different approaches.

²⁶¹ Marcuse, “One-Dimensional Man,” 257

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