Chapter 9

The Subordination of Politics

What are the causes of political apathy in modern life? This is a primary question that C. Wright Mills, a sociologist, and Herbert Marcuse, a philosopher, tried to answer just as American society was awakening from the political torpor of the 1950s. Both were extremely concerned that the political space for any reasonable notion of politics was virtually disappearing, and both desperately sought ways to revive it. Both had an important influence on political radicals in the 1960s. Mills’s critique of contemporary democracy was the foundational text of a seminal political guide of the era: the Port Huron Statement of the Students for a Democratic Society.¹ Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man* was required reading for political radicals and the counterculture alike.²

Apathy as a Condition of Consciousness

Mills and Marcuse both cast very strong images of how pervasive and deeply rooted apathy is, and were severely critical of mainstream political discourse and scholarship. For them, the dialectic between structure and ideology, action and thought, come together to fashion a type of apathy very different from that celebrated by Berelson and longed for by Huntington.

Together, the work of Mills and Marcuse indicates three potential aspects of political apathy as a condition. The first two I put under the rubric *alienation*, but I use this term in the specific sense of conditions of political life that are objective within the terms of the theory. Objective alienation takes its most severe form in what I will call *absolute political alienation*, which in turn finds its most complete expression in Marcuse’s *One-Dimensional Man*, to be discussed in the next chapter. Absolute political alienation exists when people have been so thoroughly manipulated and programmed that they lose the capacity for free intentional action, including the ability to think and act in ways that at some point may be politically relevant. Both Mills and Marcuse also offer what I consider a more tenable thesis of *relative political alienation*: the indefinite suspension of the consciousness to form political intentions and act in their terms.

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From Mills’s work, however, I draw a theory of political subordination: the scope of the political realm is so narrowly drawn, and the terms of discourse that find life within it so confusing and inappropriate, that it may be fairly said that politics is thoroughly subordinated to a matrix of depoliticizing institutions, ideas, and practices. Once modified, this theory forms the heart of what I later elaborate in chapter 13 as a thesis of complex depoliticization.

Publics and Power Elite
When we modify Mills’s overtly political analysis with his imaginative sociological investigation of the role of motivation in human behavior and the contours of modern character structure, his concept of political subordination becomes distinctive, helping locate the social glue vital to depoliticized roles: the active commitment of the actors to them. In this manner, he helps account for their resiliency.

Political subordination occurs when people are denied counterideologies, political institutions, and modes of life that may help them form political intentions and act accordingly. In a society in which the prevailing ideology focuses on individual merit and achievement, in which the major political parties’ programs are too similar, and in which “politics” is considered to be contained in the specialized electoral arena, distinct from work, culture, leisure, and family, troubles and grievances that emerge are unlikely to be translated into political issues. Left personal, or displaced onto inappropriate objects, such political moods leave the source of malaise untouched and deflect the formulation of accurate political analysis and smart strategy. Yet a clear reading of the shape of the social structure may indicate openings to a revived politics.

For Mills, the bottleneck of malaise and the faltering of reason spring directly from the development of mass society in America. His fear is that the community of publics characteristic of nineteenth-century America has been replaced by a “power elite” at the top, stalemate in the middle, and a mass society below. Comprising the top echelons of the corporate and military establishments, with the executive branch of government—the “political directorate”—as a junior partner, this elite, he claims, has concentrated more power in its hands than “any small group of men in world history, the Soviet elite possibly excepted.”

Gone is the political order characterized by a diversity of local publics, with power dispersed among the states, held in coalition by a weak federal center. The economy, too, no longer comprising a “great scatter of productive units” balancing one another, is now dominated by several large corporations. Military definitions of reality loom large as well in all political and economic decisions, as the military overcomes its meager origins colored by civilian distrust to become a full partner of the power elite.

The decline of publics is directly tied to the ascendancy of these central-
ized political, economic, and military institutions as they undermine four requirements of people as members of genuine publics: People lose the opportunity to express their own opinions, instead receiving opinions through the media in “one-way communication.” They don’t have an opportunity to answer the statements of others immediately and in public; nor can they base meaningful public action on such public discussion. And they lose the ability to protect themselves from the intrusions of large organizations.

In a public, discussion is the major medium of communication, and the media serve to link various primary publics. As publics dissolve into mass society, people no longer have a primary community within which to discuss problems and clarify their feelings or ideas about society and their position in it. Even the middle-level voluntary association—“the citizen’s major link with decision” and the heart of pluralist analysis—is becoming remote from individuals and primary publics, and is stuck in a “semiorganized stalemate.” To the extent politics exists, it is here, yet these group conflicts are those of second-rate provincial interests, not the great clash of dominant interests whose resolution, in pluralist theory, yields the public interest. Even here, there is increasing integration into the expanded state apparatus as bureaucratic administration displaces electoral politics and real legislation. United by psychological similarities, “the structural blending of commanding positions and common interests,” and at times “explicit coordination,” the power elite is able to dominate the American social structure. Without publics within which to develop alternative ideas and strategies, people and their opinions are successfully managed. The result is a permanent war establishment tied to a privately incorporated economy insulted by a “political vacuum.”

Within the elite as a whole, this coincidence of military domain and corporate realm strengthens both of them and further subordinates the merely political man. Not the party politician but the corporation executive is now more likely to sit down with military men and answer the question, “What is to be done?”

Key institutions fail in their responsibility to democracy. The media do not help clarify the meaning of the narrow milieu of individuals in mass society. Instead of helping “enlarge and animate the discussions of primary publics,” they transform “them into a set of media markets in mass-like society.” The educational institutions themselves have become mass media, becoming job preparation centers rather than teaching citizenship, with “an ideology of ‘life adjustment’ that encourages happy acceptance of mass ways of life rather than the struggle for individual and public transcendence.” The political parties and voluntary organizations similarly fail to provide an effective link between the individual and public decisions. This failure is egregious because “these middle-level associations are the citizen’s major link

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with decision….it is only through them that he exercises such power as he may have."

People become ripe for manipulation, unable to fully grasp even dramatic political experiences.

experience of such a structural shift has to be organized and interpreted if it is to count in the making of opinion.

The kind of experience, in short, that might serve as a basis for resistance to mass media is not an experience of raw events, but the experience of meanings. The fleck of interpretation must be there in the experience if we are to use the word experience seriously.

The Last Radical Democrat of Modernity

A central focus of Mills's work was always the use of critical intelligence in the service of human progress. He considered that modern life—and modern intellectual life in particular—was characterized by a “higher immorality” precisely because, although knowledge was plentiful, critical intelligence was in short supply, too often not prized or even missed. This was what he strove to rectify. “Only where publies and leaders are responsive and responsible,” he wrote, “are human affairs in democratic order, and only when knowledge has public relevance is this order possible.” As Irving Louis Horowitz claims, to achieve this critical intelligence, “Mills called upon the ‘classic tradition’—rational and enlightened tradition, in which mind is autonomous and independent of power but, nonetheless, morally related to the mainsprings of social growth.” Although Horowitz would later temper his judgment, writing in 1967 he called Mills “the greatest sociologist the United States has ever produced.”

The main drift of C. Wright Mills’ work is linked to the practical importance of an ethically viable social science. This is so because such a sociology confronts the facts with integrity, and confirms the integrity by doing something about the facts.

Indeed, for Mills there was an intimate connection between the study of society and the issues facing it.

To formulate any problem requires that we state the values involved and the threat to these values. For it is the felt threat to cherished values—such as those of freedom and reason—that is the necessary moral substance of all significant problems of social inquiry, and as well of all public issues and private troubles.

Throughout his career, Mills used what he considered the intellectual craft of sociology to search for a way for people to break with the “main
drift” of American society toward increasing corporate domination, state and corporate administration, economic boom and slump, and ultimately war. The problem of how to generate real political participation and overcome apathy was always an important practical obstacle to his passion to see America become more democratic once again, and for it to fulfill the Enlightenment ambition of a society in which power was guided by reason. Overturning mass society, however, would require more than knowledge. It would also involve a coming together of organization, structural conditions, strategic location in the social structure, leadership, vision, and willpower.

In his early work, particularly *The New Men of Power*, Mills gives a more subtle analysis of the societal conditions that lie behind political apathy, and how they may be overcome. Writing in the economic and political climate of 1948, he suggests that unions could become a formidable agency of change, with union leaders playing a vital role. Backed by numbers and organization, they were in a unique strategic position both to organize the unorganized and to unite the power of labor organization to the ideas of “labor intellectuals.” If the “character and timing” of the next slump created “appropriate conditions,” Mills concluded, the masses could be moved.

There were formidable obstacles, however, including selecting leaders within unions who were “the last representatives of the economic man,” and the “apathy and lack of understanding” of union members. Moreover, the state was taking over the task of regulating the labor force, and union leaders were supporting this development, narrowing the labor-capital struggle, serving as discipliners of the workforce and as go-betweens for workers, owners and managers, and politicians. Yet he had a hope. A major slump was coming, creating a “political interlude” during which union leaders could become decisive actors. The fact that economic struggles seemed increasingly to intrude into the political arena was itself a symptom of pending crisis. Mills proposed a program of increasing worker democracy in the economic sphere, workers’ control of production, socialization of the means of production, and a party of labor to press for a program that would address not only the needs of organized labor, such as wages, but also those of the American public, such as prices and war and economic slump. For this program to succeed, however, a democratic mass base had also to be created, requiring “training . . . in the more direct democracy of daily life, in the shop and in the unions,” especially allowing expression of creative impulses at work: “That is the basis for a politics of democratic socialism.”

Labor leaders were uniquely situated to unite alternative ideas to the power of organized workers, reject old legitimations, propose countersymbols, organize the unorganized, unite the unions, and develop a broad political program. Complete the task of developing an informed national union constituency, Mills warns, or the unorganized may be used against you.
It is the task of the labor leaders to allow and to initiate a union of the power and the intellect. They are the only ones who can do it; that is why they are now the strategic elites in American society. Never has so much depended upon men who are so ill-prepared and so little inclined to assume the responsibility.14

Mills, in 1948, saw the apathetic public as neither the consenting abstainers of Berelson and his colleagues, nor the “cheerful robots” he himself was to later worry about in *White Collar*. Instead, he sees a range of depoliticized citizens.

The “underdogs” were “an important aspect of class relations in America”; for them to “endure this life requires a low level of aspiration which softens the will and creates apathy.”15 They could become politically engaged, however, through a “new type of union community” in which they would likely become “solid union members.”16

The white-collar workers’ numerical growth and bureaucratic indispensability had to be made politically relevant through union organizing, promoting their freedom and security. At present, they had “neither political awareness nor rudimentary organization” and their “occupational ideology” was “politically passive.”17

Finally, the workers themselves had a “historic mentality of acquiescence,” based on American prosperity and not broken completely even by the Great Depression. Yet would they suffer another depression without serious political engagement? Didn’t advertising slogans that promoted business loyalty already seem banal, as market contraction helped undermine the dream of success through hard work? Although education was expanding, didn’t the opportunity it afforded now mean less because there were an insufficient number of appropriate jobs? Mills asks,

> The personalization of success has been possible, but how long will the personalization of failure into individual guilt continue?18

Mills’s hope was that changed circumstances, political space, leadership, and organization would help break the back of acquiescence.

> Political apathy is not a function only of leadership; certain conditions in the life of the worker, and in the history of the United States, lie in back of it.19

The capacity of American workers for political action, he cautions, should not be underestimated. Prefiguring Schattschneider’s mobilization of bias thesis, he writes,

> The political apathy of the American worker is an apathy about engaging in electoral politics when there are no issues about which he feels deeply or understands fully. He votes neither for Tweedledee nor Tweedledum. Yet on more stirring occasions, the U.S. worker may “vote with his feet.” The
American worker has a high potential militancy when he is pushed, and if he knows what the issue is. Such a man, identified with unions as communities and given a chance to build them, will not respond apathetically when outside political forces attempt to molest what is his.  

It was foolish, he argues, for labor leaders to complain about apathetic workers and support either of the main parties, who “alienate people from politics in its deeper meanings and demoralize those on the edge of political consciousness.” In those “who suffer the results of irresponsible social decisions and who hold a disproportionately small share of values available,” labor had potential allies. But its leaders still had to choose to fight. Only they could weld ideas to organization and “focus the deprivation politically, inculcate the truth about common interests and common struggles, and offer some hope of winning a better tomorrow.”  

Despair  
By the 1950s, with the increasing stability of capitalism and the integration of unions as interest groups within the corporate economy, Mills dismissed the “labor metaphysic” as a romantic illusion, concluding, as Herbert Marcuse also would, that the working class was now a conservative political force standing against structural reform:

the trade unions, have the pure and simple ideology of alienated work: more and more money for less and less work.

If labor’s recent history worked against Mills’s hopes, the politics and consciousness of the white-collar worker met his fears. In this world, Mills found a “new little man,” shaped by large centralized bureaucratic institutions, stuck in dull routines of enervating work and leisure, apathetic, and without political power. As persons in a mass without communities, publics, or traditions, the white-collar worker embodied the most profound apathy of his time.

Unlike the old middle class, Mills reports, the new consists largely of dependent employees in salesrooms or offices, small-business people under pressure, and salaried professionals. The idea of the old independent middle class, confused by a dated “rhetoric of competition,” now obscured the reality of a new dependent “middling class” of salaried employees.

The broad linkage of enterprise and property, the cradle-condition of classic democracy, no longer exist in America. This is no society of small entrepreneurs—now they are one stratum among others: above them is the big money; below them, the alienated employee; before them, the fate of politically dependent relics; behind them, their world.
Expanded by an increasing need to coordinate and dispose of the economic surplus, itself generated by leaps in productivity, the white-collar workforce had the essential tasks of manipulating the people who make things, the things themselves, and symbols in the form of paper and money, and turning all these into profits for owners. Like Marcuse would, Mills sees a pervasive new ideology tied to increased productivity.

The immense productivity of mass-production technique and the increased application of technologic rationality are the first open secrets of modern occupational change: fewer men turn out more things in less time.

The bulk of the white-collar class falls into what he calls “the great salesroom” or the “enormous file.” For both, the nature of their work life, leisure, communities, and culture keep them politically marginal and apathetic. With the decline of independence and real craft, work life becomes alienating and “whatever satisfactions alienated men gain from work occur within the framework of alienation; whatever satisfaction they gain from life occurs outside the boundaries of work; work and life are sharply split.”

Lacking true craft as a live contrast model, the white-collar worker is unable to determine independently the sources of dissatisfaction. To ensure steady work, enlightened managers propose relief that itself is alienating, conceived as a “human relations” problem of the personnel department. Legitimated “in the pseudo-objective language of engineers,” these adaptive solutions allow “the personnel manager to relax his authoritarian manner and widen his manipulative grip . . . to conquer work alienation within the bounds of work alienation.” Anticipating Jürgen Habermas’s thesis of “motivation crisis” in advanced capitalism, he says management has “not yet found a really sound ideology” to replace the work ethic. Instead, there exists a “curious contradiction” about the meaning of success—both a compulsion to “amount to something” and a “poverty of desire, a souring of the image of success.”

The very meaning of a successful life in America is transformed:

The governmental pension is clearly of another type of society than the standard American dream. The old end was an independent prosperity, happily surrounded by one’s grandchildren; the end now envisioned is a pensioned security independent of one’s grandchildren.

Dependent on authoritarian hierarchy not only for income but for self-image, as Karl Mannheim observed, people will frantically grasp claims of status. The result is a “status panic” and self-alienation:

striving for the next rank, they come to anticipate identification with it, so that now they are not really in their places . . . status that is exterior to one’s present work does not lead to intrinsic work gratification. Only if present work leads to the anticipated goal by a progression of skills, and is thus given meaning, will status aspirations not alienate the worker.
As the home declines in importance as the worker’s psychological center, it falls to leisure to prepare people for increasingly alienating work, and people segregate work life from real life. Rather than relaxing or regenerating creativity, however, leisure only diverts from the “restless grind” of work into the “absorbing grind” of glamor and thrills, encouraging distinct work and holiday images of the self: “The bright two weeks [of vacation] feed the dream of the dull pull.”

With the decline of status in work, residence and consumption also gain as currency for prestige. But here, too, people rely on appearance in a “market of strangers” with whom one shares interests rather than descent or tradition, has contacts rather than relations, lives in a mass of uniformity, distant from work, rather than a cohesive community. Status claims must be continuously renewed. “Physically close, but socially distant,” Mills writes, “human relations become at once intense and impersonal—and in every detail, pecuniary.” As ties become more superficial, self-respect is maintained through the display of the “token of economic worth,” as Thorstein Veblen argued, “a struggle to keep up appearance.” But it is an unsuccessful struggle for status, on a “personality market” consumed by a “fetishism of appearances” that denies self-respect, alienates emotions from “inner feelings,” and creates “self-estrangement.”

Popular culture also helps transform one’s self-image from a producer to a “relaxed consumer.” The relaxation, however, is illusory. As the gap grows between potential accomplishments and the forces that actually determine life chances, ambition takes the form of the “conscientiousness of the good employee”; leisure, of “consumer dreams” where the individual can “make no mistakes”; and life itself appears accidental, as a game or lottery, while success seems dazzling, beyond reach and something to be enjoyed vicariously.

Mills characterizes the message to the white-collar worker in this way: Work hard but expect little enjoyment from work and don’t expect to go too far. When you fail, you will still be blamed for your inadequacies, and you will blame yourself as well. Don’t worry, because success, you will be told, is not what it’s cracked up to be, so do as you are told at work and seek your success in spiritual fulfillment off the job. You will try to find your satisfactions in consumption and vicarious living, your self-respect in competition over appearances, and your craft in molding yourself into a happy person despite your life. But you will fail because your position remains insecure, your relations transitory and shallow, and your self-esteem under constant assault.

White-collar workers, at the heart of mass society, are ripe for manipulation.

**Hidden Power**

In the popular imagination, Mills is perhaps most famous for his theory of power developed in his 1956 classic, *The Power Elite*. Mills’s volume touched
off a storm of debate and controversy, especially over whether he accurately captured
the structure of power in American society, and over what power is and how one goes
about examining it. Robert Dahl, for example, criticizes Mills for not putting his thesis
to the “test” of discovering whether an elite in fact exists “by an examination of a series of
concrete cases where key decisions are made.” While Dahl is surely right to look for evidence,
his focus here on “decisions” not hidden to the researcher overlooks the way power
can be deployed through what Lukes calls its second and third dimensions; therefore,
Dahl much too narrowly constricts what is to count as evidence. Moreover, as
Horowitz argues, pluralist community power studies like Dahl’s classic Who Governs?,
even if accurate, do not disprove Mills’s thesis. “Dahl seems to have deliberately
decided,” Horowitz writes, “that if Mills is right in the larger context it will be borne
out in any community study. However, this is precisely what Mills’s premises do not
require.”

Criticizing Mills’s theory of elite power more adeptly than Dahl, Peter Clecak
concludes,

In his desire to perceive the making of history as an increasingly conscious
activity, Mills probably assigned too much weight to the elites at the top.
Having done this, he was committed to overexplaining the powerlessness of
other groups. The myth of consolation appealed to powerless individuals
[especially intellectuals], but it implicitly subverted the creation of a new
politics. In White Collar, however, Mills emphasizes a hidden, more insidious form of power.
Manipulation, he argues there, has become the chief form of power in twentieth-
century America, and its ascendance is directly tied to the bureaucratic context of
decision making. Driven by a “managerial demiurge,” “at the top, society becomes an
uneasy interlocking of private and public hierarchies, and at the bottom, more and
more areas become objects of management and manipulation.” Mills claims that, for
the bureaucracy, the world is an object to be manipulated, and implies that the very
idea of rationality has become a tool of manipulation. Trapped in ever larger
organizations ostensibly built on principles of rationality, carrying “out series of
apparently rational actions without any ideas of the ends they serve,” white-collar
workers feel that life itself is arbitrary.

The psychological heart of this mood is a feeling of powerlessness—but with
the old edge taken off, for it is a mood of acceptance and of relaxation of the
political will.

The result is “organized irresponsibility,” a form of power that is manipulative
precisely because it promotes the illusion that no one seems to bear responsibility.
You are used for ends you cannot see, in ways you are unaware of, by people you do
not know. You follow motives that are external to you,

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not because you believe in them, although you may come to, but because following them is how you function within the organization. You fit yourself in without clearly seeing how you are being fit in. And all this nurtures character development whose lack of grounded sense of self makes you ripe for further manipulation.

It is “the grand problem of the psychology of social strata,” he writes, to explain the lack of correspondence between “political mentalities” and “objectively defined strata.” Middle class largely in name only, white-collar workers have little power. For a social stratum to accumulate power, it must have a favorable interplay between

will and know-how, objective opportunity, and organization. The opportunity is limited by the group’s structural position; the will is dependent upon the group’s consciousness of its interests and ways of realizing them. And both structural position and consciousness interplay with organization, which strengthen consciousness and are made politically relevant by structural position.  

Lacking the idea of craftsmanship as a contrast model, devoid of firm tradition, subject to the propaganda of one-way communication while “relaxed of mind and tired of body,” living in a community of strangers, the worker of the modern metropolis has few resources with which to comprehend the white-collar world he or she inhabits. Without a clearly self-evident common group interest, shackled by an ideology and self-understanding that further deny such interest, left vulnerable by an easily manipulated character structure, white-collar workers will remain politically passive.

Apathy
The white-collar worker is Mills’s prototype of the apathetic citizen. The most fundamental political difference between white-collar workers in mass society and citizens of a democratic society is that

men in masses are gripped by personal troubles, but they are not aware of their true meaning and source. Men in public confront issues, and they are aware of their terms.

Unaware of their own lives as biographical examples of a collective historical experience, unable to forge interpretive links between their life and their times, they are ignorant and apathetic, unable objectively to understand their position in American society or press independently to improve it. Whether joining unions or not, they are likely to remain “the little individual scrambling to get to the top” instead of the dependent employee banding together with others for a collective ascent. As people stuck in mass society,

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they don’t truly observe their real experience, and their desires “often are insinuated into them”:

They may be politically irritable, but they have no political passion. They are a chorus, too afraid to grumble, too hysterical in their applause. They are rearguarders. In the shorter run, they will follow the panicky ways of prestige; in the long run, they will follow the ways of power, for, in the end, prestige is determined by power.47

To overcome their discomfort and dependence, they would first have to understand precisely what mass society so skilfully keeps from them: the relation between social structure and milieus of the individual. Only then could vague discontent be translated into political issues:

It is not merely paradoxical to say that the values of freedom and reason are back of the absence of troubles, back of the uneasy feeling of malaise and alienation. In a similar manner, the issue to which modern threats to freedom and reason most typically lead is, above all, the absence of explicit issues—to apathy rather than to issues explicitly defined as such.48

The advent of the apathetic person as a dominant political and social type, for Mills, was a direct threat to American democracy. He asks,

Can he be happy in this condition, and what are the qualities and the meanings of such happiness? It will no longer do merely to assume, as a metaphysic of human nature, that down deep in man-as-man there is an urge for freedom and a will to reason. Now we must ask: What in man's nature, what in the human condition today, what in each of the varieties of social structure makes for the ascendancy of the cheerful robot? And what stands against it?49

New Left
Before he died in 1962, Mills did entertain moments of hopefulness that a young intelligentsia could spark a New Left and become a catalyst for democratic change. Seeing worldwide dissent by young intellectuals, students, and other protesters, he charged intellectuals to become guides for the New Left then emerging: “help them to focus their moral upsurge in less ambiguous political ways; work out with them the ideologies, the strategies, the theories that will help them to consolidate their efforts: new theories of structural changes of and by human societies in our epoch.”50 Develop a “politics of truth,” he urged, to counter the “crackpot realism” of the “NATO intellectuals” that was moving us toward World War Three.

Mills understood that youth, as an agency of change, were limited by lack of power in the social structure. He even wondered whether his hope was

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In turning to young intellectuals, Mills may have been trying to break out of the despair of what Peter Clecak calls “radical paradoxes”—the discontinuity between what one believes ought to happen and what is likely to happen. At times, he created an undemocratic mood within which to achieve democratic ends, perhaps in his anxiety that this was one last chance to rescue the opportunity for conscious, progressive history-making, now being squandered by elites with real power, from the “grip of fate” and avoid the slide into nuclear war. Yet, his turn to youth and young intellectuals was more than a delusion with which to escape “radical paradoxes.” Before he died, it gave him hope:

Let the old men ask sourly, “Out of Apathy—into what?” The Age of Complacency is ending. Let the old women complain wisely about “the end of ideology.” We are beginning to move again.52

After he died, youth did become a significant agency for change. They were not powerful or wise enough, however, to be the agency he would have hoped for. Would he have been able to help them focus their moral outrage and discontent in politically relevant ways, as he goaded other intellectuals to do?53 He died too young.

Mills on Mills: Social Structure
In endlessly reaching for agents of change, Mills undervalues his own analysis of social structure and how vital structural position is to the real power of potential agency. He writes at times as if both elites and intellectuals have more independent power than they actually do, then fails to suggest what reforms we might be able to expect of enlightened elites at particular times of opportunity:

Far from being dependent upon the structure of institutions, modern elites may smash one structure and set up another in which they enact quite different roles. In fact, such destruction and creation of institutional structures, with all their means of power, when events seem to turn out well, is just what is involved in “great leadership,” or, when they seem to turn out badly, great tyranny.54

Of course, Mills’s political goal was to shake the power elite out of its collective irresponsibility, but when he tried to do so in this way, his ability to analyze power suffered.

Mills on Mills: Methodology
Writing in the quiescent 1950s and early 1960s, Mills offered tools to penetrate the silence. If it is a sad commentary on modern life that people’s self-
understanding could stand against their own freedom and reason, it is still a theoretical possibility that has to be faced squarely. His idea of the modern polls and his very American pragmatism forbade any compromise between truth and dispatch of method.

If we take the simple democratic view that what men are interested in is all that concerns us, then we are accepting the values that have been inculcated. . . .

If we take the dogmatic view that what is to men’s interests, whether they are interested in it or not, is all that need concern us morally then we run the risk of violating democratic values. . . .

. . . by addressing ourselves to issues and to troubles, and formulating them as problems of social science, we stand the best chance, I believe the only chance, to make reason democratically relevant to human affairs in a free society, and so realize the classic values that underlie the promise of our studies.55

Mills’s later writings on the power elite and mass society, however, fail to fully incorporate key insights of his own earlier work, particularly on language and vocabularies of motive. In Mills’s chapter on work in *White Collar*, for example, there is “not one reference to the feelings expressed directly or indirectly by white collar workers.”56

In his early work, Mills suggests that inquiry follow a more sensitive path. Behind social behavior and interpretation lie basic values and vocabularies of motive that can yield discrepant meanings, mixed motives, motivational and value conflicts, especially in complex societies—what he later calls troubles in mass society—that can lead to revision of meaning and, consequently, of understanding and action. Within given historical eras and positions in social structure, therefore, social interpretation should explore the situational patterns within which people form motives and intentions:

For men live in immediate acts of experience and their attentions are directed outside themselves until acts are in some ways frustrated. It is then that awareness of self and motive occur. The “question” is a lingual index of such conditions.57

In explaining conduct, analysts should look to construct “typical vocabularies of motive” that refer “to the typical constellation of motives which are observed to be societally linked with classes of situated actions.” For “motives are the terms with which interpretation of conduct by social actors proceeds” and they “are circumscribed by the vocabulary of the actor.” Mills writes, “This imputation and avowal of motives by actors are social phenomena to be explained. The differing reasons men give for their actions are not themselves without reasons.”58

The implications for research methodology are significant. Researchers

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who “tentatively delimit the situations in which certain motives may be verbalized” and construct “situational questions” stand a better chance of not illicitly imputing motives to the actor. 59 And he cautions social scientists: “To simplify these vocabularies of motive into a socially abstracted terminology is to destroy the legitimate use of motive in the explanation of social actions.”60

Political Subordination

For Mills, the modern threat of apathy takes the form of a direct ideological and structural assault on the potential to form political intentions and act upon them, severely constricting the scope of political thought and action. It is political subordination.

Apathy, in this sense, is a condition under which people suffer, caused by a suppression of political freedom through the subordination of political life itself. It is a complex form of depoliticization, hinged on the way mass society inhibits or channels political knowledge and restricts the ability to make use of it, and complicated by a dialectic between the present mobilization of bias and a complementary psychology, radiating through individuals, that helps social structure dynamically reconstitute itself. Overcoming apathy of this sort requires reconfiguring the present structural and psychological terrain of society. The role assigned women, as Mills put it, of “darling little slaves,” the structure of work, the quality of leisure, the security of residence, perpetual vulnerability of self-esteem, the ability of society to manipulate wants—for Mills, all are latent political problems of contemporary social structure, all foster insidious political apathy.61

Read sympathetically in its entirety, Mills’s work can help clarify how people in mass society help socialize themselves into apathetic postures. We not only learn ideologies that harm our interests; we pursue modes of life, in thought and action, that do so. Forms of social structure and outlines of ideology and vocabularies of motive set the parameters of the commitments we are positioned to make. Our awareness of self and motive and our active re-creation of roles, through commitments we make, then become themselves crucial resources for giving legitimacy to beliefs and ideologies, and this helps explain the resiliency of apathetic roles.

Taken as a whole, Mills’s writing on nonparticipation allows for explanation that in principle may include the republican liberal focus on individual responsibility, the plain democratic concern with the mobilization of bias,62 and the radical democratic preoccupation with the relation between social structure and consciousness. He distinguishes himself in specifying both faces of political apathy. Mills’s paradigm of apathy related to choice can be represented as follows:

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X (an elite, person, group, gender, stratum, subjective class, or society) can be considered responsibly apathetic with respect to Y (something important, of which knowledge is available, and something X could conceivably influence if X could choose to) if X does not care or demonstrate care about Y.

(Mills uses this most clearly in reference to members of the power elite or to intellectuals.)

The suppression of the ability to use freedom and reason to make explicit troubles that threaten these values can lead to the worst sort of apathy as a condition:

X (a person, group, stratum, subjective or objective or mass society) is in a condition of apathy with respect to Y (something important, especially reason and freedom themselves) if X is unable to care about Y.

(Mills most often uses this to refer to the members of mass society, especially white-collar workers.)

**Political Alienation**

In his darker moments, Mills carries too far his analysis of apathy as a condition, unable to substantiate it either theoretically or with reference to lived experience:

We know of course that man can be turned into a robot, by chemical and psychiatric means, by steady coercion and by controlled environment; but also by random pressures and unplanned sequences of circumstances. But can he be made to want to become a cheerful and willing robot?

Here Mills pushes past the more moderate concept of political subordination, starkly suggesting that the very ability to form political intentions—indeed, the ability to form intentions at all—could be severely alienated from the person. Left where Mills leaves it, however, the idea of objective political alienation remains acutely underdeveloped.

As a tendency, or possibility, apathy of the more extreme sort Mills describes should be considered a theoretical possibility of enough consequence to deserve fuller analysis. This is exactly what Herbert Marcuse tries to do in his famous and influential *One-Dimensional Man.*
Chapter 10
Absolute Apathy

In his 1964 *One-Dimensional Man*, Herbert Marcuse put forth this bold thesis: American society is rapidly becoming “one-dimensional” due to the indefinite suspension of structural contradictions within American capitalism and the eradication of the critical dimensions of thought, action, language, and character structure of its people. Only the dimension of the given social order remains, insulating the theory and practice of advanced industrial society from transcending critique, and the liberation it seemed poised to achieve.

The problem in need of explanation is this: science and technology create the possibility for greater freedom, lessening the need for instinctual repression that under conditions of scarcity is necessary for survival. This creates a “specter of liberation,” in which the social relations that continue to dominate under capitalism become unnecessary. Acceptance of such extensive but now unnecessary repression cannot be explained, Marcuse argues, merely by the manipulation of wants, but instead now must correspond to some deeply felt need. Otherwise, the pointless character of contemporary domination would simply be too transparent. Seyla Benhabib captures Marcuse’s point well when she suggests that in his earlier *Eros and Civilization*, he “formulates the impossibility of social crises under conditions of industrial-technological civilization” by claiming, she writes, that “the very objective conditions that would make the overcoming of industrial-technological civilization possible also prevent the subjective conditions necessary for this transformation from emerging.”

Marcuse turns to Freud to help him answer the question, *Why, in spite of the presence of the material basis for it, has a liberating transformation not occurred?* For society to progress—indeed, for civilization to exist—basic conservative instinctual drives seeking pleasure and gratification must be repressed. This clash, the “reality principle,” is ahistorical, he claims against Freud, really specific only to periods of scarcity. With much repression no longer necessary, today the disciplining force is the “performance principle.” The greater the productivity and promise for freedom from alienating labor, the more of what now becomes surplus repression intensifies. The more repression is unnecessary, the more aggression is created and displaced into greater
productivity or onto an “enemy” such as Communism or the underclass. The performance principle dynamically fortifies itself, fostering interclass and international capitalist harmony, an “economically essential and self-beneficial arms economy,” while spurring further technological rationalization and integration of state, society, and the technical base. As John Fry describes it, “Both political apathy and economic prosperity are further ensured in a single stroke.”

Deeply buried under political apathy is extreme danger—the Nazi Holocaust in “civilized” Germany was never far from Marcuse’s thoughts. Nor was nuclear war. The more productivity increases without allowing real gratification or enjoyment, the more repression becomes unnecessary, the more aggression is created, and the more productivity is needed on which to displace aggressive impulses, especially given the inability of the now weak conscience to discipline them. A “vicious circle of progress” is created. Should productivity falter, the severe aggression that repression causes in advanced industrial society could break free. With the world capable of achieving affluence and freedom, it creates instead the conditions for a modern barbarism.

Technological domination of society is extremely powerful, however, and conditions acquiescence right down to the instincts. With the strengthening of the institutions of technical reason over the family and the father, the superego is greatly weakened, the ego reified, losing its ability to mediate among the various instincts, reduced to “automatic reaction” to stimuli from the outside world, unable to distinguish the individual from the society, freedom from repression. The id becomes directly tied to this world through “repressive desublimation,” a direct cathexis onto objects, losing the fantasy (and potential for critical distance) embodied in sublimation.

Productivity, consumption, and the enemy all become instinctual needs of the one-dimensional person, as technical reason becomes the ego ideal, the model for conduct, of the immature ego. Behavior is determined by “mimetic” adjustment to the needs, even rhythms, of the technological infrastructure, rather than by interjected codes of morality. The “multidimensional dynamic,” he writes, “…has given way to a one-dimensional static identification of the individual with the others and with the administered reality principle”.

Marcuse’s specific contribution is to attempt to show how one-dimensional society creates the immediate and unreflective identification of the needs of the individual with those of the technological apparatus itself:

domination—in the guise of affluence and liberty—extends to all spheres of private and public existence, integrates all authentic opposition, absorbs all alternatives. Technological rationality reveals its political character as it becomes the great vehicle of better domination, creating a truly totalitarian universe in which society and nature, mind and body are kept in a state of permanent mobilization for the defense of this universe.
In contrast to the expectations of generations of Marxists, as Jürgen Habermas puts it,

> At the stage of their scientific-technical development, then, the forces of production appear to enter a new constellation with the relations of production. Now they no longer function as the basis of a critique of prevailing legitimations in the interest of political enlightenment, but become instead the basis of legitimation. This is what Marcuse conceives of as world-historically new.⁵

Marcuse writes in his essay “Industrialism and Capitalism in the Work of Max Weber,”

> The very concept of technical reason is perhaps ideological. Not only the application of technology but technology itself is domination (of nature and men) —methodical, scientific, calculated, calculating control….Technology is always a historical-social project: in it is projected what a society and its ruling interests intend to do with men and things. Such a “purpose” of domination is “substantive” and to this extent belongs to the very form of technical reason.⁶

The point which I am trying to make is that science, by virtue of its own method and concepts, has projected and promoted a universe in which the domination of nature has remained linked to the domination of man.⁷

At once, Marcuse casts doubt on both optimistic moments of the Marxian dialectic: the forces of production in science and technology are no longer a means to unmask the now antiquated social relations of capitalism—indeed, they become the mode of domination itself; the working class is thoroughly integrated by them, and is removed as the historical agent capable of apprehending and breaking from obsolete capitalist social relations.

The political task is formidable, in Marcuse’s view—to oppose, confront, and break “the tyranny of public opinions and its makers in the closed society.” He writes, “it makes sense to say that the general will is always wrong—wrong inasmuch as it objectively counteracts the possible transformation of society into more humane ways of life.”⁸ For a radical democrat this poses a powerful dilemma, one which Marcuse confronts in his essay “Repressive Tolerance.”

Tolerance, as now practiced, is really acceptance of a closed universe of ideas and actions that either clearly supports the status quo, or tacitly does so, however “negative” these ideas and actions may be in outer appearance.⁹ This is what he means by “repressive tolerance.” In contrast, Marcuse claims we need a “liberating tolerance”: intolerance of destructive and oppressive ideas and deeds, and toleration of those of pacification and liberation—and this means “intolerance against movements from the Right [and “the estab-
lishment”], and toleration of movements from the Left.” Not tolerating oppressive ideas may anger, and alienate those you seek liberation for—including workers. However, they too have become functional units of a system of total domination. Is Marcuse’s theory of toleration a violation of democratic principles? As long as the “general will is always wrong,” he argues, “discriminating” tolerance must be part of the “struggle for a real democracy.” This is the slim hope left liberation.\textsuperscript{10}

In the last analysis, the question of what are true and false needs must be answered by the individuals themselves, but only in the last analysis; that is if and when they are free to give their own answer.\textsuperscript{11}

In advanced industrial society, they are not free to give it.

The result is the atrophy of the mental organs for grasping the contradictions and the alternatives and, in the one remaining dimension of technological rationality, the Happy Consciousness comes to prevail.\textsuperscript{12}

Apathy
For Marcuse, the explanation of what would normally be thought of as political nonparticipation is not really the issue. The question is, How do we explain the fact that so few people are engaged in liberating thought or action? His answer (with respect to liberation) is that people are thoroughly apathetic, and his paradigm of apathy as a condition is the following:

\[ X \text{ (a subjective or objective mass, class or society) is in a condition of total apathy with respect to } Y \text{ (something enhancing human liberation) when } X \text{ loses the capacity to care about } Y. \text{ Apathy can take the form of absolute or relative objective political alienation.} \]

We have now come 180 from our opening discussion of Bernard Berelson’s explanation of nonparticipation. The apathy that Berelson saw and celebrated as necessary for American democracy is now viewed through Marcuse’s radical lens as profound false consciousness affecting “political” participants and nonparticipants alike. There is an irony here because both err decisively in overstating the amount of apathy present and in misconstruing the nature of much of that which exists. In fact, Marcuse’s work turns out to be both explicitly an attack on technocratic (and positivist) theory and modes of social organization and implicitly an argument that technocratic social theory can become human practice.

Marcuse’s work is important, however, as Jürgen Habermas points out, for he helps answer a question vital to explaining how modern capitalism retains legitimacy in a post-free-market era. Shorn of the legitimations based on the “free exchange of equivalents,” how will necessary state intervention in the economic and social order, and the depoliticization that may be re-
quired for the state to proceed unimpeded, be made plausible to the inhabitants of advanced industrial society?

Let’s now bring Samuel Huntington back in. Habermas’s thesis of “legitimation crisis,” which should provide some hope to Marcuse, would worry Huntington. Too many demands on a democratic political system, beyond what it is capable of achieving, would undermine the system’s authority, in his view, wounding democracy itself. His solution, it will be recalled, is observance of rules of behavior for an advanced technological society, or what Marcuse calls technological rationality, overtly reinforced by a tempering of democratic ideals and tacitly by more apathy.

What Huntington wishes to achieve, Marcuse fears. The technocratic project is most dangerous because people can conform to its requirements. To what degree is Huntington’s hope and Marcuse’s despair justified?

**Absolute Political Alienation?**

Marcuse’s thesis of one-dimensional persons taken literally, on its own terms, can be read as a thesis of absolute objective political alienation. While there is little doubt that he hedges on, modifies, and even sometimes contradicts it, Marcuse scholar Morton Schoolman takes the strict one-dimensionality thesis so seriously that he calls his book on Marcuse *The Imaginary Witness*: If society is truly one-dimensional, who is left to observe this fact? Marcuse writes,

> [Alienation] has become *entirely objective*; the subject which is alienated is swallowed up by its alienated existence. There is only one dimension, and it is everywhere and in all forms. The achievements of progress defy ideological indictment as well as justification; before their tribunal, the “false consciousness” of their rationality becomes the true consciousness.¹³

Critical of Schoolman’s interpretation, Marcuse scholar Douglas Kellner suggests that there “are two ways to read Marcuse’s theory of the one-dimensional technical world and society,” “the primary focus” of *One-Dimensional Man*. One way is to see his “theory as a global, totalizing theory of a new type of society that transcends the contradictions of capitalist society in a new order that eliminates individuality, dissent and opposition.” Indeed, I think the above statement by Marcuse lends some support to such an interpretation. Kellner argues, however, that because Marcuse criticizes one-dimensional society with alternatives that should be “fought for and realized, it is wrong to read Marcuse as a theorist of the totally administered society who completely rejects contradiction, conflict, revolt and alternative thought and action” and a “mistake” to understand *One-Dimensional Man* “simply as the epic of total domination in a quasi-Hegelian attempt to subsume everything into one monolithic totality.”¹⁴
My purpose here is not to try to capture fully all of Marcuse’s nuances, but rather to examine the viability of theories of total apathy through the example of his work. There is sufficient evidence, in my view, to suggest that Marcuse offers what I here call a strict one-dimensionality thesis of absolute political alienation, and a more tenuous thesis of relative political alienation, and an argument for continued political struggle, as Kellner notes. I would further suggest that all actually can even be found in One-Dimensional Man alone. While Marcuse’s pessimism as a whole is closer to the theorist of relative political alienation discussed below, there is the still bleaker side to One-Dimensional Man, in which he advances a hypothesis of such radical alienation that it effectively eliminates subjectivity and constitutes a break with Hegel’s metaphysics of the subject-object relation.15

One cornerstone of Marcuse’s more extreme hyperalienation postulates in One-Dimensional Man is his inaccurate prediction of structural tendencies, such as long-term economic stability, mounting affluence, and domestic and international integration (in his later writings, Marcuse adjusts to account for evidence of problems and dissent—it gives him hope—but it challenges his strict thesis of one-dimensionality16). The essential problem is that Marcuse gives an overfunctional, almost teleological reading of social structure, privileging his ideas about the power and inevitability of technological hegemony over rumbles, present and past, of structural difficulties.17 Typically, he looks at institutions such as welfare and trade unions simply as adaptive institutions, neatly functional for advanced industrial society. But this is a quick glance at them after they have been afforded enough legitimacy to appear integrated, and it misses the ways some demands are not simply adaptive and not easily conceded. If the “working class” appears integrated, this may have more to do with its inability to forge a common interest than its thoroughgoing integration. This fact points to Marcuse’s account of subjectivity as a central problem within his work.

Alistair MacIntyre reminds Marcuse that “the majority of men in advanced industrial societies are often confused, unhappy, and conscious of their lack of power; they are often also hopeful, critical, and able to grasp immediate possibilities of happiness and freedom.” Underrating people as they are, MacIntyre warns, breeds “false contempt” and “underpins policies that would in fact produce just that passivity and that irrationalism with which he [Marcuse] charges contemporary society.”18

Writing about Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, but Marcuse “in particular,” Benhabib suggests that “their work is the best demonstration of how feeble the philosophy of the subject has become.”19

Marcuse’s problematic account of subjectivity is apparent both in his fear of total administration and in the hope for liberation that resurfaces in his post-One-Dimensional Man works, An Essay on Liberation and Counterrevolution and Revolt, written at the height of 1960s protests.20 In hope, it becomes
what he calls the “new sensibility,” which manifests itself through Eros, the life
instinct, in students, third world rebels, minorities, and others he claims are “allergic”
to domination. In fear, it is the thoroughly programmed instincts of “one-dimensional
people” in mimetic harmony with the needs of advanced industrial society, their libido
victim to repressive desublimation and their aggression harnessed to greater
productivity.

Schoolman is right, I think, when he suggests that the subjective underpinning of one-
dimensionality comprehends “social life exclusively in terms of the historical
conditions, material factors, in the final analysis, structural elements constituting and
determining the subject.” Marcuse downplays Freud’s constitutional factors of
development and the development of the ego, focusing instead on the malleability of
the instincts for social control. I would add that this allows Marcuse to develop his
theory of surplus repression, which in turn preserves his Marxian cum Marcusean
hope that the freedom from necessity made possible by advanced technology is the
base upon which liberation can still be built, once unnecessary instinctual repression is
overthrown.

Marcuse’s dilemma regarding Freud is this: Without Freud, he has an underspecified
and somewhat impoverished subject. Yet with Freud, he can’t identify the individual
with the society in the way he wants to, either in the oppressive one-dimensional
phase, or in the future liberated and communitarian one. So he adapts Freud. But in
discarding Freud’s psychological pessimism, he also discards his model of psychosocial
development without replacing it with a more tenable one. The irony undoubtedly
struck him when he wrote One-Dimensional Man. Freud’s model of human development
must have appeared to him an exercise in optimism in comparison to his own.

Habermas explains, however, that one of Marcuse’s “most admirable features”—“not
to give in to defeatism”—was enabled by “a chiliastic trust in a revitalizing dynamic of
instincts.” Marcuse could believe that the individual “is more and more swallowed up
by a totalitarian society,” that the “shrinkage of the ego is without any limits,” and still
“hope for the rebirth of rebellious subjectivity from a nature which is older than, and
arises from below the level of, individuation and rationality.”

This belief, however, itself misapprehends important sources of rebelliousness—for
instance, understating the personal reflection and political engagement that often are
vital to alternative ideas. Many of the young student radicals of the 1960s, for example,
were reared in privileged homes with nonrepressive child rearing, which Marcuse
sometimes thought allowed unrepressed instinctual energy to cause a thirst for
liberation. Yet their ideas, rather than being motivated by some vague “organic”
foundation, were often extensions of those of their parents; and their radicalization
was the result of what they perceived to be broken promises of liberal reform. In
Young Radicals, Kenneth Kenniston reports that “what is most impressive is not their
secret motivation to have the System fail, but their naïve hope that it would succeed, and the extent of their depression and disillusion when their early reformist hopes were frustrated.25 Kenniston’s conclusion concerning the students who worked in the “Vietnam Summer” of 1967 is consistent with a reading of the seminal statement of student protest of that era—the 1962 Port Huron Statement of the newly established Students for a Democratic Society. The most striking thing about this document is that it attempts to formulate and then heal the breach between American ideals and practice.26

There is also substantial empirical evidence to counter Marcuse’s account of thorough worker integration. Schoolman claims that “technological rationality is frustrated by the rationality of subjectivity,” severely limiting the capacity of technological rationality to impose its will—even at the workplace, the closest point to the technological base.27 Industrial psychology literature since the 1950s has focused on “job rotation,” “job enlargement,” “participative management,” “work teams,” “human relations training,” “sensitivity training,” “job enrichment,” “encounter groups,” and even Eastern philosophy. While Marcuse would argue these are emblematic of increasing rationalization of the human mind to conform with technological rationality, Schoolman contends that “the increasing rationalization of production results not in more extensive domination but in increasing resistance to domination.” The proliferation of such techniques points to their failure rather than their success, indicating a “contradiction between human nature and the nature of work in a rationalized society.”28

Thomas Fitzgerald, director of employee research and training for the Chevrolet division at General Motors, writing in the Harvard Business Review, bluntly warned management that programs such as “job enlargement” will wear thin, requiring continuous development of new techniques, including the specter of meaningful reform such as “worker participation”:

Once competence is shown. . . and after participation has become a conscious, officially sponsored activity, participators may very well want to go on to topics of job assignment, the allocation of rewards, or even the selection of leadership. In other words, management’s present monopoly—on initiating participation, on the nomination of conferees, and on the limitation of legitimate areas for review—can itself easily become a source of contention.29

Fitzgerald concludes, “History does not offer many examples of oligarchies that have abdicated with grace or goodwill.”30

If human subjectivity is more complex than Marcuse’s darkest (and brightest) moments allow, can a strict one-dimensional language thoroughly circumscribed by technological rationality be constructed? Marcuse’s claim is that in conflating dialectically opposite terms, or in redefining critical concepts to conform to operational system needs, a thoroughly functional lan-
language is being created in one-dimensional society in which people follow either technical rules of behavior or other concepts whose moral content has been completely drained. Can action be reduced in this way to predictable lawlike behavior? The answer, I believe, is no, for such a language, at least as Marcuse describes it, would be incoherent and therefore not language at all.

Marcuse’s legitimate moral concern, however, is not behind us. Recall when not too long ago, President Reagan dubbed the MX missile “the peacekeeper.” Anticipating this kind of usage, Marcuse gives as an example of one-dimensional language the locution “preparing for war is preparing for peace,” collapsing the contradiction between the two terms and thereby making criticism of war impossible.

But to the extent people accept the locution “preparing for war is preparing for peace,” they do so precisely because they retain an implicit distinction between war and peace; actually, they accept the well-known deterrence theory of “peace through strength.” That is exactly what Reagan’s argument was. It was only intelligible to people to the degree that a conceptual distance was retained by Reagan and his supporters between war and peace. Marcuse needed to show what he did not and could not, that the term peace is fully defined by the term war, as in the locution “war is peace.”

Marcuse’s claim now can be coherently limited to say that pushing the locution “preparing for war is preparing for peace” too far is dangerous, undermines coherence, could be manipulated by elites sowing mass confusion and allowing what is really war preparation to continue. If the confusion spread to elites, we would have a society in complete interpretive breakdown, an extremely dangerous situation in an era of nuclear weapons, but in an important sense the exact opposite of a one-dimensional society. People would become dangerous to themselves and others in precisely the same way certain mental patients are. Indeed, schizophrenics sometimes develop a language along the lines outlined by Marcuse to cope with unbearable reality. But a mass insane asylum is not a one-dimensional society.

If opposite terms cannot be collapsed with the result Marcuse fears, can important nonnative concepts, like democracy, be reduced to technical terms? Again the answer to the strong thesis is no, for two reasons. First, to the extent they are, they simply lose their importance, ideological drawing power, and the ability to motivate behavior, perhaps replaced by other, newly ascendant normative ideals. Second, technical language cannot exist on its own because it is dependent on the language of human interaction to discover the purpose of the rules of technical behavior, indeed to define those rules, and for human subjects to follow these for some purpose not reducible to the rules themselves. Subjects following only technical “rules” would in fact be objects determined by “laws.”

Marcuse’s fear of hyperalienation of this sort does seem rooted in his worry that positivist theory can become human practice. Imagine, however,
MacIntyre suggests, that we are able “to build and program computers which are able to simulate wide ranges of human behavior.” These are mobile, can gain, reflect, and exchange information, are competitive and cooperative, and can choose between courses of action—that is, make decisions. But they are also “completely specified mechanical and electronic systems of a determinate kind.” Their closed mechanical character would seem to make them far better candidates to become one-dimensional—they are robots—than flesh-and-blood humans. Yet they would still be subject to the inherent unpredictability that MacIntyre identifies as ineliminable in human life: they couldn’t predict radical conceptual innovation; nor the “outcome of their own as yet unmade decisions”; nor could they opt out of the game-theoretic tangles they would find themselves in, any more than we can; and they would be subject to contingencies, such as power failures. 31 He writes,

> It follows that the description of their behavior at the level of activity—in terms of decisions, relationships, goals and the like—would be very different in its logical and conceptual structures from the description of behavior at the level of electrical impulses. It would be difficult to give the notion of reducing the one mode of description to the other any clear sense; and if this is true of these imaginary, but possible computers, it seems likely to be true of us too.

He then adds elliptically: “(It does seem likely that we are these computers.)”32

If the behavior of mechanical beings whose circuitry we could fully specify has an inherent unpredictability to it, a strict one-dimensionality thesis would seem implausible on these grounds alone. A totalitarian universe of this sort would be one precisely in which there could be the kind of law like generalizations about human behavior that MacIntyre shows to be impossible.

**Relative Political Alienation**

Partly out of richness of thought and acute moral sensibility, partly out of lack of clarity, Marcuse also presents a useful although tenuous thesis of relative objective political alienation. The essential elements are: (1) a powerful apolitical ideology of technological rationality that limits human self-consciousness and freedom but does not itself become the categories of the human mind; (2) as part of this ideology, a host of “operationalized” concepts that trivialize and personalize grievances, and confuse but do not reduce moral ideas to technical terms; (3) a language that undercuts the potential for oppositional concepts to criticize society—for example, the MX as a “peacekeeper”—but that does not really collapse contradictory ideas (a modified notion of the “one-dimensional language” central to his more extreme thesis); (4) an adaptive mass psychology that defuses psychological discon-
tent, both libidinally (what he calls repressive desublimation) and aggressively (in the “enemy,” Communism or perhaps an “underclass”), but not a strict mimesis theory; (5) the production of expanding rewards that serve to focus satisfaction privately; (6) pseudo-political outlets for political thought, action, and discontent—for example, elections that really serve only as ceremonial plebiscites, and this called “democracy.”

Robert Paul Wolff captures one of Marcuse’s genuine insights on mass psychology, explaining Marcuse’s theory of repressive desublimation in a way that is compatible with a modified one-dimensionality thesis. Within all people there exists a “psychical pool” in the unconscious that is permanent opposition to established society and that critical thinking taps in order to imagine a different society. The real genius of repressive desublimation is that it “absorbs” the opposition into dominant class interests by refusing to clamp down on these hidden impulses:

Such a reaction [clamping down] only heightens the force of the repressed desires and, Antaeus-like, redoubles their energy. Rather, the appropriate move is to permit the specific, overt act, but to rob it of its unconscious significance by immediately accepting it into the repertory of permissible acts.

The act, therefore, is unable to mobilize the hidden psychic energy because it “ceases to serve as a surrogate for the entire unconscious.”

The constellation constituting Marcuse’s thesis of relative political alienation, however, is an unstable one for a number of reasons. I will concentrate here on examining to what degree technological rationality as ideology, and the practices it generates, can help create enduring legitimacy for advanced industrial society.

The Limits of Integration into Technological Society

Machiavelli, who did as much as anyone to use the political arts effectively for purposes he supported, believed there was an ineliminable unpredictability to life. He called it “Fortuna.” MacIntyre argues there are empirical and practical grounds for believing “Fortuna” to be permanent. An organization set up to minimize societal unpredictability would first need its leaders “to render the activity of . . . [the] organization wholly or largely predictable.” But empirical studies show that effective organizations require initiative, redefinition of tasks, advice rather than command, and the use of knowledge whose location in the organization may itself not be predictable; they have an open quality about them, at least in being able to use fully—or exploit, if you like—their own resources. Thus MacIntyre argues “organizational success and organizational predictability exclude one another” and, therefore, “the project of creating a wholly or largely predictable organization committed to creating a
wholly or largely predictable society is doomed and doomed by the facts about social life.”

Totalitarianism of a certain kind, as imagined by Aldous Huxley or George Orwell [I add Herbert Marcuse], is therefore impossible. What the totalitarian project will always produce will be a kind of rigidity and inefficiency which may contribute in the long run to its defeat [MacIntyre is prescient here about the Soviet empire]. We need to remember however the voices from Auschwitz and Gulag Archipelago which tell us just how long that long run is.34

Technological rationality does have a great strength, however, and that is that it doesn’t appear to be ideology at all. Herein also lies its most important practical weakness. It doesn’t have the solid moral resources other ideologies have at their disposal. Habermas argues that the “new ideology is distinguished from its predecessor in that it severs [I read this “attempts to sever”] the criteria for justifying the organization of social life from any normative regulation of interaction, thus depoliticizing them.”35

But technological rationality cannot really eliminate the existential questions of why we do what we do, or why we should do or not do something, although it can help tell how, when, where, and what to do. The answer to the question “why” can be unreflective and assumed, but it cannot be eliminated. And it can’t be answered only within the terms of technological rationality. One of the appeals of President Reagan was his ability to call into question not only the ability but the right of government to manage social affairs, deploying older ideas of a free market against technocratic rhetoric. When Daniel Bell follows his “end of ideology” thesis with a later call for a “public household,” he is trying to reinsert an ethical dimension into a society in which obeying the rules of work and consumption nevertheless creates hedonism as a “cultural contradiction” of capitalism.36

In fact, technological rationality does have an ethical ally in utilitarian ethics, so that when most people seem to be accepting its logic, they are not really only producing for the sake of the productive apparatus itself, as Marcuse has it, but altruistically producing the greatest good for the greatest number, and self-interestedly maximizing their own rewards, as he sometimes does put it. Technological rationality remains subject, at a minimum, to a quasi internal critique within utilitarian ethics.

Yet this ethical basis for a construal of human interests is a weak one, prone to being severely questioned when productivity falters. Stuart Hampshire argues that the alliance of social engineering and utilitarianism offers a constricted view of human purposes:

when the mere existence of an individual person by itself has no value, apart from the by-products and uses of the individual in producing and enjoying
desirable states of mind, there is no theoretical barrier against social surgery of all kinds.37

Yet there are numerous examples, arrayed across the political spectrum, of vigorous opposition to “social surgery” on matters considered vital to constituting desired, perhaps competing, ways of life, such as sexual practices, customs of war, treatment of the terminally ill or the aged, and respect for life itself.38

Technocrats may themselves be morally uncomfortable with their roles, even from the point of view of their own self-interest. The technocrat is asked to view not only members of the public as objects to be administered, but him or herself as an objectified administrator. But while I, as a technocrat, may talk about my contribution of an idea for the more efficient accomplishment of a project as “input,” I may well resent its rejection and become indignant if it is repeatedly rejected. I may then conclude that the system is unfair to people like me and search for those characteristics that constitute such a class, question a hierarchy that now only appears to be organized by true functional skill, question the legitimacy of the roles of those whose status is higher than mine, and maybe even question the technocratic model itself. Even technocrats sometimes try to answer the question, “why?”

There is, even more fundamentally, an important relationship between action, responsibility, knowledge, and self-consciousness that suggests technological consciousness cannot dispense with the need for grounding beliefs in values external to technological rationality. Consider that the job of the technocrat is to correctly apply technical rules, posing as a predictor of his or her own behavior, with the prediction circumscribed by the set of rules most appropriate for a given end. But once a person predicts that something will happen because he or she is willing to follow the rules necessary to make it happen, and observes that prediction, a contradiction arises: because we are simultaneously observer and observed, once we predict and are conscious of our prediction, our role of observer contradicts our role as actor. Our prediction is necessary for us to know what we can achieve, but knowledge of our prediction now constitutes a decision on our part to do something. This dialectic of people as predictors and deciders, identified by Hampshire as a basic aspect of human action and self-consciousness,39 can be obscured but not eliminated by technocratic roles.

If I as a social service bureaucrat say to you, “I predict I will take you off welfare because of raised eligibility requirements,” we both probably know what I really mean is I have decided to follow the rules and take you off. The more aware I become of my decision, the more intentional my action, the more I persist, the more deliberate. If I tell you, “I have no choice,” we both know that what I really mean is that I have chosen not to absorb the cones-
quences of helping you, or that my helping you is futile because down the line your request will be stopped by someone else’s choices. Clearly these choices are constrained, and we might even say predictable. In principle, however, language is always available to bureaucrats and technocrats (and all of us) to formulate the question, “What is it I’m really doing?” in following what seem to be purely bureaucratic or technical rules.

Subsystems of societies ostensibly organized only under what Habermas calls “purposive-rational” rules of behavior, that is, rules of technique, cannot rely on people to adopt only the role of predictors of their own behavior: Because people must decide as well, in principle, it must be possible to become aware of that role, heightening awareness of responsibility and freedom and forcing into the open the need for beliefs, external to the logic of prediction, to justify conduct. Such justification can weakly fall back on “I just follow the rules,” or “it’s in my self-interest to do so,” or “following the rules helps the system run smoothly,” or, less weakly, “it’s for the greatest pleasure for the greatest number,” or, more strongly, “it’s for the greatest good for the greatest number,” and, most strongly, “it is to enhance human life.” Each step taken is one step away from a pure technocratic model, first into utilitarian ethics, and ultimately into more traditional ones. Each, however, calls into question the suppression of ethics and politics necessary for the depoliticized ideology that Marcuse argues is required to maintain the legitimacy of advanced industrial society. And Marcuse cannot (nor does he) abandon the centrality of such an ideology if he is to have any theory of one-dimensional society left at all.

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Notes for Chapter 9


2. Ronald Aronson writes about Marcuse’s influence on the New Left: “In the 1960’s Marcuse legitimized us... One-Dimensional Man expressed how negative, how oppressive was this society that seemed so positive. It broke with the American end-of-ideology smugness intellectually as the Civil Rights movement broke with it politically. Marcuse gave philosophical and historical validation to our inarticulate yet explosive demand for a totally different vision.” Quoted in Douglas Kellner, Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism (Berkeley: Univ. of Calif. Press, 1984), 376.


4. Ibid., 22-23. My emphasis.


6. Ibid., 311.
7. Ibid., 319.
8. Ibid., 307.
9. Ibid., 312. My emphasis.
12. For an excellent guide to Mills’s life and career, see Horowitz, *C. Wright Mills*.
15. Ibid., 267-268.
16. Ibid., 268.
17. Ibid., 280, 279.
18. Ibid., 271.
19. Ibid., 270. My emphasis.
20. Ibid., 269-270.
21. Ibid., 270.
22. Ibid., 274.
23. Ibid., 273-274.
25. C. Wright Mills, *White Collar: The American Middle Classes* (New York: Oxford Univ. Press, 1951), 230. However, wage earners are more alienated and vote less (331-332).
27. Mills, *White Collar*, 59. The “rhetoric of competition” provided business with ideological cover to legitimate rationalization of the market. For small businesses, it became the rallying cry with which their political leaders could mobilize and exploit anxieties. As public belief it emphasized both a largely defunct free market and the idea of merit as determining economic advantage, thereby obscuring the role of political bargaining and struggle. As private dream, it blurred the differences between democratic and class property.
28. Ibid., 65.
29. Ibid., 66.
30. Ibid., 234-235.
31. Ibid., 285.
32. Ibid., 240.
33. Ibid., 254.
34. Ibid., 252.
35. Ibid., 256, 255.
36. Ibid., 257.
37. Robert A. Dahl, “A Critique of the Ruling Elite Model”, in C. Wright Mills and the Power Elite, ed. G. William Domhoff and Hoyt B. Ballard (Boston: Beacon, 1968), 35. Dahl’s “test” is: “The hypothesis of the existence of a ruling elite can be strictly tested only if. 1. The hypothetical ruling elite is a well-defined group. 2. There is a fair sample of cases involving key political decisions in which the preferences of the hypothetical ruling elite run counter to those of any other likely group that might be suggested. 3. In such cases, the preferences of the elite regularly prevail” (31). He repeats this criticism, although in somewhat muted form, in Democracy and Its Critics (New Haven, Conn.: Yale Univ. Press, 1989), 367, note 15. See the discussion of Dahl in ch. 15, 221, and note 18, of this volume, where I suggest he may himself now be a candidate for this test and may fail it.
38. See the Introduction of this volume, 12-14, for a review of Lukes’s analysis of power.
39. Horowitz, C. Wright Mills, 277. Horowitz suggests that Dahl also misses Mills’s point, which was not that there did not exist some pluralism at the middle levels of power, in middle-sized towns like New Haven, Connecticut, but that such power distribution was of secondary importance to that of the national structure of elite power.
40. Cleck, Radical Paradoxes, 64.
41. Mills, White Collar, 106.
42. Ibid., 77.
43. For Mills, bureaucracy could be a source of authority as well as manipulation, and rational bureaucracy could be “the most efficient type of social organization yet devised.”
45. Mills, White Collar, 300.
47. Mills, White Collar, 353-354.
49. Mills, Sociological Imagination, 171.
50. Quoted in Cleck, Radical Paradoxes, 54.
51. Ibid.
53. Horowitz suggests that toward the end of his life, “Mills became the writer seeking world historic vindication, and he tried to achieve it by violating nearly every canon of the sociological imagination he had urged upon others. . . . Mills the political ideologist ultimately betrayed Mills the social scientist”; from C. Wright Mills, 300-302. Yet, he concludes that in his “final and personally agonizing years, Mills addressed himself to the open secrets of society.” Saying publicly the things known to everyone secretly requires the most courage: “Mills had that sort of courage.” Horowitz concludes he is best characterized “in terms of seriousness: the achievement of enlightenment through the classic tradition in social science” (328-330).
58. Ibid., 440.
59. Ibid., 440, and note 3.
60. Ibid., 452.
62. See 138 this volume. In *White Collar*, he suggests, sometimes, “political indifference” is “reasoned cynicism,” and “political apathy” is “horse sense” (327, 347).
63. While gender issues are not central for Mills, see his “Women: The Darling Little Slaves”, in *Power, Politics and People*, 339-346; and 172-178 in *White Collar*.

**Notes for Chapter 10**
9. See Robert Paul Wolff, “Marcuse’s Theory of Toleration”, *Polity*, 6 (Summer 1974). Wolff explains Marcuse’s theory of toleration this way: “Tolerance, for Marcuse, is liberating when it is the established order’s grudging acceptance of negative or oppositional expressions which seek to tap the unconscious as a way of attacking surplus repression. Tolerance is repressive when it is, as in our present society, an easy acceptance of the surface manifestations of the negativity in such a manner as to rob it of its transcending capability and leaves surplus repression untouched” (476).

11. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 6. Marcuse’s theory of toleration was extremely controversial. Alisdair MacIntyre sharply criticizes him for not realizing that the “telos of tolerance is not truth but rationality,” and rationality requires toleration of alternative ideas. Douglas Kellner suggests that Marcuse backed off his harsher version of confronting pseudo-tolerance with intolerance in his later writings. In “Repressive Tolerance”, Marcuse claims that “the alternative to the established semi-democratic process is not a dictatorship or elite, no matter how intellectual and intelligent, but the struggle for real democracy. Part of this struggle is the fight against an ideology of tolerance which, in reality, favors and fortifies the conservation of the status quo of inequality and discrimination. For this struggle, I proposed the practice of discriminating tolerance.” Herbert Marcuse, “Postscript 1968” to “Repressive Tolerance”, in *A Critique of Pure Tolerance*, 122-123.


13. Ibid., 11. My emphasis.


15. For Kellner’s full argument against this point, see *Herbert Marcuse and the Crisis of Marxism*, 234-240.


17. Kellner is also correct when he says that Marcuse believed that “the system of advanced capitalism itself plays a structuring role in helping to produce science and technology, which it shapes and uses for specific social purposes,” although Marcuse also suggests in *One-Dimensional Man* that capitalism was being transformed into something new: advanced industrial society. Kellner, *Herbert Marcuse*, 263.

18. MacIntyre sharply criticizes Marcuse, saying that only “self-education” truly liberates. Making people “objects of liberation by others is to assist in making them passive instruments; it is to cast them for the role of inert matter to be molded into forms chosen by the elite.” In his account, Marcuse’s impoverished subject illicitly justifies elite domination of the majority and fosters apathy. See Alisdair MacIntyre, *Herbert Marcuse: An Exposition and a Polemic* (New York: Viking, 1970), 105-106.

19. She continues, “Yet they never abandon it altogether; even when the historical process seems to destroy all hope in the *revolutionary subject*, the search for *a subject* whose needs and interests might represent those of humanity as such continues”; from Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, 143.

20. *One-Dimensional Man*, even with its many faults, is superior to these later works in that it lays out a serious theory. The later works may accomplish better reportage of by then more obvious conflicts, but they do little to improve the basic theory.

21. For this reason, John Fry asserts that libido as a “material substratum” allows Marcuse to “have his idealist cake and eat it too,” while Schoolman accuses him of
behaviorism and MacIntyre calls him a “pre-Marxist” thinker. Benhabib writes of Marcuse: “On the one hand, in order to anchor the possibility of revolt in some domain that could escape the ravages of the administered world, Marcuse had to turn to the resistant and immutable core of human instincts; on the other hand, faced with the utter malleability of conscious needs and the formation of false ones, he had to draw a distinction between true and false needs. . . . it is partly the authoritarianism of such a project which has led Habermas to emphasize the merits and significance of bourgeois democratic-liberal traditions”; from Benhabib, *Critique, Norm, and Utopia*, 336-337.


23. Jürgen Habermas, “Psychic Thermidor and the Rebirth of Rebellious Subjectivity”, in *Habermas and Modernity*, ed. Richard J. Bernstein (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1985), 74-77. Habermas suggests that *Eros and Civilization* is Marcuse’s “most Marcusean one.” Yet, in spite of the role instincts played in Marcuse’s theories, shortly before his death, referring to the normative basis of critical theory (and whether it was grounded in natural law), he said to Habermas: “Look, I know wherein our most basic value judgments are rooted—in compassion, in our sense for the suffering of others” (77).


30. Ibid., 43.

31. See MacIntyre’s critique of positivist social science in ch. 7, 114-116, this volume.


33. Wolff, “Marcuse’s Theory”, 476.

34. MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 105-106. My emphasis.

35. Habermas, “Technology and Science”, 112.


38. Ibid., 12.