



Marcuse and his critics

Author:

Thompson, Denise

Event details:

Staff seminar

School of Sociology and Social Anthropology, UNSW

Publication Date:

2002

DOI:

<https://doi.org/10.26190/unsworks/662>

License:

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/au/>

Link to license to see what you are allowed to do with this resource.

Downloaded from <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.4/43817> in <https://unsworks.unsw.edu.au> on 2024-04-26

Marcuse and his critics

[This is one of the papers that came out of the work on liberalism I did with Bronwyn Winter and Sheila Jeffreys. The others are:

'What can rights discourse cover up?' (2000)

'Power and distaste: tolerance and its limitations' (2002)

'Freedom for whom? Liberalism as ideology' (2003).

With the exception of the paper on 'Tolerance', they were not sent to academic journals, but instead were presented as conference/seminar papers. All are included on UNSWorks.]

(A paper presented at a staff seminar in the School of Sociology, UNSW, 15.5.02)

I'd like to start by saying that the title as advertised—'Pure Tolerance Visited'—doesn't make any sense. It was, in fact, 'Pure Tolerance Revisited'. However, that's not what I'm going to be talking about anyway, except briefly at the beginning by way of introduction. What I am going to be talking about is Marcuse's paper 'Repressive Tolerance', some of the criticisms which have been raised against it, what is wrong with those criticisms, and why.

But before getting to that, I want to talk about two reasons for my interest in the concept of tolerance. One is the crucial role it plays in liberal thought (and I've been studying liberalism for a few years now—the reason being that I'm intrigued by something that can sound so right and yet be so wrong. That's not what this paper is about, but I will be saying something more about liberalism at the end). Along with liberty and pluralism, the idea of tolerance is central to defining what liberalism is. Indeed, tolerance and pluralism are just two ways of saying the same thing. (The connection between tolerance and liberty is rather more complicated, but I won't go into that now either). So I'm interested in the idea of tolerance because of the way it fits into liberalism.

The other reason for my interest is more personal. Some years ago now, I heard that a new feminist journal was being planned. (It was called *Feminist Theory* and the first

issue appeared in April 2000). The advance publicity for the journal invited contributions discussing (among other things) what counts as feminist theory. So I wrote a paper called 'What Counts as Feminist Theory?' and sent it along. It was rejected. The reasons given were that they already had a paper on the topic, and that mine was 'out of the academic mainstream' and 'did not engage with the ideas that have claimed the mainstream', that the views I put forward were 'unpopular' and 'old-fashioned', that 'the analysis [was] shoddy and the argument unearned', that 'The whole tone is one of someone who is in possession of the "truth" and who is simply "right" ', and that my paper was a 'rather dogmatic manuscript'.

I wrote back challenging these points. I said that the paper they mentioned did not in fact deal with what I discussed, that I had defined feminism whereas the paper in question had explicitly refused to do so; I said that I *did* deal with the ideas that had claimed the mainstream—I disagreed with them; I pointed out that I failed to see how anyone could write *without* claiming they were telling the truth, so I failed to understand the force of the criticism that I wrote as though I were in possession of the truth; I said that the only sense I could make out of these readers' reports was that they disagreed with me; and I asked if the editors thought the disagreement of readers was sufficient grounds for rejection. I got no reply, of course.

And then, when the first issue of the journal came out, there appeared in the editorial a reference to 'feminist theory in all its many and diverse forms', and the following statement: 'we neither wish to impose any form of theoretical orthodoxy nor any single definition of what counts as feminist theory' (*Feminist Theory*, 2000: 5). In response to this, there popped into my head the phrase 'pure tolerance'. I had a vague recollection it had something to do with Herbert Marcuse, whom some of us remember as the doyen of the New Left and what later came to be called 'the new social movements', a member of the Frankfurt School, and a major theorist of authoritarianism. In fact, the phrase occurred in the title of a slender volume containing three papers criticising tolerance, called 'A Critique of Pure Tolerance'.

It seemed to me that this talk on the part of the journal's editors of 'diversity' and 'not imposing orthodoxies' was just such a regime of pure tolerance. It said that everything was acceptable and nothing was unacceptable, that everything was

included within feminist theory and that there were no grounds for excluding anything. To me, it appeared (a) thoroughly intolerant because, in judging everything to be acceptable, it banned criticism, discrimination and judgement; and (b) incoherent because, in banning criticism, it made an exception to this rule of universal acceptability.

I wrote a short paper to this effect (which they did publish). I didn't actually say outright that their claims to 'diversity' were a sham since they had rejected my paper with its 'out of the academic mainstream' ideas—that would have been to call them liars, and I didn't want to do that. (It wouldn't have been polite). The point is that I have a peculiar susceptibility to regimes of pure tolerance because what I write is always critical. (I agree with the Frankfurt School that social theory is essentially critical because the aim of the exercise is to change the world not just to interpret it). That means that in the kingdom of pure tolerance, I'm always out of favour.

But that's just by way of introduction. I'm not going to be talking about that today either.

What I am going to be talking about is Herbert Marcuse's paper 'Repressive Tolerance' and some of the criticisms which have been leveled against it.

In this paper Marcuse was arguing that there are certain forms of tolerance which are demands for acquiescence in oppression. In these cases what is required, then, is intolerance of those demands and a refusal of acquiescence. What he was arguing, in fact, was that there are limits to tolerance. In doing so, he was well within the traditions of liberalism which has always acknowledged that tolerance has its limits. Locke, for example, argued that atheists were beyond the bounds of tolerance because they 'deny the being of a God'. In Locke's view, they placed themselves outside 'the bonds of human society' because, by denying God, they denied the basis for the 'promises, covenants, and oaths' which maintained those social bonds. And they had no justification for asserting any claim to tolerance because they 'undermine and destroy all religion', and hence 'can have no pretence of religion whereupon to challenge the privilege of a toleration' (Locke, 1689: 18). He was also inclined to deny tolerance to 'Papists' on the grounds that they were potential traitors since they owed allegiance to 'a prince', i.e. the Pope, other than the ruler of

their own country (Cranston, 1987: 109). These exclusions on Locke's part seem rather quaint these days. But at the time he was writing they made a kind of sense. And the point remains that discussions of tolerance have always allowed that it may not be an entirely unmixed blessing.

For John Stuart Mill, the limits to tolerance were summed up in the harm principle. As Mill saw it, this was a 'very simple principle': 'the only purpose for which power can be rightfully exercised over any member of a civilized community, against his will, ... whether the means used be physical force in the form of legal penalties or the moral coercion of public opinion ... is to prevent harm to others' (Mill, 1859: 129). Mill's principle has turned out not to be so simple after all, largely because it is too individualistic. The classic objection to it, raised in Mill's own day by James Fitzjames Stephen, is that it is impossible to distinguish between self- and other-regarding acts, and that any act, no matter how private and isolated it might appear to be, can affect others as well as the self (Bowie and Simon, 1977: 165-6). Nonetheless, once again, it's clear that the liberal tradition allows that tolerance may not always be a good thing.

There's another aspect of Marcuse's argument which also sits quite comfortably within liberalism, and that is his somewhat obscure utterance, 'The telos of tolerance is truth'. In my view, what Marcuse was doing here was restating Mill's point that tolerance is the way to truth. According to Mill, truth is arrived at 'by the collision of adverse opinions', and the silencing of any of these can only impede the discovery of truth, which proceeds by way of open debate, not by closing it off. There can never be any good and sufficient reason for silencing the expression of opinion, in Mill's view, because no one can ever be in a position to know for certain whether or not it is false. Further, even if there are reasonable grounds for believing something to be false, it may still contain 'a portion of truth'. And finally, even if any particular opinion does happen to be the whole truth, it will 'simply be held in the manner of a prejudice' unless it is allowed to be 'vigorously and earnestly contested'. Its meaning will become 'enfeebled' or even lost altogether if it is never rejuvenated by being exposed to challenge and debate (Mill, 1859: 169).

In saying that the aim towards which tolerance strives is truth, Marcuse was making explicit what Mill accepted implicitly, and agreeing with it. I also think Marcuse is saying something else here, and that is that tolerance does not require that one accept lies, mistakes, deceptions, delusions, etc., that being committed to tolerance doesn't mean abandoning criticism.

However that may be, it seems to me that, in these two aspects at least—that there are limits to tolerance, and that there is an intimate connection of some sort between tolerance and truth—the liberal credentials of Marcuse's argument are beyond dispute. (He thought so too. He said at the beginning of his paper that, in his own argument 'tolerance appears again as what it was in its origins, at the beginning of the modern period'—Marcuse, 1969: 95).

Why, then, has he been so roundly criticised by those who, if they don't actually identify as liberals themselves, certainly condemn him on recognisably liberal grounds, that is, on the grounds that his argument is a variety of authoritarianism? Alisdair MacIntyre, for example, even accused him of Stalinism: 'What Marcuse invites us to repeat is part of the experience of Stalinism' (MacIntyre, 1970: 92). He believed that Marcuse was saying that '[t]he truth is carried by the revolutionary minorities and their intellectual spokesmen, such as Marcuse, and the majority have to be liberated by being re-educated into the truth by this minority who are entitled to suppress rival and harmful opinions' (p.90).

Alex Callinicos partly agreed with MacIntyre, although he was more inclined to see 'virtues' in Marcuse's argument. He said that 'Marcuse's is not an argument for the suppression of diversity', that it was an insightful account of 'the way in which public discussion is managed and manipulated', and that his 'denunciation of "false tolerance"' was a healthy antidote to certain relativist tendencies in academic life (Callinicos, 1985: 60-1). But he also felt Marcuse's work provided arguments in favour of terrorist violence. Even though he acknowledged that Marcuse had 'disassociated himself from the use of political terrorism', he also said that Marcuse 'cannot be wholly exculpated from the disastrous consequences of the actions of the Red Brigades, Red Army Faction, and other such organizations' (Callinicos, 1985: 65).

Norman E. Bowie and Robert L. Simon interpreted Marcuse's argument as recommending the closing down of debate. Like Callinicos, they had some sympathy for Marcuse's argument, saying that had a 'penetrating analysis of *some* of the features of modern industrial democracies' (Bowie and Simon, 1977: 180—emphasis in the original). But they felt it rested on two major errors. The first of these was what they saw as Marcuse's misinterpretation of Mill's defence of freedom of thought and discussion. Mill was not arguing, they said, that such freedom would only be available in a free and rational society, i.e. not the kind of society we currently live in. Mill was arguing, they said, that it was 'a procedure through which people *learn* to distinguish warranted from unwarranted belief' (pp.180-1—original emphasis). As such, it was possible now, and not simply a utopian ideal which must be postponed till a better time. Much the same point was made by Callinicos when he said, 'it is only by granting freedom of opinion that the process of conjecture and refutation through which false beliefs are rejected and true(r) beliefs adopted can flourish' (Callinicos, 1985: 61).

MacIntyre's treatment of the same point—that Marcuse was attempting to close down debate—involved criticising Marcuse's above-mentioned utterance that the 'telos of tolerance is truth'. According to MacIntyre: 'The telos of tolerance is not truth, but rationality ... It is a necessary condition of rationality that a man [sic] shall formulate his beliefs in such a way that it is clear what evidence would be evidence *against* them and that he shall lay himself open to criticism and refutation in the light of any possible objection. But to foreclose on tolerance is precisely to cut oneself off from such criticism and refutation. It is to gravely endanger one's own rationality by not admitting one's own fallibility' (MacIntyre, 1970: 90-1—original emphasis).

Refuting the critics

Here I want to defend Marcuse against these critics. To take Callinicos' accusation first—that Marcuse's text could be read as an incitement to violence. One answer to this charge might be that authors are not responsible for the uses to which their work is put by others. As Schumpeter once famously remarked, it makes as much sense to blame Marx for Stalinism as to blame Christ for the Inquisition. But beyond that, and even beyond the fact that Marcuse explicitly repudiated terrorism, Marcuse's own account of the reasons for and necessity of violence make it clear that, far from

recommending it, he deplored it. He said that all forms of violence are 'inhuman and evil'. He did point out, however, that the original violence emanated from the powers-that-be, and that to forbid the oppressed to use violence against their oppressors 'is serving the cause of violence by weakening the protest against it' (Marcuse, 1969: 117).

Closing down debate?

To come now to the arguments that Marcuse was recommending the closing down of debate, 'foreclosing on tolerance', as MacIntyre put it. I interpret MacIntyre to be saying (in his preference for 'rationality' over 'truth') that there is no final end point to be aimed at, that there is no certainty and no guarantee of truth, that to assert something is true is to defend it against counter-arguments and disconfirming evidence, and that this is a form of dogmatism, even fundamentalism. In general terms he may have a point (although that would depend on the social power, including the willingness to use violence, of those who are making the assertions), but it is not an argument against what Marcuse was saying about truth. Marcuse did insist that 'there is an objective truth which can be discovered'. But he was not asserting the kind of positive truth that leads to dogma. He was asserting the kind of truth that rectifies an already existing falsehood. What already existed, to the extent that it was dominating and exploitative (Marcuse used the word 'oppression'), was that which needed to be challenged and overcome. What was needed was 'learning and comprehending that which is and that which can be and ought to be done for the sake of improving the lot of [humankind]' (Marcuse, 1969: 103).

He was saying that the truth, in the sense of (certain) facts about the social world, was a lie, in the sense that it was anti-social and dehumanising. In doing so, he was taking an ethical stance against a relativism which disallows moral judgement. His 'telos of truth' was aiming towards what *ought* to be by exposing what is as what *ought not* to be. MacIntyre thought he was arguing against Marcuse by saying: 'One of the most urgent of contemporary tasks is to insist on subjecting the social and political order to continuous rational criticism' (MacIntyre, 1970: 91). But that is exactly what Marcuse was doing, exposing, in order to challenge, what it is that prevents rational criticism.

Neither are Bowie and Simon's and Callinicos' arguments refutations of what Marcuse was saying. On the contrary, they are restatements of exactly the position held by Marcuse who also understood freedom of thought and expression as an unhampered exchange of ideas. The point he was making, however, was that debate was systematically blocked and stymied by ideological forms of social control which disallowed freedom of expression. At the same time, he obviously did not see this in any absolute terms, since he was himself attempting to place certain issues on the public agenda.

It is true that Marcuse was arguing against (certain kinds of) tolerance and for (certain kinds of) intolerance. But this does not mean that he was arguing in favour of authoritarianism; on the contrary, he was arguing *against* it. Marcuse did not subscribe to the elitist vanguardism MacIntyre accused him of. In fact he said exactly the opposite: 'The question, who is qualified to make all these distinctions, definitions, identifications for the society as a whole, has now one logical answer, namely, everyone' (Marcuse, 1969: 120). He did consider arguments in favour of government by an elite, but he dismissed them on the grounds that this was happening already—'government by a ... minority of politicians, generals and businessmen' (p.135)—and that what was needed was more democracy not less.

Why?

How, then, does it come about that Marcuse is accused of the very thing he was arguing against? Why is his argument interpreted as a brand of authoritarianism, when in fact it is an exposure of what he called 'oppression' (but which I would call 'domination')? What is going on here?

One way of arriving at an answer to that question is to look at the second supposed error in Marcuse's argument identified by Bowie and Simon, the error of self-refutation. 'If', they said, 'thought is the mere outcome of social conditioning', then Marcuse's own argument must be 'such a product'; on the other hand, if Marcuse's position is somehow exempted from this conditioning, then other positions can be too. Social conditioning 'can be overcome', they said, 'The very fact that [these issues] can be analysed and discussed is evidence of this' (Bowie and Simon, 1977: 181). Precisely. But this is not a refutation of Marcuse's argument, it's a description of it.

His argument is a kind of performative utterance—by its very existence it is evidence that it is possible to open up debate despite the forces arrayed against it. Bowie and Simon's objection rests on a view of society as a homogeneous totality which allows no room for dissent—'thought is the mere outcome of social conditioning'. They attribute this view to Marcuse, use it to refute his argument, then throw it away—social conditioning 'can be overcome'.

But it is not a view that Marcuse ever held. As a Marxist, he was well aware that 'society' was far from homogeneous. The ruling ideas in every epoch may well be the ideas of the ruling class, but the very fact that that can be said already opens up a space for confrontation. Moreover, his concept of 'one-dimensional man' was an attempt to demonstrate that belief in social homogeneity belonged with the ideological logic of a domination which reduced human variety to a single pattern compatible with the maintenance of relations of power. He argued that, while that certainly had its effects in the social world, and hence it was real, it was not the only reality, either potentially or in actuality. Hence, his argument was not self-refuting because it had already demolished the premise which would have made it so.

As well, his argument was an exercise in Critical Theory in the sense that he made statements about the way the world is, that is, positive assertions, only for the purpose of criticising that world. As he put it in 'Repressive Tolerance', theorising the social proceeds 'never with the evidence of necessity, never as the positive, only with the certainty of a reasoned and reasonable chance, and with the persuasive force of the negative'. Social theory was not a positive reaffirmation of what society was already—what already existed was in certain crucial respects 'that which must be surmounted'. It was not a matter of using the resources 'in an *established* society'; rather, it was part of the process of '*creating* the society in which [people are] no longer enslaved by institutions which vitiate self-determination from the beginning'. The task of social theory was to use 'the experience and understanding of existent society' in order to 'identify ... what is *not* conducive to a free and rational society, what impedes and distorts the possibilities of its creation' (Marcuse, 1969: 101—original emphases). The fact that freedom and rationality are impeded and distorted does not mean they are absolutely unavailable—'never with the evidence of necessity'. It means they are an achievement to be struggled for, just as John Stuart

Mill argued. Marcuse differed from Mill, and from liberal thought in general, in focusing his attention on those forces which militate against freedom of opinion and expression (rather than postulating an endless series of reasons why the free flow of ideas was a good thing). As the three authors of *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* put it: 'For each of us the prevailing theory and practice of tolerance turned out on examination to be in varying degrees hypocritical masks to cover appalling political realities' (Wolff, Moore and Marcuse, 1971: 8). It was those appalling political realities which Marcuse's theory was intended to address.

And it was those appalling political realities which Marcuse's critics were unable to see. More to the point, they were unable to see that those realities are systematic in the sense that social arrangements can serve powerful vested interests, that they nonetheless masquerade as the interests of all, and that they are both imposed coercively *and* maintained through the consent of subordinated populations. What those critics were unable to see, in a word, is domination. Terms like 'advanced industrial democracies' (MacIntyre), 'modern industrial societies' (Bowie and Simon), 'consumer capitalism', or 'an irrational social order' (Callinicos), are inadequate as designations of what Marcuse was criticising. At the same time, it must be admitted that Marcuse was not a great deal of help in this question of naming the problem. As well as 'oppression', he referred to 'violence', along with 'fear and misery', 'established policies', 'constituted authorities', 'the government', etc., which equally give little hint of the systematic existence of domination. Phrases like 'totally administered society', or 'total administration and indoctrination', were not a great help either, although he was trying to make the valid point that there are structures of domination even within the so-called 'democracies'. He did at one point refer to 'the institutionalised inequality' of 'the class structure of society' (Marcuse, 1969: 98-9). But class is not the only form domination takes, as Marcuse knew very well, given his involvement in the New Left.

In this blindness to domination, it is the *critics* who demonstrate a belief in a homogenous society. When they read Marcuse's recommendation for intolerance as approval for authoritarianism or violence, they must be reading him as recommending an upheaval of an already existing state of stability and homogeneity, of non-authoritarianism and non-violence, of freedom and equality. In

their inability to see domination, the critics see everybody as already free and equal. So when Marcuse recommends intolerance, he can only be recommending (in their view) an end to freedom and equality.

But Marcuse knew that we're not already free and equal, and that 'what is proclaimed and practiced as tolerance today' was too often 'serving the cause of oppression' (p.95). Tolerance of the 'false words and wrong deeds which demonstrate that they contradict and counteract the possibilities of liberation' (p.102), far from being a virtue, is something 'radically evil' (p.97). Marcuse's recommendation of intolerance was directed towards 'the protagonists of the repressive status quo' (p.99), towards 'what is *not* conducive to a free and rational society' (p.101), towards those 'policies, conditions, and modes of behavior which ... are impeding, if not destroying, the chances of creating an existence without fear and misery' (p.96). Tolerance which fails to ask whose interests are being served by what is being tolerated is not real tolerance. Refraining from taking sides, granting equal validity to all points of view, to 'the Right and well as the Left, to movements of aggression as well as to movements of peace, to the party of hate as well as to that of humanity' (p.99), does not bring freedom and equality. None of this can the critics see because they can't see the ways in which society is systematically unfree and unequal.

To sum up then: the critics' arguments against Marcuse don't work. Sometimes they are quite simply wrong. Marcuse doesn't argue for an elitist vanguard; nor does he advocate violence or the closing down of debate. Nor can his argument be accused of self-refutation, because he doesn't subscribe to the premise—society is a homogeneous totality—which would make his argument self-refuting. The reason why the critics' arguments don't work, I have suggested, is because they are based on a hidden agenda—denial of the fact of social domination without mentioning it (since to mention it is to acknowledge the possibility of its existence). It is this hidden agenda which makes sense of liberalism as a whole.

If it is the case that liberalism serves political purposes which must remain unacknowledged by liberalism itself, much that is obscure becomes clear. The staunch commitment to individualism which ignores the forces which render people

passive and helpless; the priority given to liberty which ignores the conditions of unfreedom; the Panglossian positivity which extols freedom, equality, reason, justice and liberal democracy while remaining oblivious to the forces of domination; the pluralism which fudges issues of moral judgement; the tolerance which fails to come to grips with the reasons why certain categories of people serve as scapegoats for mass alienation; the moral vacuity of the 'shopping mall culture—where one has hundreds of shops to choose from, all of which sell the same junk' (Beiner 1995: 23); in short, the curious combination of platitudinous goodwill and a stubborn refusal to face reality, all fall into place once it is realised that liberalism has something to hide—its role in the maintenance of social relations of domination.

References

- Beiner, Ronald (1995) *What's the Matter with Liberalism?* Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press
- Bowie, Norman E. and Simon, Robert L. (1977) *The Individual and the Political Order: An Introduction to Social and Political Philosophy* Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall Inc.
- Callinicos, Alex (1985) 'Repressive Toleration Revisited: Mill, Marcuse, MacIntyre', in Horton and Mendus, eds
- Cranston, Maurice (1987) 'John Locke and the Case for Toleration', in Mendus and Edwards, eds
- Horton, John and Mendus, Susan, eds (1985) *Aspects of Toleration: Philosophical Studies* London and New York: Methuen
- Locke, John (1689) 'A Letter Concerning Toleration', in R. M. Hutchins, ed. *Great Books of the Western World*, 35: Locke, Berkeley, Hume Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica/William Benton, 1952
- MacIntyre, Alisdair (1970) *Marcuse* London: Fontana/Collins
- Marcuse, Herbert (1969) 'Repressive Tolerance', in Wolff, Moore Jr and Marcuse, 1971
- Mendus, Susan and Edwards, David, eds (1987) *On Toleration* Oxford: Clarendon Press
- Mill, John Stuart (1859) *On Liberty*, in Maurice Cowling, ed. *Selected Writings of John Stuart Mill* London: The New English Library Limited, A Mentor Book

Nussbaum, Martha (1999) 'The Professor of Parody: The Hip Defeatism of Judith Butler' *The New Republic* Feb 22

Voltaire (1763) 'A Treatise on Toleration', in *Selected Works of Voltaire* The Thinker's Library, No. 54 London: Watts and Co., 1948

Waldron, Jeremy (1987) 'Theoretical Foundations of Liberalism' *The Philosophical Quarterly* Vol.37, No.147. April

Wolff, Robert Paul, Moore Jr, Barrington and Marcuse, Herbert (1971) *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* London: Jonathan Cape

© Denise Thompson, May 2002