

Marcuse the Lover

Vincent Lloyd

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1.

In one sense, Herbert Marcuse seems like the sort of theorist whose significance would be fleeting. A generation coming of age in a world of tumult, rebelling against authority, against the Establishment, needed an authority – needed a father. Marcuse appeared to be the perfect fit: reaching the desired conclusions (about the power and corruption of the Establishment and about the possibility of its overthrow) using an authorizing language that was sophisticated but radical (Marxian and psychoanalytic against a background in German philosophy, especially Heidegger and Hegel). The machinery of Marcuse’s critical theory had been developed by his Frankfurt School mentors and colleagues, Adorno, Horkheimer, and Benjamin. But Marcuse had an ability to remix their insights for a broader audience, and Marcuse had the temperament to engage (intellectually and sometimes with his person) the social movements of the day, from Vietnam War protesters to Black power advocates to environmentalists. He seems an intellectual of his day, and little more.

But in another sense, Marcuse’s faded academic celebrity is unexpected because of his uniqueness as an activist intellectual. The ability for theory to inform and be informed by practice is the ostensible goal of many a theorist, and it is often elusive. It is much easier to point, fairly or unfairly, to a mismatch between theory and practice (Adorno, Levinas), or to indict theory based on apparently consequent practice (Heidegger, Schmitt), than to find an imitable ideal. If the regularity of Kant’s strolls in Königsberg is the best example on offer, the situation

is surely dire – and the desideratum is called into question, or the usefulness of theory at all is called into question. Of course there is the Marxist tradition, strongly committed to the unity of theory and practice, with figures such as Gramsci, C. L. R. James, Lukács, Luxemburg, and Lenin, in addition to Marx and Engels themselves. But this has become increasingly rare with the professionalization of the academy from the mid-twentieth century. Marcuse's lack of lasting fame might suggest that the unity of theory and practice is fantasy, desired only from a distance (even contemporaneously there is distance: Marcuse the foreigner speaking to crowds of young Americans). The closest analogue to Marcuse today would seem to be Slavoj Žižek, also synthesizing Marxian and psychoanalytic insights against a German philosophical background (though with a stronger dose of Hegel and a lighter dose of Heidegger), and similarly locating himself in critical dialogue with social movements (seen on YouTube lecturing Occupy Wall Street). It seems reasonable to conclude that Žižek's star power, like Marcuse's, will quickly fade once the cultural moment that made it possible passes.

This story of Marcuse's containment as a thinker of his moment and no more too quickly passes by the social (and so ideological) forces that have performed this containment on him, and that choose which theorists' influence continues, which gain institutional seals of approval. The academy likes radicalism at a distance, so theorists who find politics in identity or aesthetics, or neologisms, and who lace their writing with revolutionary-sounding words are met with high demand in the academic marketplace. However, Marcuse's containment is also a result of a less obvious, and seemingly less likely ideological force: secularism. This is unlikely because, on the surface, Marcuse seems to be more an advocate than a critic of secularism. Indeed, his refusal to robustly engage with the presence, and repression, of religious ideas may seem like one of his critical blind spots, especially in light of the academic energy around secularism and political

theology today. But this view is wrongheaded. Marcuse was a critic of secularism, as well as a victim of secularism. We just are not trained to hear his criticisms because the discourses around critical theory and secularism remain so disjunct.

2.

In many ways, the world of the present closely resembles the target of Marcuse's critiques of the 60s and 70s. Just as Marcuse diagnosed, the working class continues to become the middle class, not only in terminology and in self-identity but also in terms of desires. The ubiquity of McDonald's has given way to a ubiquity of Starbucks, pricy desires descending downwards on the class spectrum, compressing the spectrum. Social media accelerate, and commodify, the transmission of desires from individual to individual. The illusion of freedom within the United States continues to play a central role in political discourse, with its crudest form becoming nearly hegemonic with the ascent of the Tea Party and the hold of the pseudo-truism that more government equals less freedom. Marcuse's diagnosis of neo-colonialism manifests in the form of globalization, precisely the sort of term Marcuse would have analyzed as doublespeak, masking the control of the many by the few with a term connoting warm, universal embrace. Global warming, another uncannily gentle term, has spurred the growth of a green energy business – new demand, new supply, new markets – but carbon emissions continue to rise. Counterrevolutionary forces, to use Marcuse's term, remain ascendant, with dissent vigorously and militaristically quashed. Police informants infiltrate even non-violent social justice organizations (accompanied by aggressive tactics such as grand jury subpoenas of peace organization members), college students continue to be arrested and disciplined for protest (now more often about sweatshops and campus worker wages than foreign policy and Black

liberation), and even the left end of the mainstream union movement still kowtows to the corporate-controlled Democratic Party at local and national levels (hopes that SEIU's secession from AFL-CIO would alter the political climate of organized labor were quickly dashed). The lumpenproletariat, excluded from the regular labor market, is carefully managed by capital through the nexus of the temporary labor market and mass incarceration, which disqualifies millions for regular employment.

By the early 70s Marcuse was skeptical of the imminent prospects for revolution, and he foresaw the potential for a long period during which the left would be on the defense.¹ He worried that the social movements of the 60s were giving way to a fetishization of freedom compatible with capitalist logic, that the hippie's search for authenticity, and of ever new desires, was precisely the self-delusion also evinced by the "conformists" who were ostensibly the hippie's antithesis. But there was another form of identity management which was also spawned by the 60s, and which Marcuse had less to say about. The transformation of claims for community power into the discourse of multiculturalism played a crucial role in pacifying dissenters, and so fragmenting the Great Refusal heralded by Marcuse. Multiculturalism turned dissenters into consumers of culture that was at once particular and universally accessible.² Less discussed, but closely aligned with multiculturalism, is religious pluralism: the management of religious identity and religious communities by the Establishment. Such management, like multiculturalism, at once defangs critical potential and transforms what was once critical potential into market participation: religious values informing purchasing decisions, religious communities selling coupons to raise funds, crosses adorning t-shirts like the face of Malcolm X.

¹ Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972).

² See Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011).

Like multiculturalism, religious pluralism disguises its ideological nature as empirical fact or principle. “America is browning” or “America is increasingly a land of many faiths.” (The same is said of Europe). Racial difference is, in principle, tolerated or celebrated; so is religious difference. But behind these gentle assertions is a new form of social control that Marcuse does not explicitly address. His critical theory, however, does hold some nascent resources to address such issues.

These two, perhaps twin, ideologies of secularism and multiculturalism come together in the recently unveiled monument depicting Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., in Washington, DC. The monument was controversial, but for the wrong reasons. (Pseudo-controversy is a tool ideology deploys to conceal itself). Behind the 30 foot high representation of King is an “Inscription Wall” with fourteen quotations, and aside the image of King are two quotations. That one of these quotations paraphrased King in a way that made him seem egotistical – “I Was a Drum Major for Justice, Peace, and Righteousness” – elicited complaint. But more significant is the choice of all sixteen quotations. Frequently the words justice, equality, peace, and love appear in them. Entirely absent is the robust religious vocabulary that King deployed: God, Christ, law, and sin. This is not only King’s religious vocabulary; it is also his critical vocabulary, the language he used to circumvent the obfuscations of segregationists and liberal reformists alike. That segregation was a sin, that it violated God’s law, these assertions not only express a complaint but more fundamentally call into question the wisdom of the world as a whole – that is to say, they expose and question ideology. Also entirely absent from the memorial is any mention of race, let alone the words “Black” or “Negro.” Indeed, the memorial itself was created by a Chinese sculptor, further marking the memorial as a multicultural, post-

racial project. In order to make King safe for the nation, both race and religion must be carefully managed.

The vocabulary of religious pluralism carved near King, of justice and peace and love, is not atheistic. Rather, it is language that is imagined to be embodied in all religious traditions – when those traditions are understood rightly. This is how religious pluralism does not simply acknowledge multiple religious communities, but *manages* religion.³ Religious ideas are legitimate if they can be translated into a supposedly neutral idiom, which happens to be an idiom that expresses the self-image of the Establishment at its most Orwellian (or, Marcusean): pursuing peace through war, achieving justice through capital punishment, encouraging equality as equal opportunity despite grossly unequal realities. In this way, secularism names the ideology of which religious pluralism is one mask (militant atheism and fundamentalism are others). Religious discourse and practice is authorized if and only if it is essentially secular, decorated with religious coating of one color or another. Precisely the same is the case for multiculturalism, one mask of white supremacy: racial discourse and practice is authorized if and only if it is essentially humanistic – of the white, Euro-American variety – with one of several colorful coatings added as decorative embellishment. Decorative embellishment is suggestive of precisely the economic role that racial and religious difference are made to play. These embellishments entail marketable accessories, demanded by the desires of identity and supplied by the free market – and so susceptible to the whims of the market. Blaxploitation films gave way to black-white buddy films, Chinese chop-suey gave way to Japanese sushi, and the undocumented immigrant has replaced the welfare mother as object of white liberal noblesse oblige. While poor

³ Talal Asad, *Formations of the Secular: Christianity, Islam, Modernity* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Winnifred Fallers Sullivan, *The Impossibility of Religious Freedom* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007).

people are managed fascistically, behind bars, rich minorities who might identify with them are assimilated and managed ideologically, through multiculturalism. In this way, what once appeared as the triumph of the New Left and the kindling of a coming Great Refusal has been successfully quashed by the Establishment.

3.

Marcuse tells a story about capital in which religion, especially Protestantism, is the villain. Religion assists in the repression of instincts, in the shaping of desires, so that humans live together in peace, and so that they believe there is no path to genuine happiness in this world, only in the next.⁴ Marcuse follows Weber's assessment of the "Protestant ethic" that promotes hard work and seriousness as worldly means of glorifying God. Luther and Calvin begin his story of the bourgeois invention of freedom, of the distinction between public and private, of commitment as interior and government rule as exterior – all of which pave the way for capital, and ultimately for the stranglehold of ideology. As Marcuse puts it, "Luther's pamphlet *The Freedom of a Christian* brought together for the first time the elements which constitute the specifically bourgeois concept of freedom and which became the ideological basis for the specifically bourgeois articulation of authority: freedom was assigned to the 'inner' sphere of the person, to the 'inner' man, and at the same time the 'outer' person was subjected to the system of worldly powers."⁵ One way of understanding Marcuse's entire project, in his work from the 60s and 70s, is as offering an alternative understanding of freedom, an understanding that has been foreclosed by the hegemony of the Christian understanding of the concept.

⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry Into Freud* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), Chapter 3.

⁵ Herbert Marcuse, *Studies in Critical Philosophy* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1973), p. 56.

“Whether called Christian freedom, or freedom of conscience and worship – this has been to this day the *only* freedom available to man as man: ‘essential’ human freedom. Essential indeed if the body is inessential, and if this is the only freedom which can be claimed as pertaining and as granted to all men, regardless of class, race, religion.”⁶ Marcuse goes on to contrast freedom of thought with freedom of action, noting how the former is often surreptitiously substituted for the latter, and is largely illusory.

In this account of the Christian origins of freedom, Marcuse already hints at a critique of secularism. It has become fashionable over the last decade or two to investigate the “unintended consequences of the Reformation,” or of late medieval Scholasticism, or of early modern humanism.⁷ Wherever the origin is located, the story involves transformation from the religiously infused world that once was to the world we have today, where religion is present but repressed, or sublimated. But it is important to proceed carefully, for the terms “secular,” “secularism,” “secularization,” and “secularity” are often used loosely, causing the rapidly growing scholarly conversation on these topics to become muddled. The most important distinction to make is that between a historical process (secularization) and an ideology (secularism).⁸ The results of both are often referred to as secularity or the secular, an absence of visible religious ideas or practices. But secularization marks simply change over time, from more religious to less religious, for reasons discerned from historical inquiry. Crucially, a concept of the “religious” is assumed, presumably from ordinary usage in the present. In contrast,

⁶ Ibid., pp. 212-213

⁷ Brad Gregory, *The Unintended Reformation: How a Religious Revolution Secularized Society* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2012); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007); John Milbank, *Theology and Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

⁸ See Jeffrey Stout, *Democracy and Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005), Chapter 4.

secularism excludes religion (religious ideas, practices, or language) from a given domain, and in doing so manages religion. Secularism is necessarily about power. Power may or may not be an aspect of stories of secularization. Genealogies are useful tools to critique ideology, and genealogies of the secular are sometimes used to critique secularism.⁹ But genealogy is a distinctive form of historiography, and not all stories of secularization are genealogies; in fact, most are not.

Even though Marcuse is not ostensibly writing about religion, he can be read as a critic of secularism. His target is the confinement of religious ideas to one domain (the inner life of humans), and the consequent exclusion altogether of genuine (i.e., unmanaged) religious practices from public life. Put another way, religious freedom is the first freedom taken away from humans, where human history is a story of loss of freedom. The ideological machinery of secularism stays intact after Luther and Calvin: Marcuse continues to track it, from Kant to the existentialists. A religious idea, freedom, continues to be managed in order to support the interests of the powerful, of the emerging bourgeoisie. Moreover, Marcuse suggests that this machinery of secularism is particularly suited to deal with difference. Not only religious difference but also racial and class difference can be acknowledged – and managed – through this ideological machinery which locates freedom in thought, not action. Actions are subordinate to external authority, whether the hard hand of the state or the soft hand of the market (they usually work in tandem). In other words, in our contemporary context, secularism makes multiculturalism possible. More broadly, it is secularism that co-opted the New Left, transforming it from power-building social movements to market-driven identity politics.

⁹ For example, Asad, *Formations of the Secular*.

Stories of secularization often lean on nostalgia or hope (Siamese twins).¹⁰ Things were once better, when we were always and unavoidably surrounded by the embrace of the spiritual world. Or, things will be better once secularization ultimately succeeds, once the last vestiges of religion are reasoned away. Stories of secularism – that is, the critique of the ideology of secularism – are neither nostalgic nor hopeful. Critique itself does not aspire to replace religion; it simply reveals the mystifications of the powerful.¹¹ Marcuse is quite adamant about this: “[C]ritical theory did not intend to replace the theological hereafter with a social one – with an ideal that appears in the new order as just another hereafter... By defending the endangered and victimized potentialities of man against cowardice and betrayal, critical theory ... makes explicit what was always the foundation of its categories: the demand that through the abolition of previously existing material conditions of existence the totality of human relations be liberated.”¹² The potentialities of man are “endangered and victimized,” faced with “cowardice and betrayal,” because of ideology: because the wealthy and powerful conceal their interests in the guise of neutrality, disabling the possibilities of happy human existence by carefully managing human life down to the very desires of humans. According to Marcuse, critical theory responds to the question “What may I hope?” by pointing “less to eternal bliss and inner freedom than to the already possible unfolding and fulfillment of needs and wants.”¹³ The world we genuinely hope for is already here, it is just obscured by ideological distortions which make us misperceive our own needs and wants. In other words, Marcuse’s work is not a new theology in

¹⁰ See Christopher Lasch, *The True and Only Heaven: Progress and Its Critics* (New York: Norton, 1991).

¹¹ Contra Talal Asad, “Free Speech, Blasphemy, and Secular Criticism” in *Is Critique Secular? Blasphemy, Injury, and Free Speech* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2009).

¹² Herbert Marcuse, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 145.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

the traditional sense; it rejects the common understanding of theology because it is ideological (a product of secularism) and so uncovers a space where the religion versus secular distinction is null and void.¹⁴

4.

Discussions of political theology often accompany discussions of secularism, or secularization, though the relationship between them is usually left opaque. Political theology denotes a relationship between religious and political concepts. What that relationship consists in, and what significance it has, are questions answered differently by different scholars. Political theology can present a constructive project that complements discussions of secularism, or secularization. Once we realize that religion is fading from the world, we may advance religiously-derived political concepts in order to slow secularization, if we find it undesirable. Or, if we cheer secularization, we may put under suspicion concepts in our current political vocabulary that are religiously-derived, or, less strongly, that supervene on religious concepts. Political theology can be responsive to conversations about secularism in two ways. First, if secularism entails the repression or sublimation of religious concepts, secularism may distort our social, and political, life. Political theology offers therapy for this repression or sublimation, confronting the connections between religion and politics which are present and powerful but unspoken.¹⁵ The religious ideas explored in political theology are merely instrumental, therapeutic tools, not truth commitments. The second way that political theology can be responsive to secularism is to name what remains once the ideology of secularism is destroyed.

¹⁴ See Denys Turner, “Marxism, Liberation Theology, and the Way of Negation” in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹⁵ For example, Paul Kahn, *Political Theology: Four New Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

What remains is not specific religious, and certainly not specific Christian, ideas – such ideas are the nostalgic antidote to secularization. Rather, what remains when ideology is destroyed cannot be named in the terms of the present, in the terms of ideology. It is the substance of things hoped for. In other words, this sense of political theology is *negative* political theology, the political theology that rejects as idolatrous any name given to its content, that rejects ideology as idolatry. Negative political theology can only stutter, can only use contradictory images and illusions, can only imagine.¹⁶ This is Marcuse’s political theology.

Marcuse is strongly committed to the beautiful, and it seems warranted to call this a commitment to the beautiful as good and true. The beautiful is found in our world but points beyond our world; or, more precisely, the beautiful points to the possibilities latent in our world once ideology is demolished. “Art stands under the law of the given, while transgressing this law.”¹⁷ The form of art, rather than being repressive, is liberative, the prerequisite for representing an “other reality within the established one – the cosmos of hope.”¹⁸ Marcuse forcefully opposes Marxist theories of art that would dismiss the beautiful as a criterion of the aesthetic and replace it with, for example, the social origins or immediate effects of an artwork. “Aesthetic formation proceeds under the law of the Beautiful, and the dialectic of affirmation and negation, consolation and sorrow is the dialectic of the Beautiful.”¹⁹ This is how the complexities of life beyond ideology can be represented: by assembling fragments in aesthetic form with the goal of producing beauty. Even death is overcome through beauty – or, rather, the

¹⁶ See Turner, “Marxism, Liberation Theology, and the Way of Negation.”

¹⁷ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1978), p. 11.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, p. 52.

¹⁹ *Ibid*, p. 62. Compare Marcuse’s quotation from Marx’s *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*: “[Man] can produce ‘in accordance with the laws of beauty’ and not merely in accordance with the standards of his own needs.” Marcuse, *Studies in Critical Philosophy*, p. 17.

absolute value placed on death by capitalist ideology is negated. “Though the universe of art is permeated with death, art spurns the temptation to give death a meaning.”²⁰ Here is the epitome of negative theology: salvation from death neither through return to Eden nor through a promised heaven, but through refusing to give death the force that the idolatrous (i.e., ideological) world assigns to it.

Liberation is a crucial concept for Marcuse, the telos of his thought, but liberation does not have content. To present a “concrete alternative” is always already to accept the logic of the Establishment, of hegemonic ideology. The “specific institutions and relationships” of the post-liberation world “cannot be determined a priori; they will develop, in trial and error, as the new society develops.”²¹ Because capitalism not only organizes humans but shapes our desires and our consciousness, it is difficult to even hint at what we ourselves would be like after liberation. We would have “a new way of life, a new Form of life.” “Understanding, tenderness toward each other, the instinctual consciousness of that which is evil, false, the heritage of oppression, would then testify to the authenticity of the rebellion.”²² Marcuse draws heavily on Marx’s early writings where Marx envisions the “life-activity” of humans before private property, before wage labor. Marcuse cites Marx’s descriptions of “the sensuous appropriation for and by man of the human essence and of human life” where “Each of his human relations to the world – seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling, thinking, observing, experiencing, wanting, acting, loving ... are in their ... orientation to the object, the appropriation of that object.”²³ Liberation is not simply having all one’s needs fulfilled; it is much more complex, and holistic – and, ultimately,

²⁰ Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*, p. 68.

²¹ Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), p. 86.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 88.

²³ Marcuse, *Studies in Critical Philosophy*, p. 33.

indescribable. And yet there is also a sense in Marcuse's work that this desired world is not, in fact, a telos, but rather still a site of tension and struggle – though the struggles are on a smaller struggle than the Goliath of late modern capitalism.

The world is run by law and order, Marcuse argues, but law and order are tools of ideology. There is a higher law to which we can appeal, beyond the law of the world. In the struggle for liberation “law and order become something to be established as *against* the established law and order: the existing society has become illegitimate, unlawful.”²⁴ Beauty is one name of this higher law. Another name for Marcuse's higher law is love. Marcuse is well aware of the hazards of writing about love. He is aware of the Marxist criticisms of love as essentially a bourgeois pastime with only counterrevolutionary significance. “The revolution of love, the nonviolent revolution, is no serious threat; the powers that be have always been capable of coping with the forces of love.”²⁵ But a hidden – repressed by secularism? – concept of love seems essential for Marcuse. What else could be the kind of desiring that will remain once the perversion of desire by capital concludes: rightly ordered desire, truthful desire?²⁶ What else could be “the erotic quality of the Beautiful, which persists through all changes in the ‘judgment of taste’.”²⁷ In the philosophical tradition, Marcuse finds a vision of the emancipated world: “In the exigencies of thought and in the madness of love is the destructive refusal of the established ways of life.”²⁸ A quick qualification is offered: the convergence between reason and freedom is limited by “the antagonistic character of reality.” And in this Marcuse continues his negations,

²⁴ Marcuse, *Essay on Liberation*, p. 78.

²⁵ Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension*, p. 113.

²⁶ See William T. Cavanaugh, *Theopolitical Imagination* (London: T & T Clark, 2002).

²⁷ Marcuse, *Aesthetic Dimension*, p. 62.

²⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964), p. 127.

what might be called his negative political theology. Love would be the key to liberation, but, like beauty, it connotes rather than denotes. It can at most be one name among many that are used to mark that which cannot be named, that which exists beyond ideology, beyond idolatry.

5.

Like Marcuse, Louis Althusser offers a gripping account of ideology.²⁹ For both Marcuse and Althusser, ideology is not only ruling ideas, but ruling ideas sustained by institutions and *embodied*, constituting the very desires and consciousness of the individual. In Althusser's terminology, to which Marcuse likely would not object, ideology makes the individual a subject. Although both accounts are gloomy, Althusser's is gloomier. Not only the state but civil society organizations and individuals themselves are caught in the loop of ideology, constituted by and constituting the ideas (now become "material") of the ruling class. Althusser uses religious imagery to explain how this works. God makes humans subjects, or rather calls them to recognize that they already are subjects of God. God calls Moses, "And Moses, interpellated-called by his Name, having recognized that it 'really' was he who was called by God, recognizes that he is a subject, a subject *of* God, a subject subjected to God, *a subject through the Subject and subjected to the Subject*. The proof: he obeys him, and makes his people obey God's Commandments."³⁰ With an omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent Subject always at the helm of ideology, escape seems impossible. Althusser's followers struggled to find a way out. Michel Foucault finds resistance always accompanying the power exercised by ideology on small scales, and he finds sudden, inexplicable ruptures. Judith Butler finds potential in practices of parody to

²⁹ Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses" in *Lenin and Philosophy* (London: New Left Books, 1971).

³⁰ Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses," p. 179.

undermine the sense of naturalness that ideology uses to conceal itself. But these do not offer much guidance for political organizing that would challenge ideology on a broad basis, that would genuinely threaten the interests of the wealthy and the powerful.

While Althusser and his followers have been all the rage in academic theory circles for at least the past two decades, Marcuse has fallen out of favor. Yet Marcuse offers more hope. His accounts of ideology show how possibilities of resistance always accompany advances in ideological control. We can always catch a sideways glance at freedom, for example through beauty or through love. We always have evidence before us that shows another world is possible, even if there is no clear path from here to there, nor even a clear sense of what “there” looks like. Marcuse’s account underscores these possibilities because of its negativity, because it is a negative political theology. Instead of God as ideologue-in-chief, for Marcuse God is iconoclast-in-chief, calling his people not to be subjected but to refuse the idolatry that permeates their worlds, their lives, and their very selves. Maybe this is a cause of Marcuse’s limited reception. Secularism manages theology by reducing theology to God the Father, omnipotent, omniscient, omnipresent. The theology of Althusser is permissible under secularism because it is so thin, and the political theology of Althusser is thus impotent. Negative theology is illicit, unmanageable, so uncomfortable.

When critical theory is negative political theology, it knows its limits. Althusserian theory aspires to speak of everything, to subject the world to the Subject of ideology. The critical theorist becomes a court jester, speaking critically of the king, the Subject, but doing so ultimately to entertain the Subject. Marcusean theory knows when to speak and when to remain silent. The critical theorist’s vocation is ideology critique, weakening the hold of the powerful and wealthy so as to clear space for ordinary people to organize themselves, to liberate

themselves. As Marcuse puts it, the “construction of the new society cannot be the object of theory, for it is to occur as the free creation of the liberated individuals.”³¹ In other words, Marcuse has faith in ordinary people freed from ideology, and in the liberation movements which free them, to act rightly. Freed from ideology, no guidance from theory is necessary. Free from idolatry, we walk with God.

³¹ Marcuse, *Negations*, p. 135.