HERBERT MARCUSE: A PIECE OF THE PAST DISLOGED
Russell Jacoby

Herbert Marcuse is dead. At the age of 81, he succumbed to a world he always resisted. His list of credits or crimes is long, and includes inciting the student revolts of the 1960s. For those who were too young to remember those years and those who never cared should be told: A piece of the living past has been dislodged.

Herbert Marcuse was a perpetual scandal. He belonged to a species on the endangered list everywhere: the politically engaged intellectual. The world of the big buck and the fast deal was not his; neither was he one of those academics who clamber up the ladder of government posts and consulting fees nor was he the front man or fall guy for any political group. His commitment to critical and independent thought belonged to a fading tradition.

Marcuse shared obsolescence with others from his generation; it was the source of their intellectual force. What he said on the occasion of the death of his friend, T.W. Adorno, can be said of himself: He preserved past forms of culture in the uncompromising opposition to the present culture. This generation indicted the present with its own past. Here was the root of Marcuse’s unfashionable integrity. That Marcuse was attacked not only by defenders of the security of the Republic, but also by Moscow’s Pravda; not only by the Pope, but also by the French Communist Party; not only by the American Legion, but also by left sectarians suggests that he threatened authorities of every stripe. Marcuse was not only a subversive; he was subversive to the subversive.

Marcuse a subversive? He never tired of affirming that he was only a ‘poor’ philosopher. He threw no rocks and set no bombs. He offered only unpurgated thought: thinking without censorship and fear. But this provoked censorship and fear. Academics were unnerved by his intellectual audacity, and the ease with which he walked between the departments of the university. He wrote on Marx as well as Freud, on the Soviet Union as well as the United States, on philosophy as well as on art. His academic critics were convinced that because he had so much to say he lacked rigor. Defenders of law and order mailed him death threats.

Marcuse drank deeply from Freud, as well as from Marx and Hegel. The titles of some of his books suggest his unfashionable scope: Eros and Civilization and Reason and Revolution. These four words encompass everything he wrote. The Freud who pondered whether aggression and self-destruction would drown civilization was familiar to Marcuse; and he turned not to the Marx of state production goals, but to the Marx of human liberation. He shared the sentiments of his friend Max Horkheimer, who had denounced those revolutionaries who were already drawing up lists for the executions of the future. Marcuse was no pacifist, but neither was he a friend to the cultists of violence. In his vocabulary, pornography was not so much four-letter words, but the hardware of military destruction. He found obscene a society that indited the pornographers while parading bem sedled generals to be gawked at by Little Leaguers and Boy Scouts.

The improbable happened. For a historical instant this uncompromising intellectual from the past, who never lost his German accent and never learned to drive, was lionized - and cursed - as instigating the student upheavals of the '60s. A student of Marcuse’s, Angela Davis, made headlines as a black revolution ary, and added to the din around her teacher. His best known work, One Dimensional Man, had appeared in 1964, and anticipated that future social revolts would be triggered not by a working class but by those 'outside' the working class: blacks, minorities, students and peoples of the Third World. In the US, and even more in Germany, France and Italy, Marcuse emerged as one of the most visible spokesmen of a new left. The 'new' of the New Left expressed a hope and, partly, a reality. It was new after the dissipation and repression of the older left of the 1950s, and it turned away from the traditional arenas of elections and trade unions to challenge society in its gut: the streets, the bureaucracies, the forms of life and loving. Yet did the youth of Jerry Rubin's 'Do it!' - the Yuppies, hippies and rebelling students - actually read Marcuse’s books? No matter. For a moment there was a convergence of sensibilities. The inchoate protest against the war in Vietnam and racism, which spilled into a wider and deeper protest, found its reason and mind in an aging German-Jewish philosopher. For a moment the gap between the texts of Marcuse and the writing on the wall was closed. At the same time that he was writing 'the fight for Eros is a political fight' the streets resounded with the scuffles of a counter-culture. If Marcuse was fashionable, however, it was despite himself; he wrote no blank checks, and was sometimes a sharp critic of the New Left. And when the world went on to other things, Marcuse continued writing and lecturing.

A society traumatized by the exhaustion of its energy and fuel should take note. Fascism packed off to these shores a sliver from the wreckage of European culture. It included a Thomas Mann, a Bertolt Brecht and a Herbert Marcuse, as well as thousands of others. Marcuse was active and committed, interested and interesting to the very end of his life. He was born before the age of the automobile and he died in the nuclear era. Today, corrosion and erosion have damaged the ability and energy to think critically and boldly; the pay is poor, and few are applying.

Marcuse, the pessimist, once wrote that 'Not those who die, but those who die before they must and want to die, those who die in agony and pain, are the great indictment against civilization.' Neither Marcuse's life nor death add to that indictment; the carnage of daily life and the destruction of wars more than suffice. Marcuse led a full and graceful life. What does darken the future prospects, however, is that the force and subversion that belong to the engaged but independent intellectual will fade into oblivion, and that with Marcuse we are burying a piece of ourselves that we are unable to retrieve.