

FINDING FREEDOM: SIMONE WEIL, HANNAH ARENDT, AND HERBERT
MARCUSE ON POST-TOTALITARIAN POLITICS

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in the Department of Political Science.

Chapel Hill
2006

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ABSTRACT

LISA COURTNEY FOX: Finding Freedom: Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt, and Herbert Marcuse on Post-Totalitarian Politics
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Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt and Herbert Marcuse are generally considered to be theorists quite distinct from one another. In this paper, I argue that there are notable similarities in their work, particularly with regards to their social and political critique of modern, technological society. Each of them emerged during World War II as social critics who attempted to trace the rise and success of totalitarian movements, while engaging with the most fundamental political issues of their times: collective action, the relationship of the individual to their society, and justice, among others. Using a selection of their most significant writings, I consider their views on freedom, rationality, and science and technology, along with their vision of politics, and emphasize their similar perspectives on these issues. I conclude with some deliberations about their core beliefs, and summarize the commitment of each to a post-totalitarian politics dedicated to the fulfillment of human potential.

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INTRODUCTION

Simone Weil, Hannah Arendt and Herbert Marcuse are not customarily grouped together as thinkers. When reading them, it is their differences that are easily seen. Although all twentieth century thinkers, the authors write in different contexts and times. Weil's *The Need for Roots* was written and published prior to the end of the second World War, at the height of fascist regimes in Germany and Italy. Arendt's controversial *The Origins of Totalitarianism* appeared during the 1950s, during the trials of Nazi war criminals and the beginning of American political dominance. Marcuse's *One-Dimensional Man* was a product of the protest-laden 1960s. While all engaged in some way with Marx and Marxism, they wrote from different perspectives. Weil has been analyzed as a Christian (Perrin and Thibon 2003; Hanratty 1997; Kerr and Mulder 1994), a mystic (Nava 2001), and a communitarian (Diogenes and Sprin 1994). Arendt has been described primarily as a theorist of democracy (Henaff and Strong 2001; Knauer 1975). Studies have concentrated on Arendt's relationship with Heidegger (Young-Bruel 1998); her connections to the Jewish community (Ring 1997; Bernstein 1996; Felman 1978) and her problematic views on questions involving women (Pitkin 1998; Honig 1995). For his part, Marcuse has been seen in different ways: as a radical thinker who inspired the student leaders and oppositional movements of the sixties (Kellner 1998; Cranston 1971); as a Marxist (Kellner 1984); as influenced by Freud and psychological theory (Vellilamthadam 1978; Boyers 1975; Lipshires 1974; Robinson 1969). Yet while each of these claims on these scholars is correct, there is

something to be gained—namely, a sharp tool for political critique—by highlighting their similarities, rather than their differences.

On this point there has been surprisingly little scholarship. There have been some treatments of Arendt and Weil together, notably Mary Dietz’s “The Slow Boring of Hard Boards” (1994) and Sylvie Courtine-Denamy’s book on Edith Stein, Arendt, and Weil (2000). Arendt and Weil were also analyzed together in Andrea Nye’s *Philosophia: The Thought of Rosa Luxembour, Simone Weil and Hannah Arendt* (1994). Arendt and Marcuse have been discussed together by Richard Wolin in *Heidegger’s Children* (1998). It is remarkable that the connections between Arendt and Marcuse have not been more fully explored. They were both connected to Walter Benjamin—Marcuse through his colleagues at the Frankfurt Institute, while Arendt met Benjamin in Paris after fleeing Germany. They both left Germany in the same year, in fact—1933—and both made their way to the United States. They became influential academics in the United States, and died within one year of each other. Nevertheless, there is little work describing the parallels between them. As to treatments of all three theorists together, they are nonexistent.

But the similarities between these three thinkers are striking. To begin, what I found were consistent subsidiary themes in their discussion of totalitarianism: a similar account of politics and human freedom, a similar critique of science and technology as applied in modern societies, and a similar hope for the redemption of rationality as an integral part of human life. The bedrock upon which each thinker’s thought rests is a conception of politics that is human (and humane) and resistant to violence and might; a politics that is committed, above all, to human freedom.

Freedom in their work is most often equated with struggle, uniqueness and the wholly new and unexpected. It requires a shared understanding of history, a feeling of common cause, and knowledge of particularity. It does not occur in isolation, but relies on the presence of others. From their experience with totalitarian regimes, they draw the lesson that people may imagine themselves to be free even when they are emphatically and empirically unfree. Thus, they are all reliant on a conception of true freedom that is to be distinguished from the ability to choose between manufactured possibilities. Their vision of freedom has to do with human development. Under conditions of freedom, we could freely choose who we are, and what we will do. Freedom contains the possibility of genesis, of new beginnings, and is the fulfillment of human creativity.

In their investigation of rationality, they each turn to questions of true and false consciousness and true and false needs, even, for that matter, true and false rationality. Industrial society, in their view, relies upon creating a false kind of rationality, one that makes rationality private and individual rather than public and collective. True rationality would allow humans to achieve both intellectual and physical conditions of freedom; it would have human liberation and the good as its goal; it would rest upon the rational refusal of both economic behavior and means-ends thinking. They question the possibility of rational action within a framework they consider to be irrational as a whole.

They all object to science as technocracy, science which does not advance humanity by freeing them but rather enslaves them further. They object to what they see as the dehumanizing forces of technology expressed through labor that is ultimately repetitive and meaningless. They strongly object to the belief that science is or can be isolated from politics, and reject the idea that science occupies a place that stands apart from the common

world. They see science as an abstraction from the world, rather than an engagement with the world, and they see the language of science as increasingly meaningless and elitist. They would prefer to see science devoted to freeing men *from* necessity in order to free them *for* a political, creative, human life. Perhaps a useful distinction might be made: between the scientific enterprise as one method of investigation and inquiry, and *scientism*, the belief that there is only one valid way of gathering information and evidence. What these three thinkers object to most is the second: the belief that all human activity can be studied and understood the same way that the movement of atoms and energy can. This kind of belief leads to a conception of society and politics as no more than so many forces to be contained and manipulated: a technocratic understanding of human life.

In addition, they share a conception of politics as conflictual, public, and process-oriented, one of the last human activities that reveals our true selves to one another. It is a vision of politics as resistance, for they see modern society as largely a-, or anti-, political. Politics, in this view, is a work of art, a skill much like the composition and conducting of a symphony. It is based on legitimate authority rather than might and violence. It is based on a different conception of rationality, what Marcuse calls “reason rightly understood,” a rationality that is collective and communal and created between people, rather than an individualistic, means-ends, economic rationality. For all that, they value the local and the particular, and the politics that is only possible among people in a cohesive community, and they also share a deep distrust of the human need for unity.

Above all, these thinkers are oppositional thinkers in two ways. First, they place themselves largely against the prevailing winds of public thought and preference, opposing what they see as the dangers and deficiencies of mass society. Secondly, in each of their

work they offer groups or concepts that are opposed to one another. The use of opposed categories in their thought shapes their view of politics as being composed primarily of opposed groups and tendencies: there are those actions and beliefs which lead to human freedom, and those that lead away from human freedom, and very little in-between. Weil, the only Christian thinker of the three, is the most comfortable with dualistic statements of good and evil. Her thought tends toward a black-and-white understanding of morality and goodness, and Arendt emphasizes the opposition of the political and the social, an opposition she brings from the Greeks and which colors her view of the social movements that are often what we mean when we think of a politics of resistance. Marcuse, in his turn, lauds such movements, as he saw them emerge in the late 1960s, and, indeed, influenced their course. Marcuse's thought rests almost entirely upon dialectical relationships, relying upon negation and refusal as the primary path to human emancipation.

As I work through each thinker, I will first touch upon their idea of freedom. Then I will move through their critique of rationality, the practice of science in industrial society, and their conception of politics. I hope to show that apparently different categories perform the same analytic work in each.

SIMONE WEIL AND ROOTED RATIONALITY

Simone Weil was born in Paris in 1909 to secular Jewish parents who raised both Simone and her brother Andre as agnostics. Both children were highly intelligent; Andre Weil became one of the great mathematicians of the 20th century. The two children invented a language that they used to speak to one another, and taught themselves advanced geometry and ancient Greek. In other words, Simone Weil's childhood was as extraordinary as her

life, and she never valued conformity. She attended the Ecole Normale Superieur with Simone de Beauvoir. After receiving her degree, she became a schoolteacher, and also worked for a time in the Renault factory and on farms. This was highly unusual for a middle-class, well educated woman such as Weil, but it was an effort on her part to gain compassion for, and understand the plight of, the laboring classes. Weil had a series of conversion experiences and became a devout, though unbaptized, Christian. Displaced by World War II, she lived in London and wrote *The Need for Roots* while trying to return to France to become a member of the French Resistance. She was diagnosed with tuberculosis in 1943 and disregarded instructions as to rest and diet; she died in a sanatorium in Kent that same year.¹ All her works were published posthumously, including *The Need for Roots* (1952), as well as *Gravity and Grace* (1952), *Oppression and Liberty* (1958), *Waiting on God* (1979). Her collected notebooks were published in 1956, and a reader compiling her shorter essays in 1977.

Freedom Through Community

Weil's idea of freedom is distinct from conceptions of freedom as unlimited liberty, liberty without bounds other than (perhaps) the possibility of harming others. Such unmitigated freedom is, interestingly enough, a totalitarian, not a liberating, tendency present in a society. Faced with too much choice, Weil believes that people will be paralyzed rather than liberated, and will seek relief from what they will see as a burden.² She writes, "where the possibilities of choice are so wide as to injure the commonweal," that is, where choosing

¹Though I must respectfully disagree with some analyses of Weil's eating "disorder" (See for example Maitre 2000, Kraus 2000). I believe that classifying her as an anorexic, as these scholars do, oversimplifies what Weil believed she was doing at the end of her life.

² Psychological experiments have validated this hypothesis.

against the common good is possible, “men cease to enjoy liberty” (Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 12). They cease to enjoy liberty, Weil suggests, because they cannot use their liberty to attain the things they truly wish to have: connectivity and history. Weil believes that people desire to belong to a community that has both a past and a future, and that people wish to have knowledge of their place in that past and in that future. Secondly, their liberty is of an illusory nature, and they are aware on some level that a choice between a thousand breakfast cereals is no choice at all. Their liberty is unsatisfactory in all ways, and so they resent it. Weil writes, “Under such circumstances,” of unmitigated choice, “men, believing, wrongly, that they are in possession of liberty, and feeling that they get no enjoyment out of it, end up by thinking liberty is not a good thing” (Weil, *The Need for Roots* 13). Men given unlimited liberty will not know how to use it, and will, in the end, forsake it.

Here is one of Weil’s many oppositions: between men’s belief about liberty and the actual existence of liberty; between true and false freedom, for the freedom that men would easily forsake is no freedom at all. Weil isn’t sure that men will always seek emancipation—in fact, she distrusts this impulse toward freedom more than either Arendt or Marcuse—but she does believe that men should be taught what real freedom is, and how to use it. It is the purpose of the human community to teach the proper uses of freedom.

But freedom, for Weil, happens only within limits and frames, specifically, within hierarchy and ordered communities. This is so for two reasons: first, hierarchy establishes order, without which equality is meaningless. Order provides a context that enables men to fulfill their duties. It is a “texture of social relationships” which is such that “no one is compelled to violate imperative obligations to carry out other ones” (Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 10). The primary obligations Weil means here are the respect one owes one’s

community and the responsibility and respect one has for other human beings. An ordered society implies that one can fulfill both of these obligations, whereas in a totalitarian or anarchic society one may often be forced to choose between one's community (be it a town or a nation-state) and one's respect for the humanity of other men. Weil understands that a society without an established order is anarchic and therefore, though there may be a kind of equality in an anarchic state, there cannot be freedom.

Hierarchy performs an educational function. It instructs men in their proper roles, and represents a continuity that is larger than each individual. A hierarchy that endures creates places and spaces that are both individual and collective: individual, because individuals must occupy certain places within the hierarchy and collective, because they last longer than an individual's lifespan and are acknowledged by the community. People become equal to others who have occupied in the past, and currently occupy, the same position in society that they do. Hierarchy is a necessary *complement* to equality, for it is hierarchy that "bring[s] each one to fit himself morally into the place he occupies." (Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 18). "Liberation" from rooted, human communities throws us into individualized lives, without recourse to a larger system of meaning. This lends itself to totalitarianism, because then meaning, which is individuated, can always be contested and seen as relative.

Weil's conception of rooted communities needs to be examined, as it is the primary category upon which her theory rests. It is both part of her nostalgia for communities that have been destroyed and part of her normative desire to see such communities established once again. Hierarchy is but one part of these rooted, historic—and by historic she means those that have maintained and continue to express right relation to the past—communities. Whereas democracy is often conceived of as being without hierarchy of any kind, Weil feels

that hierarchy is a necessary complement to equality. Weil's standards for what constitutes a community are exacting and rely upon certain basic assumptions. A person belongs to such a community, or has roots (for Weil, being rooted and belonging to a historic community are the same) "by virtue of his real, active and natural participation in the life of a community which preserves in living shape certain particular treasures of the past and certain particular expectations for the future" (Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 41).

Like Arendt, Weil sees belonging to a political community as reliant upon action and participation. She also sees this participation as "natural," which is to say, as part of being human. Further, such communities "preserve in living shape," which means, for Weil, that they preserve the past *in practice*, through continued replication of roles and duties. History is expressed through actions that replicate the actions of forebears, and thus is literally embodied in the action of each participant. Action in concert with others expresses one's place—in the community, in time, and in the world at large—and one's identity. Each rooted community is distinct and unique. Weil invokes the language and imagery of art (similar to her view of politics as a symphony or composition):

When a really talented painter walks into a picture gallery, his own originality is thereby confirmed. The same thing should apply to the various communities throughout the world and the different social environments (Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 41).

The rooted community is a narrator and navigator for its members. Society's "supreme mission" toward the individual is "maintaining throughout the present the links with past and future" (Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 95). Without this guide and narration, Weil believes people lose their ability to think critically. Intelligence and rationality is for Weil embedded and rooted in communities that provide the structure necessary for both.

Weil's foundational oppositional category is between might and justice.³ In Weil's view, the purpose of politics is justice and the struggle towards the good. Politics must teach individuals the place they occupy morally, both in their own community and also in the course of history. Weil has a vision of politics that is counter to the current conception of politics as ugly and corrupt. In Weil's view, politics can be "*ensembles* in which independent factors concur...so as to form a thing of beauty" (Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 10). In this conception, politics could be seen as a symphony, as the correct and harmonic arrangement of societal elements: for example, an educational system which produces the right kind of citizens, who have the kind of knowledge necessary for a government based on freedom and justice rather than coercion.

Once men do not relate compassionately to one another, politics of might is inevitable, because a politics of compassion and justice is no longer possible. The relationship between means and ends is inverted (*The Simone Weil Reader*, 31) and each man becomes a means, rather than an end in himself. Becoming a means to an end makes a thing of man, as men who are subjected to might become things. In her essay on the *Iliad*, Weil investigates the politics based on might; the kind of politics which, it is clear, she believes is the primary mode of politics today. It is a politics that does not acknowledge the vicissitudes of fortune, one which believes that all things—and in a politics of might, human beings are emphatically things—can be bent to the human will.

Progress in Weil's view is thus a "transition to a state of human society in which people will not suffer from hunger" (Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 6). For Weil, these needs encompass not only bodily needs, but also the needs of the soul, which she considers of equal

³ Though one could also say that it is between the human and the divine: between human tendencies to use might in place of justice and the divine, which definitionally (for Weil) is the just.

importance. A nourishing society offers nourishment to the body, but also nourishes the desire for the good that Weil feels is inherent in every human being, “a desire for good which is unique, unchanging and identical with itself for every man, from the cradle to the grave” (Weil, *The Need for Roots* 11). A progressive politics rests on the distinction between true and false needs, and on a commitment to meeting those needs which are essential. Needs, unlike wants, are always limited in scope; though there can never be enough gold, one eventually has enough bread. One’s hunger for money can never be satiated; one’s hunger for bread has an end in sight. It is possible, indeed necessary, for a just society to provide enough bread. It is impossible for a society of any kind to provide enough gold.

Rooted Rationality

For Weil, rationality is not rote memorization of facts or the performance of economic cost-benefit calculations. Like Marcuse and Arendt, Weil objects to treating mankind like economic man, and reducing rationality to mere maximization of utility. Weil, being an ascetic herself, despises money and monetary concerns, which she feels creates a profound malaise. Money “destroys human roots” because it makes gain man’s only motive, outweighing all other concerns “because the effort it demands of the mind is so very much less” (Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 42). Calculating action based on monetary gain or loss requires only the most rudimentary mental effort. Rationality is, ultimately, knowledge of the good, and knowledge of one’s relation to the good. This is far from a simple cost-benefit calculation, and the mental effort it requires is therefore that much greater. If one imagines that the primary dialectic Weil is describing is that of movement between good and evil, facts

devoid of context are meaningless. One must also know “their true perspective relative to good and evil” (Weil, *The Need for Roots* 222).

A rooted rationality begins with critical intelligence, which for Weil is grounded—literally—in community. Communities that offer continuity in time allow for the emergence of common sense, rationality that is created between citizens who share a common past and a common future. Such communities teach men how to make judgments based on considerations such as justice, history and compassion rather than on simple means-ends calculations. They teach men that what should be admired are “only those actions and lives through which shines the spirit of truth, justice and love” (Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 218). More than Marcuse, or even Arendt, Weil longs for the restoration of destroyed communities, which allowed people to have a right relation to the past, a relation which educated them to their place in the community and in time and which allowed them to fulfill their obligations without conflict. Weil believes that the destruction of a city is “the greatest of griefs that can come among men” (Weil, *The Simone Weil Reader*, 178) and that such destruction is irrevocable.

Rooted rationality creates the ability to distinguish between true and false needs. For Weil, true needs are the needs of the soul, which she enumerates in *The Need for Roots*: needs such as equality, order, and liberty. Importantly, these needs are equivalent to, but predicated upon, the satisfaction of essential needs of the body. Therefore, in order to meet the needs of the soul, there must be a certain freedom from necessity and from excessive concern with the needs of the body.⁴ Rationality for Weil also means knowing the good, not only what is good for the individual, but what is good for the community. Without

⁴ As we shall see, Arendt makes a similar argument for freedom from necessity as a prerequisite to political freedom.

communities which frame, narrate, and help individuals to navigate their uncertain lives, each individual is left with only her own fragile and fallible human consciousness, easy prey for totalitarian propaganda which promises to restore a mysterious irrational wholeness in the minds of men. Weil writes:

Today, it is only belonging unconditionally to some brown, red or other totalitarian system which is able to give, as it were, a solid illusion of inward unity, which is why it constitutes such a strong temptation for so many distraught minds (Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 235).

One of the greatest dangers of modern industrial society is that imperfect history is replaced with perfect fiction, and one of the largest and most perfect fictions is the fictional community that is the nation-state. Weil believes the nation-state to be an idol, a false god that people love because they have nothing else. It is also the most visible sign of that malady of modernity, uprootedness. This false love is dangerous because it lacks context and spirit, and also because it is not translated in the everyday lives of citizens. The past is no longer preserved in living spirit, which is to say, in the living practices that manifest history. The nation-state becomes the primary thread in the narrative citizens have about their lives, but it is a narrative that ultimately, for Weil, fails, because it does not allow for citizens to fulfill their obligations both to each other and to humanity.

She sees totalitarianism as the end of distinction—between force and justice, and good and evil—because totalitarianism is based on might, which makes things out of men and subjects all men to whimsical violence. This means, too, that good and evil collapse into one, or, rather, that it becomes impossible to distinguish between them, and to determine rightly what is good and what is evil. A politics based on might—and Weil feels that this is nearly all of modern politics—allows might rather than morals to determine the good, and it preempts the compassion of one man for another. A politics based on might ends the

distinction between masters and slaves, making all men simultaneously masters and slaves. This ends Hegel's dialectic, and forecloses the possibility of overcoming.

This knowledge of the good is for Weil irrevocably rooted in the past. The primary tragedy of our age is the destruction of the past through a politics based on might. History is a work of art, the accumulated narrative of thousands of human lives, one of which is our own. One of the greatest dangers of modern industrial society is that imperfect history is replaced with perfect fiction.

Science and the Technological Transformation of Man

Weil is at once enamored with and distrustful of science as it is practiced in modern society. For her, science now performs two primary functions: to confirm what philosophers have already acknowledged, and to create technology that ultimately uproots. For the first, she gives as an example Niels Bohr's discovery in quantum mechanics that the observer always affects the observed, "so that it is impossible to know a phenomenon as it would be if we were not observing it." She calls this an "obvious truth" which has "always been known." (Weil, *The Simone Weil Reader*, 100). Bohr's principle of complementarity is "nothing other than the old correlation of contraries which is basic in the thought of Heraclitus and Plato" (*The Simone Weil Reader*, 101). From this, Weil seems to draw the questionable conclusion that philosophers have already conceptualized what is only now being "discovered" in physics: therefore philosophy is not shaped by scientific discovery.⁵ Underlying Weil's critique of science is the idea that scientists are technocrats: that they are not committed to the truth *per se*, but rather to a mechanistic world-view advanced to consolidate their own power. Beyond that, Weil believes that "there is not, strictly speaking,

⁵ To further explore: Weil could be condemning a false division between science and philosophy. After all, in Greek society the two were not distinct from one another.

the possibility of anything new in philosophy” (ibid.). If there is nothing new in philosophy, and if philosophers cannot learn from scientists, then scientific inquiry may as well stop; there is nothing to be gained from further investigation that cannot be learned as well from the ancients. Science as currently practiced is not directed toward what Weil believes to be the correct ends, for “the scientist does not use science in order to manage to see more clearly into his own thinking, but aims at discovering results that will go to swell the present volume of scientific knowledge” (*The Simone Weil Reader*, 30). This knowledge is of questionable value, as it is pursued for its novelty and prestige alone, and not for the advancement of human reason.⁶

Such science is also removed from the everyday, linguistically based, experience of men. It exists in a world of symbols, and the cohesiveness of science depends upon signs rather than meaning, on “ready-made phrases whose use is stretched beyond the meanings originally contained in them” and on “algebraic calculations.” Such highly symbolized investigation of the world is “blind” and leads to “pseudo-ideas,” the content of which is “no more than that of relations between signs” (*The Simone Weil Reader*, 29-30).

Further, from her experience in the Renault factory, in which she witnessed the mind-numbing and repetitive nature of factory work, she believes that men are increasingly coming to shape themselves to their tools, rather than tools shaping themselves to men. Homo faber—he who makes—becomes, instead, he-who-is-made. Men come to serve machines, rather than machines serving men: “Machines do not run in order to enable men to live, but

⁶ It should be noted that Weil does not place a high premium on intelligence: when speaking of Plato’s Allegory of the Cave she said, “The difference between more or less intelligent men is like the difference between criminals condemned to life imprisonment in smaller or larger cells. The intelligent man who is proud of his intelligence is like a condemned man who is proud of his large cell...A village idiot is as close to truth as a child prodigy. ...” (Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, 52). And yet, as we shall see in the next paragraph, Weil wants men to be more than machines, to use their intelligence to direct their activity to certain ends, *not* to be like blind forces.

we resign ourselves to feeding men in order that they may serve the machines” (*The Simone Weil Reader*, 30-31). Weil sees this as a perversion of the natural productive capacity of men. It is a violence done to them, distancing them from their humanity. Making men like machines in turn makes them into forces of nature, blind, irrational, force without intelligence. Like Arendt, Weil sees labor as natural and essential to man, particularly physical labor, which she defines as the “spiritual core” of a “well-ordered social life” (Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 288). The rise of technology strips men of their capacity for labor.

Politics as Compassion

Might “makes a thing of anybody who comes under its sway” and, in the extreme, “makes a thing of man in the most literal sense, for it makes him a corpse” (*The Simone Weil Reader*, 154). Men who have weapons continually trained upon them—as all men now do, whether they acknowledge it or not—are naked before might, and are a corpse before they are even touched (155). They are dehumanized by fear. It may be that they are killed, but it may be that they suffer a worse fate, “without dying, [they] have become things for the rest of their lives” (157). They are enslaved by might, stripped of their power to decide. They cannot even be faithful to their city. They lose “all inner life” (159). They become, in essence, one-dimensional, though of course Weil does not use this term. The only hope for such de-humanized people comes if there is “an opportunity to change [their] destiny” (161)—assuming that they have the capacity to recognize such an opportunity.

This politics of might, however, also strangely *ends* the distinction between master and slave. The human race is not so divided, between the “suppliants on one hand, and conquerors and masters on the other” for “no single man is to be found in it who is not, at some time, forced to bow beneath might” (161). Those who are powerful always over-reach,

and are then subjected to might themselves (165); Weil gives the example of Hector and Achilles, who each play the role both victor and vanquished. The politics of might is therefore an endless cycle, a movement of retribution, movement between being master and being slave. This violent movement crushes all, those who appear for a time to wield it, those who receive it, “for violence so crushes whomever it touches that it appears at last external no less to him who dispenses it than to him who endures it” (167). Man becomes a tool, used by forces beyond his control, and both victor and vanquished, though they may not know it, are equally subject, equally object.

Might is without justice, and without justice, there is no politics. Might cannot understand suffering, and it does not believe in chance, and the acknowledgement and understanding of both are necessary for the existence of politics. Weil states this in epigrammatic fashion: “the understanding of human suffering is dependent upon justice, and love is its condition” (181). Necessity and fate make us equal, for we will all suffer under both: “Whoever does not know just how far necessity and a fickle fortune hold the human soul under their dominion cannot treat as his equals, nor love as himself, those whom chance has separated from him by an abyss” (181).

Turning away from a politics of might, a politics that is inevitably one-dimensional and objectifying, requires a radical humility. It also requires that one know the empire of might, and that one respect love—that is, compassion for one’s fellow human beings, one’s fellow sufferers—more than one respects violence. Violence springs from “pride, humiliation, hate, disdain, indifference, the wish to forget or to ignore” but a politics arrayed against might would acknowledge “the relations between the human soul and destiny” the degree to which “any and every soul is transformed by pitiless necessity” (181). Weil

proposes, in the face of a totalitarianism that promises the irrelevance of fortune, that men remember “that nothing is sheltered from fate, how never to admire might, or hate the enemy, or despise sufferers” (183). Such compassion is the cornerstone of Weil’s rooted rationality.

HANNAH ARENDT AND RATIONAL ACTION

Hannah Arendt was born in Germany in 1906 to secular Jewish parents. In 1923 she began her studies at the University of Berlin; in 1924 she entered Marburg University, where she worked—and, in time, began a romantic relationship with—Martin Heidegger.⁷ Arendt wrote her dissertation--on the concept of love in the thought of St. Augustine—in 1929, but, as a Jew, was prevented from completing her *habilitation*. In 1933 she left Germany for Paris, where she befriended Walter Benjamin and attended Alexander Kojeve’s lectures on Hegel. She immigrated to the United States in 1941, and in 1959 became the first woman appointed to a full professorship at Princeton. She died in 1978. Among her many published works are: *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (1951); *The Human Condition* (1958); *Between Past and Future* (1961); *On Revolution* (1963) and *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963).

Freedom as Praxis

One of Arendt’s primary oppositions is between the social and the political. Freedom for Arendt, following Aristotle, means “full independencies of the necessities of life and the

⁷ I do not know whether Arendt and Marcuse met in Germany or not; she had seemingly left Heidegger’s circle when Marcuse joined it (he began attending Heidegger’s lectures in 1928). Arendt and Marcuse’s lives are interestingly parallel, and a cursory examination has not revealed when or if they connected as scholars and exiles in the United States. It would be interesting to examine the disparate development of these two scholars as a reaction against Heidegger. They take very different paths, and yet retain very similar categories of critique.

relationships they originate” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 12). By this, Arendt means a minimal freedom from necessity, a definition of freedom that “excluded everybody who involuntarily or voluntarily, for his whole life or temporarily, had lost the free disposition of his movements and activities” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 12). Thus, many citizens currently considered free are not at all free, for they must labor for necessities and lack the free movement and activity that is the definition of a citizen. To be free means “neither to rule nor be ruled” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 32), either by others or by necessity.

Like Weil, Arendt was deeply enamored of the ancient Greeks, and much of her work is shaped by the ideal of freedom through political action. In Arendt’s thought, the political is distinct and separate from the concerns of everyday life. It is where men⁸ make manifest their dedication to the common good. A life chosen in freedom will “[be] concerned with the ‘beautiful,’ that is, with things neither necessary nor merely useful” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 13). This definition leads to Arendt’s oft-criticized division between the political and the social. For Arendt, freedom is dependent on the absence of human (that is, personal) wants and needs. The political is not, therefore, meant to address these questions of necessity, which should be confined to the family and the realm of the social rather than the realm of the political. She credits (or blames) Thomas Aquinas for confusing the two realms, and notes that “this unconscious substitution of the social for the political betrays the extent to which the original Greek understanding of politics had been lost” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 23).

⁸ It seems inappropriate to make this a gender-neutral term. While Arendt was surely, as a woman, in favor of women’s participation in the political, her division of the social and the political, and the privileged position she gives the political, seems to relegate many issues related to women’s political participation to that murky “social” realm she so despises. Arendt seems to believe that women can be included in the political as simply an expansion of franchise, and that women will behave no differently and have no different needs than men do in the political realm.

The confusing of the social with the political creates inequality. Bringing social concerns into the realm of the political collapses the distinction between household and polis, and opens up the possibility of patriarchal, paternal politics at every level of society. Arendt is identifying this collapse of the social into the political as a kind of uprootedness, an end to both the family and the polis. She writes, “the emergence of the social realm, which is neither private nor public, strictly speaking, is a relatively new phenomenon whose origin coincided with the emergence of the modern age and which found its political form in the nation state” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 28). This collapsing of two separate spheres into one creates a situation in which politics is no longer seen as a meaningful or heroic human action.

The family declines and is absorbed into different social groups (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 40). The nation-state, for both Arendt and Weil, indicates an absence rather than a presence. The nation-state emerges to fill the vacuum left by the collapse of classes, structure and hierarchy. For both, the nation-state is a pale imitation: of community, of authority, of politics, since the loyalty men give to the state is qualitatively less than that which they would give to a *polis*. Both theorists see the modern patriotism as servility and self-abnegation, rather than as legitimate loyalty and obedience to a greater good. What Arendt wants is what Weil and Marcuse want, simply, “nothing more than to think what we are doing” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 5). (It is difficult to read Arendt and Weil and not see that they ascribe virtue to the traits they themselves have: exceptional intelligence, a scholarly, upper middle-class background, and a high degree of education.) By “think[ing] of what we are doing” Arendt is asking for two things: a rational consideration of being and action, and a consideration of the relation of that action to the common good.

Arendt, like Weil, believes that hierarchy and structure is necessary for freedom. It is the aristocracy—meaning, those who are free from necessity—who advance societies, and Arendt mourns the lack of “an aristocracy of either a political or spiritual nature” from which “a restoration of the other capacities of men could start anew” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 5). Even those who achieve high position in society view what they do as a “job,” a means of earning a living, rather than as a part of a larger, human and political enterprise.

Classes (as opposed to masses) bind people to the whole. Like Weil’s conception of hierarchy, classes relate people to one another, and to the past and the future. They create what Arendt refers to as the literal meaning of “inter-est”: that which lies between people, “and therefore can relate and bind them together” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 182). Without classes, no man is related to the whole, and he is incapable of knowing the position that he occupies in society. This makes him inherently egotistical, bound in with his own self-interest, which is untethered by a class or community interest.

Intersubjective Rationality

For Arendt, nature is understandable only as it stands in silent contrast to the man-made world: “against the subjectivity of man stands the objectivity of the man-made world, rather than the sublime indifference of untouched nature” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 137). Any time man lives entirely in man-made conditions, “neither labor nor work nor action, nor, indeed, thought as we know it would then make sense any longer” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 10). In this view, rationality is irreducibly earth bound and conditioned by the natural world. Science, which espouses an Archimedean standpoint, a universal standpoint that is outside the earth, makes Arendt uneasy, because it removes the possibility

of understanding rationality as intersubjective.⁹ Unlike Weil, who feels that there are obligations owed to each individual human being simply because they *are* human beings, Arendt does not want universal categories, or universal viewpoints. She sees human, located and specific viewpoints as those that can be used to make us intelligible to one another. Arendt, who values our capacity to say what is, cannot look for liberation in a discipline (such as she believes modern physics is) which says that what we see is contingent, that what is is not always what appears to be, and that we cannot trust the evidence of our own senses. In all three thinkers there is a dislike and distrust of modern physics, which denies the physical, sensual reality of the world, and which is understandable only in a highly symbolic, specialized language.

Rather than the fictional world of totalitarianism, Arendt offers the possibility of saying what is, asserting that “no human world destined to outlast the short span of mortals within it will ever be able to survive without men willing to do what Herodotus was the first to undertake consciously, namely...to say what is. No permanence, no perseverance in existence, can ever be conceived of without men willing to testify to what is and appears to them because it is.”

For Arendt, speech itself can constitute a heroic action. *Saying what is* is a public act of genesis, the beginning of a deliberate process of community creation. “What makes mass society so difficult to bear,” she writes, “is not the number of people involved, but the fact that the world between them has lost its power to gather them together, to relate and to separate them” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 52-53). Arendt compares interest to a table that is between us, which seems to separate us, but which actually connects us through shared

⁹ Though many scientists would disagree, citing the public and contested nature of their investigations.

meaning. Without the table, we are merely individuals sitting by ourselves, rather than gathered around a common object. Our rationality is what makes us human, and our rationality must be created in action, in between us all. Rationality is, above all, a question of relation and relationship, the right and meaningful relation of one citizen to another. Rationality is part of the common world, which transcends our lifespan, extending into the past and the future; it is “what we have in common not only with those who live with us, but also with those who were here before and will come after us” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 55).

In a mass society in which people are unknown to one another, “the liar is free to fashion his ‘facts’ to fit the profit and pleasure, or even the mere expectations of his audience” and, because of this fluidity, “the chances are that he will be more persuasive than the truth-teller” (Arendt, *Between Past and Future*, 53). This is above all a violent move, a violence that is done internally and is all the more dangerous because of it. It offers a false wholeness, pretending to tell a story that cannot be told, promising resolution to fractured consciousness. Moderns are above all atomized and individuated; again, rationality becomes privatized, something seen as individual. Authority, rather than being present in classes and hierarchy, devolves to the individual, meaning that there is no authority at all.

Science as Force

It is the massification of society that allows for the scientific study of the behavior of men, which Arendt distrusts. Economics, Arendt believes, “could achieve a scientific character only when men had become social beings and unanimously followed certain patterns of behavior so that those who did not keep the rules could be considered to be abnormal or asocial” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 41). This statistical uniformity, this

reliance on mass behavior rather than meaningful action, is part of the increasingly individuated isolation of organized society. Meaningful action requires the presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear, which “assures us of the reality of the world and of ourselves” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 50). Statistical uniformity can no longer be considered a harmless scientific ideal, but “is the no longer secret political ideal of a society which, entirely submerged in the routine of everyday living, is at peace with the scientific outlook inherent in its very existence” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 43).

In the view of these three thinkers, science as applied and used in modern industrial societies has tended toward destruction rather than production. The question of science is a political question, and what happens in the sciences is of great political significance, because within the (algebraic¹⁰) study of science, speech becomes irrelevant, and speech is what makes us political beings. Arendt believes the language of science to be dangerous because it is without intersubjectively created meaning, “for the sciences today have been forced to adopt a ‘language’ of mathematical symbols which...now contain statements that cannot be translated back into speech.” Scientific experts, whose opinion is highly valued, cannot be adequate guides or leaders in a society because “they move in a world where speech has lost its power” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 3-4).

Labor, which Arendt considers a quintessentially human activity, is reduced and ultimately eliminated by technology, but to our detriment, for “this society does no longer know of those other higher and more meaningful activities for the sake of which this freedom [from labor] would deserve to be won” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 5). Automation does not free us, but strips us of our “oldest and most natural burden, the burden of laboring”

¹⁰ Both Weil and Arendt insist that it is the algebraic approach to the sciences that has removed the content from them.

(Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 4). Men do not use their tools but become tools themselves, extensions of the automation and subject to its will. Arendt contrasts this to “the tools of workmanship, which at every given moment in the work process remain the servants of the hand, the machines demand that the laborer serve them, that he adjust the natural rhythm of his body to their mechanical movement...as long as the work of the machine lasts, the mechanical process has replaced the rhythm of the human body” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 124). Machines force the human body into “an infinitely quicker rhythm of repetition than the cycle of natural processes prescribed” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 125).

Technology does not free people from necessity, but redefines necessity, first by “hid[ing] it [necessity] from our senses” (Arendt *The Human Condition*, 125). To free man from necessity, for Arendt, requires *more* than merely the production of abundance. In fact, the unthinking, unceasing production that creates abundance—or what passes for it—also creates unthinking, unceasing consumption (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 126). In Arendt’s view, we have shifted from the ideals of *homo faber*—permanence, stability, and durability—to the ideal of *animal laborans*, mere abundance. All human activity has been leveled, reduced to securing the necessities of life. It’s a beggar’s dream come true, “the age-old dream of the poor and destitute, which can have a charm of its own so long as it is a dream, but turns into a fool’s paradise as soon as it is realized” (Arendt *The Human Condition*, 133). The spare time that should have materialized to allow people to fish in the morning, paint in the evening, and so forth, has instead merely given the laborer time to spend consuming. It’s important to note that there is an unstated tension here. Arendt is making a distinction between the forms of labor that most humans have participated in up

until the industrial age and the seemingly new form of labor (mechanized labor) to which she objects. This suggests that Arendt considers the toil of agricultural labor to be less dehumanizing than factory labor. Agricultural labor allows people to remain in touch with the rhythms of nature in a way that labor subjected to the whims of machinery does not—but this does not negate the fact that agricultural labor was a drudgery from which most people were glad to escape.

In a world dominated by masses instead of classes, “behavior” replaces action. Rather than attempting to achieve immortality through great deeds, men will believe that “deeds will have less and less chance to stem the tide of behavior, and events will more and more lose their significance, that is, their capacity to illuminate historical time” (Arendt, *The Human Condition* 43). It is action that contains the possibility of immortality in a way that mere behavior does not. Action is purposive, with an eye toward history and one’s place within both history and one’s political community. Behavior is merely reactive, non-liberatory. It is behaving in a certain way mindlessly—that is, without thought of the past or the future.

Politics As Action

Like the Greeks she esteems so highly, Arendt sees in political activity a truly and uniquely human activity:

man’s capacity for immortal deed distinguishes him from animals; a man who seeks immortal fame rather than mortal things is the truly human man, distinguished from men who are content with whatever pleasures nature will yield them and who thus ‘live and die like animals’ (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 19).

This activity, politics, is both that which is concerned with something larger than ourselves—our human community, its history and its future—and is also the way we make ourselves

manifest to one another, through meaningful speech. It is how we distinguish ourselves, from one another and from animals. “Natural” or apolitical speech would be that speech that reveals nothing about the speaker herself. Scientific and mathematical language could be considered this kind of non-revelatory, apolitical speech.

Arendt doubts that there is any liberatory possibility in science and technology, which she feels always lack meaningful speech. The sciences trouble Arendt, for she believes “the ‘truths’ of the modern scientific view...will no longer lend themselves to normal expression in speech and thought” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 3). Speech and action are, in Arendt’s thought, inevitably intertwined: “with word and deed we insert ourselves into the human world” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 176); “No other human performance requires speech to the same extent as action” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 179). Speech without action may be communicative, but it is not political and thus is not fully human—that is, not reflecting a human’s highest capacity.

Thus, a language that is entirely symbolic and which transmits neither meaning nor action is a language that is eviscerated, stripped of its primary purpose. Scientific language, expressed through symbols, is mute, and “only sheer violence is mute” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 26). Science in this view can only be violent or lead to violence. Rather than use speech to persuade, it commands by force, by technology, and to command rather than persuade is prepolitical. Force is an indicator of inequality. (Arendt *The Human Condition*, 26-27). Further, science has led to automation that has destroyed action even beyond these considerations of speech.

The technologies that men believe will make them free, by allowing them the time to engage in chosen, purposive activities, instead entraps them in a never-ending cycle of

necessity. As befitting someone who believes our actions shape our selves and our narratives about ourselves, Arendt believes that our tools shape us. She writes, “the things that owe their existence exclusively to men nevertheless constantly condition their human makers” (Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 9). The normative implication here is that the tools people use should be consciously chosen. This is a choice that is not given to laborers, who must use whatever technology is deemed necessary for profit, rather than that which is necessary for politics. Arendt feels that this enslaves them to constant motion, labor without meaning, process without end, and without the possibility of making themselves manifest through their action.

HERBERT MARCUSE AND RATIONAL RESISTANCE

Herbert Marcuse was born in Berlin in 1898 into a secular Jewish family. He completed his dissertation at the University of Freiburg in 1922, and returned in 1929 to write his *habilitation* with Martin Heidegger. In 1933, like Arendt, he found he could not complete his *habilitation* under the Nazi regime. He joined the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research that year and immigrated to the United States. He began teaching in 1952 and taught at Columbia, Harvard and Brandeis, finally moving to the University of California at San Diego. Throughout his life he remained politically involved and frequently gave speeches throughout the 1960s and 1970s. He died in 1979. During his life, he published extensively, including *Reason and Revolution* (1941), *Eros and Civilization* (1955), *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), *Negations* (1968), *An Essay on Liberation* (1969), and *Counter-Revolution and Revolt* (1972).

Freedom Through Opposition

Opposition itself is the foundational notion of Marcuse's thought: negation, resistance and the Great Refusal. *One-Dimensional Man* bears the marks of its time—published last, and influenced by and influencing 60's counter-cultural movements. Marcuse offers a detailed description of the freedom he considers not only possible, but also absolutely necessary, for the progress and development of mankind. True freedom requires both intellectual and physical freedom—freedom of the mind and freedom of the body—and it is irreducibly political. Marcuse sounds like Arendt when he says that it is “the political universe in which, alone, freedom can be attained” (Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 50) and that “political freedom would mean liberation of the individuals *from* politics over which they have no effective control” (Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 4). Freedom is, for Marcuse, self-directed self-development, self-development that “presupposes free available energy which is not expended in super-imposed material and intellectual labor” (Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 243). In increasingly one-dimensional societies, freedom is mainly manifested in and through opposition. Opposition reveals the irrationality upon which organized societies rest, and “to the degree to which the established society is irrational, the consciousness becomes free for the higher historical rationality only in the struggle against the established [rationality]” (Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 222).

Like Arendt, Marcuse sees that the primary violence done to those living in totalitarian regimes is internal violence, violence done to conscience and consciousness. A uni-dimensional society, a society without opposition, produces men who are incapable of resistance, or, worse, who are unwilling to resist, who see no need of it. Marcuse acknowledges that people may not know they are unfree, that, in fact, “under the conditions

of a rising standard of living, non-conformity with the system itself appears to be socially useless, and the more so when it entails tangible economic and political disadvantages and threatens the smooth operation of the whole” (Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 2).

Marcuse assumes that people want to be free, even if they do not know they are unfree. *One-Dimensional Man* is thus an attempt to correct consciousness and awaken conscience. *One-Dimensional Man*, in particular among Marcuse’s works, is imbued throughout with a distinction between true and false consciousness. In the preface, Marcuse is unrestrained in his desire to show the way, for he feels that “men must come to see it [the inherent irrationality of existing society] and find their way from false to true consciousness, from their immediate to their real interest” (Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, xlv). Further, the only way to change consciousness is to change the material circumstances of men’s existence, to change their way of life, which in Marcuse’s view *only* happens through denying the positive, through refusing what is offered (ibid.). It is not only the “given” we need to see, but also the “hidden,” (Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 71) not only what is, but what is lacking; not only the sun, but also the shadow. This is the beginning of reshaping consciousness: to first refuse, to critically examine all that is offered, rather than accepting it unthinkingly.¹¹ It is not the only action, but it is the essential action.

Marcuse’s conception of false consciousness is what he calls “enslaving contentment.” He recognizes that many people seem to live reasonably happy lives under a system he considers reprehensible and thoroughly destructive. People seeking “comfort...and job security” in a society which is simultaneously preparing itself for—through its defense industry--and against—also through its defense industry—nuclear annihilation is “an example of enslaving contentment” (Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*,

¹¹ Like a 12-step program for addicts of organized society.

243). It is impossible, to him, that a person of good conscience could be content under a system based entirely on waste and injustice. He therefore has to see them as tricked, fooled, bound. All of our social organization, from our modes of transport to the way we get and consume our food, “bind the consumers more or less pleasantly to the producers, and, through the latter, to the whole” (Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 12). Again, the criticism Marcuse is making here is dependent upon a distinction between true and false consciousness, and true and false needs. False needs are those that perpetuate toil, aggressiveness, and misery: in short, those needs that are based on artificial scarcity and zero-sum games. The fulfillment of these false needs, Marcuse admits, may be gratifying, but the end result is “euphoria in unhappiness” (Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 4-5). These needs are, ultimately, unreasonable, for they perpetuate the very state of existence that people are purportedly trying to avoid: that is, the state of unfreedom.

Rational Resistance

Reason in Marcuse’s thought is always dialectical and oppositional, discovered through conflict and contestation. It begins with considered refusal and contradiction, the possibility that what one has been told may not be what is so (Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, xiv). This implies that reason is always public and communally created. It cannot stand on its own, nor does it exist without the referent that others provide. The dialectic illuminates through opposition, and can often and most powerfully show what is lacking. What is, for Marcuse, is always shaped by what is not. Negation does not always present an alternative vision of society, but—especially in a situation of increasing uni-dimensionality—the power of negation may lie most of all in its ability to show that which is not there.

Marcuse feels that reason has yet to be discovered, for reason properly understood would always lead toward greater human freedom. True rationality is the pursuit of knowledge with human liberation as its end, and by human liberation Marcuse means both the intellectual and physical conditions of freedom. It is in his discussion of rationality that Hegel and Marx come through Marcuse's writing most clearly. First, there is clearly a dialectical component to reasoning and rationality, one which requires the presence of opposition and contestation. Second, Marcuse follows Marx in assuming that the productive capacities developed by man may be used for more reasonable, rational ends—namely, towards human liberation, rather than toward mere consumption.

Rationality is, for Marcuse, reason rightly understood: reason directed toward the end of human liberation, freedom from necessity and from unnecessary, alienated labor. Of the existing uses of reason, he writes, "Reason as thus far conceived has served to repress and deform the urge to live well. Therefore reason itself is yet to be discovered" (Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 228). Although a dialectical thinker, he must deny the possibility of the end of the dialectic, that is, the culmination of reason that Hegel anticipated. Or, more precisely, he must bring judgment to bear on the end of the dialectic: it will either be totalitarian or utopian, but Marcuse will know which it is by its ends. Either it will be directed toward human liberation (utopia) or toward further enslaving contentment (totalitarianism).

In tracing the development of the concept of reason, Marcuse reaches back first to the classical exploration of logic and rationality. Philosophy, he claims, began with two value judgments: "that freedom from toil is preferable to toil, and an intelligent life is preferable to a stupid life" (Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 126). The ancients believed (and Weil,

Arendt and Marcuse each, in slightly different ways, agree) that to lead a truly human existence required that one be free from necessity. Though modern people may see themselves as free from the kind of necessity that ruled the lives of the Greeks (namely, agricultural necessity), Marcuse notes that society still is organized so that “procuring the necessities of life constitutes the full-time and life-long occupation of specific social classes, which are *therefore* unfree and prevented from human existence. In this sense, the classical proposition according to which truth is incompatible with enslavement by socially necessary labor is still valid” (Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 129. Emphasis in the original).

When Marcuse discusses rationality, he is often explicitly discussing truth, which, in the classical view, can be apprehended through reason. Truth is subversive. The fact that the apprehension of truth is limited to those who can spend their lives in contemplation means that the truth has never attained universality. When describing the dialogic apprehension of truth, Marcuse illustrates the movement between the sensual, observed world and the imagined ideal, the purely conceptual or abstract. In the Platonic dialogues, there is movement and contestation. The meanings of terms are kept open and ambiguous, and the dialogues develop from simple propositions. In this dialogue, the “partner is led to question the normally unquestioned universe of experience and speech, and enter a new dimension of discourse...he is supposed to go beyond that which is given to him...” (Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 131). A Socratic discourse is a political discourse insofar as it “contradicts the established political institutions” (Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 154)—in other words, as long as it corrupts the youth.

Dialectical logic cannot be formal—that is, cannot be fixed, unchanging—because it is determined by the real. The real has a certain rationality, the “rationality of contradiction,

of the opposition of forces, tendencies, elements, which constitutes the movement of the real, and if comprehended, the concept of the real” (Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 141). Truth cannot be apprehended through the denial of what exists. For Marcuse, the truth is not abstract. It is the product of a dialogue between a questioning, rational mind and the world itself.

Although he believes in the potential of mind to apprehend truth, Marcuse is nonetheless deeply concerned with the limits of rationality. He conceives of a future in which certain behaviors and thoughts become unimaginable, in which there is a “totalitarian logic of accomplished facts” and “the movement of thought is stopped at barriers which appear as the limits of Reason itself” (*One-Dimensional Man*, 14-15). It is a “self-limitation of thought” which grows from a society in which certain oppositional behavior is barred and thus “the concepts pertaining to them are rendered illusory or meaningless” (*One-Dimensional Man*, 15).

Marcuse also focuses on questions of “behavior.” It is behavior which can be modified, controlled, statistically analyzed. In other words, our “rational choices” are neither rational, nor freely chosen, and thus what we call “Reason” serves the powers that be (*One-Dimensional Man*, 15-16). This is a clear parallel to Arendt’s discussion of the massification of society which allows for people’s behavior to be categorized, analyzed, and ultimately, controlled. People behave. They can no longer act, because action implies knowable ends.

Our superficially rational actions serve irrational goals. Our society is, Marcuse feels, irrational as a whole, “its productivity is destructive of the free development of human needs and faculties, its peace maintained by constant threat of war, its growth dependent on the

repression of the real possibilities for pacifying the struggle for existence” (Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, xli). The minimal definition of rationality that is commonly used is economic rationality, which relies on individual cost-benefit, means-ends calculations. Like Marx, Marcuse sees that this commodifies all of our relations to one another. Economic rationality is a liberal construct that privatizes freedom, and allows each individual to believe they are free even if others are not. In this calculus, “theoretical and practical Reason, academic and social behaviorism meet on common ground: that of an advanced society which makes scientific and technical progress into an instrument of domination” (*One-Dimensional Man*, 16).

Science as Domination

Science is an exemplar of the larger irrationality of society. It is directed toward the conquest of nature, which is the conquest of man: thus science leads to what Weil would consider a politics of might, and what Arendt would consider a politics of violence. Technology, which is science applied, makes automatons of men, and the machine becomes an efficient instrument of domination. It is an extraordinary instrument of domination, for it bends both the administrators and those who are administered to its form and function. Machines in Marcuse’s thought are like might in Weil’s thought and violence in Arendt’s thought, for they turn people into things. Rather than people having the capacity for action, they are acted upon, in a way, by machines that dictate their movements and organize their labor. What is interesting about this relationship (between man and machine) is that it closes the dialectic. It does so because it fundamentally alters the relationship between Master and Slave, which is the original exemplar, in Hegel’s work, of the dialectic. Can man go beyond the machine? Is there a possibility of overcoming such a relationship?

Alexander Kojève, in his discussion of the Master/Slave dialectic, stated that “human, historical, self-conscious existence is possible only where there are, or—at least—where there have been, bloody fights, wars for prestige” (O’Neill 51). A machine does not consciously seek dominance or recognition, but nonetheless bends the will and lives of men to it. “history stops at the moment when the difference, the opposition, between master and slave disappears” (O’Neill 53). There is no overcoming of the machine—the machine has no will to fight to the death and yet still dominates the lives and labor of men.

Science, pursued rationally as Marcuse would have it, would recognize that it is a political pursuit, would entail “recognizing scientific consciousness as political consciousness, and the scientific enterprise as political enterprise” (Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 233). The knowledge we currently pursue through the sciences is thus not the knowledge that will tend toward our freedom. It tends instead towards waste and destructivity of human potential. Our pursuit of knowledge enslaves us rather than freeing us. It creates a false contentment, what Marcuse calls an ‘enslaving contentment.’ This enslaving contentment is one of the most dangerous illusions moderns have, and is the definition of false consciousness.

Though Marcuse disagrees with the ends toward which science is directed, he believes that they can be redirected in line with reason. Science as practiced, in a society that is irrational as a whole, must be similarly irrational. Science correctly practiced, that is, directed toward human liberation rather than human destruction, would aid in the fulfillment of reason. This is the “evolution of the prevailing sciences” which would involve “scientific rationality as a whole, which has thus far been committed to an unfree existence and which would mean a new idea of science, of Reason” (Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 231).

What Marcuse is prescribing here is no small task: nothing short of the re-evaluation of two thousand years of research. The study of quantum physics, for example, does not seem directly related to human happiness or liberation. In fact, Arendt, Weil and Marcuse distrust such science *because* it leads men to be less sure of their place in the world. It leads them to the knowledge that they cannot trust the evidence of their senses.

Marcuse, more than Arendt or Weil, is conflicted about the human mind, as his approach to science demonstrates. He is aware of the partiality of the mind, but also believes that it is our only vehicle for liberation. Because the human mind is fallible, truth cannot be discovered privately, but must be created publicly, in the interplay of ideas, of presence and absence, of art and tragedy. For Marcuse, scientific rationality denies the experience of the senses in a way that supports, rather than subverts, existing institutions. Unlike a dialogic, public exchange of ideas, “*scientific* subversion of the immediate experience which establishes the truth of science against that of immediate experience does not develop the concepts which carry in themselves the protest and the refusal” (Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 140).

Thus, like Marx, Marcuse sees that the productive capacity of society could be directed towards freeing men from necessity, rather than enslaving them to false/constructed wants. If people no longer had to spend their lives in the realm of necessity, “truth and a true human existence would be in a strict and real sense *universal*” (Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 129. Emphasis in the original). Rationality, in this understanding, would be “a mode of thought and action which is geared to reduce ignorance, destruction, brutality, and oppression” (Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 148).

Politics of Refusal

Like Weil and Arendt, Marcuse sees distinction disappearing. Where Weil sees the loss of distinction between communities, and Arendt identifies the shift from classes to masses, Marcuse is most concerned about the disappearing distinction between individual and social will, the creation and maintenance of societies in which “the political needs of society become individual needs and aspirations” (Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, xli). This disappearing distinction creates a world in which an individual’s thoughts, desires and even their conception of what is possible become conflated with those of society. Man thus becomes one-dimensional. One might say that man stands in the full sun of totalitarianism, and lacks a shadow: there is no negative, no hidden or unstated quality to his life. Under such circumstances, “contradiction becomes the very form of truth and movement” and reason becomes “the power of the negative” (Marcuse, *Negations*, xiv). Politics also becomes one-dimensional, and thus, unfree. In a way, Marcuse, like Arendt, distrusts the presence of the social within the political, though he puts it this way: “[one-dimensional society] thus obliterates the opposition between public and private existence, between individual and social needs” (Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, xlvi).

Because Marcuse remains enamored with, and indebted to, Marxist theory, he tends to emphasize the idea of struggle between those who have power and those who lack it. In Marcuse’s work, he elaborates Marx’s conception of the means of production. Marx, being a materialist, saw that the physical relations of power were capable of producing different kinds of awareness—that the consciousness of the bourgeoisie would be different from the consciousness of the proletariat. The true interest of the proletariat would be obscured by the material relations of power. These relations of power, however, could (and would) be

unmasked. The false consciousness of the proletariat would be overcome and they would understand their true enemy and their true interest.

“WE LOVE THE BEAUTY OF THE WORLD”¹²

Marcuse, Weil, and Arendt turn to many of the same possibilities for alternative consciousness: the reappraisal of reason and rationality, the maintenance of the unique and extraordinary, and the valuation of the world and human community. They believe, against considerable evidence, that human beings may progress to a more just and free society; that progress is measured by “the possibilities of ameliorating the human condition” (Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 16).

They argue that there is a need for a new language, one that moves away from the technical, managerial, organizational language. Such language as we use now is “transmitted in a style...in which the structure of a sentence is abridged and condensed in such a way that no tension, no ‘space’ is left between the parts of the sentence” (Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 387). This form of speech, which seemingly tells all, resolves all of the ambiguity necessary for art and meaning. As such a language collapses (should it collapse) Marcuse hopes for new language, and new meaning, to emerge: “Deprived of his false fathers, leaders, friends and representatives, he would have to learn his ABCs again. But the words and sentences which he would form might come out very differently, and so might his aspirations and fears” (1964: 246). Word and deed must be reunited, so that speech once again becomes a meaningful form of action.

It is through political action, through acting in concert with others, that a human society may fulfill its potential. Marcuse and Arendt explicitly believe that it is “the political

¹² Weil, *The Need for Roots*, 10.

universe in which, alone, freedom can be attained” (Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, 50). Political freedom means not only the freedom to act, but also to be liberated from politics over which individuals have no control (Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 4). Freedom in this view is multidimensional: freedom in concert with others, freedom from force and violence, freedom from necessity. The freedom people enjoy in advanced capitalist societies, they suggest, is a flat kind of freedom. It is only the freedom to possess, consume, and labor.

Human freedom for each of these thinkers implies human responsibility. There is responsibility to the community in which one lives, to the history of that community, and to its future members. Our human reason must be used for the right ends. It must lead us to understand the world in which we live and our place in it. It must be more than abstract—it must impel us to action. Weil, Marcuse and Arendt are committed to closing the gap between theory and praxis. They envision a world in which human potential is actualized, a world in which human activity has as an end the rational use of productive facilities towards the establishment of greater human freedom. They emphasize that human activity must have an *end* in two senses—both as a goal to be reached and as the possibility of something being finished, accomplished. Marcuse writes, “Life as an end is qualitatively different from life as a means” (*One-Dimensional Man* 17). Each thinker is attempting to carve out a space that is stable but not stagnant, a society in which there is order that is not oppressive.

Such a society would rest on legitimate authority. This would be an authority that did not require force to rule; that would not have to turn to coercion in order to ensure obedience. Citizens would know one another, so that words and deeds would remain connected. The community would be aware of its history and would seek to transmit that history to their

children (in a way that it did not become propagandistic). It is of great importance to all three thinkers that society does not become ahistorical, and for all of them this has to do with truth claims. Without knowledge of (specific, local) history, facts become nothing more than compelling stories. The creation of the history of a community will belong to those who can tell the most compelling and coherent story, even if it is untrue, about the society and its members.

What, if any, role is there for the nation-state in this vision of politics? Weil, of course, considers the nation-state itself a sign of uprootedness. Arendt considers the nation-state the progenitor of propaganda and, also, as exercising illegitimate authority over its members. Marcuse sees vested interests—corporate interests—manifested in the nation-state. In the face of rooted, local, particular communities, would the nation-state disappear, or would it merely become irrelevant to the daily lives of the community? It seems clear that the nation-state cannot be the basis of identity and cannot be that to which people give their ultimate loyalty. Arendt feels that to command by force belongs to the realm of the household, the social, and not to the political. Bringing social concerns into the realm of the political collapses the distinction between household and polis, and opens up the possibility of patriarchal, paternal politics in every level of society. People thus become servile (Weil) rather than obedient, and obey because of fear of punishment (the wrath of the father) rather than because they acknowledge the presence of legitimate authority.

Perhaps naturally, there is a tendency among philosophers, expressed from Socrates to our three thinkers here, to privilege the philosophic life above all other forms of life. Above all, they are urging people to consider, to think: “the highest and perhaps purest activity of which men are capable [is] the activity of thinking” (Arendt, *The Human*

Condition 5). Without critical thought, Weil tells us, there is no possibility of freedom, and “where the light of intelligence grows dim, it is not very long before the love of the good becomes lost” (Weil, *The Need for Roots* 26). Marcuse and Arendt’s discussion of necessity exemplifies this hierarchy of human activity, in which philosophic conderation is at the top. In her idealization of Greek citizen life, Arendt neglects the amount of work it took on the part of those considered too lowly to be citizens—slaves and women—that enabled the creation of the public sphere. Even now, the increased participation of women in the public sphere rests too often on the labor of other women (*Atlantic Monthly* April 2004). Marcuse hopes that the productive capacity of technological society will set ever more people free from necessity, but this raises two problems. The first is that reappropriation of technology is difficult, especially given the critiques levelled at it by Marcuse and Arendt. Is there a way to use productive technology that doesn’t shape and deform men, that doesn’t make them slaves to the machines? The logical implication of their critique of technological production is that the machines would have to be built over, using entirely different design criteria. The second is that, given Arendt and Weil’s critiques of the way use of industrial machinery deforms and reshapes people, using such technology to set people free from necessity still requires that some submit to the exigencies of the machine.

All three thinkers, to greater and lesser degrees, are open to charges of nostalgia. Even Marcuse, who is perhaps least nostalgic for the hierarchy and rigidity of old, writes eloquently of the “verse and prose” of the pre-technological society and culture. Such a culture contains “the rhythm of those who wander or ride in carriages, who have the time and the pleasure to think, contemplate, feel and narrate” and while it is clear that Marcuse mourns the loss of these rhythms, he also knows that “only dreams and childlike regressions can

recapture it” (Marcuse, *Negations*, 71). Arendt seems especially susceptible to this charge; feminist and democratic theorists have pointed out that life in the Greek city-states took for granted inequalities between men and women and masters and slaves that would not now be accepted as legitimate. Further, the rooted and stable communities prized by Weil and Arendt were also exclusionary and highly disciplinary for their members.

Though they would have us recognize scientific enterprise as a political enterprise, this is more complicated than it would first seem. It is true that the developments of science inevitably influence the development of politics, and it is also true that politics applies science and scientific development. What would it mean, practically, to recognize scientific consciousness as political consciousness? Would there be certain limits to scientific inquiry that would be determined by politics? Or would politics be rightly understood as a scientific pursuit? And, if so, isn't a scientific politics a rather totalitarian thought? In short, though I empathize with their critique of the applications of science through technology, it seems to me that the scientific pursuit of knowledge can be a critical and subversive pursuit itself. Perhaps what is wrong with science is that, like the pursuit of truth in ancient times, the pursuit of scientific knowledge is too often open only to those who have a certain freedom from necessity. What is wrong with science, in my view, is not that it has too much influence, but rather that it has too little; that the method and critical thought required in scientific pursuits is widely regarded (at least in American society) as worthless if it does not lead to new and lucrative technologies.

Human beings are driven by two desires that at times conflict: the first, to be free to pursue individual fulfillment, and the second, to be at one with a community, to feel unity with others. The vision that these thinkers offer of a non-totalitarian, un-organized (so to

speak) society is a compelling vision. It is one that offers fulfillment of both these needs simultaneously. Yet there were times when, especially while reading Marcuse, I was troubled. Doesn't a totalitarian society promise the same? It is true that a totalitarian society would not allow for the fulfillment of individuality. It would only offer the *illusion* of doing so. Who, however, will tell the people that they are living a lie? And why are they likely to be believed? The ongoing problem with Marxism is that it presumes that once people know [their true interests their behavior will change. This leaves a class of people (presumably elite) who know the truth and must transmit it to the masses, for their own good.

A critical thinker must assume that people wish to be free, that the reason they are not is because of forces aligned against them—that they do not know their true interest, nor their true position. A critical thinker must assume that, once their unfreedom is shown to the people, they will cast off their cloak of servitude and become appropriately philosophical. This attitude, it seems to me, is problematic. First, because it does assume that some people have knowledge that other's lack. It also assumes that people want this knowledge, that they are aware of a lack in their own worldview. The fear that I think underlies the work of all three of the thinkers discussed here is that their arguments for the complicated, the difficult, the new and the unique, will ultimately lose to arguments that are easy and comforting, which do not require people to do very much or think too hard. In short, they fear that Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor was right.

The Grand Inquisitor tells us that in fact, people seek to avoid freedom, not to embrace it. That people prefer a comforting fiction to a hard truth. That, if they are going to be instructed by an elite who will tell them who they really are and what they really want, they would prefer an elite that takes as much of the responsibility off their hands as possible.

Weil, Marcuse and Arendt represent the elite who would like to tell people what their true interest is and then instruct them in the burden of their responsibility for self, others, and community. They expect that people will be willing to assume such a burden because for them, freedom is incomplete without this understanding of responsibility. This is not the freedom promised by capitalism, however, and it is not a freedom that is present in the lives of people living in large, disconnected, mass society. When confronting the Christ-character in the allegory, the Grand Inquisitor says words that may have come from Marcuse himself: “But let me tell Thee that now, to-day, people are more persuaded than ever that they have perfect freedom, yet they have brought their freedom to us and laid it humbly at our feet. But that has been our doing” (Dostoevsky, *The Brothers Karamozov*, 130). As long as men desire bread more than freedom, the Grand Inquisitor argues, there will never be enough bread for all; yet it is the abundance of bread, the freedom from necessity, upon which the critical thought of Marcuse, Weil and Arendt rests.

What sets these thinkers apart, what drives them more than any other consideration, is love for the world and the people in it. They are driven by a deep compassion, by the belief that “in the exigencies of thought and in the madness of love is the destructive refusal of the established ways of life” (Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 126). They want to open the door to genius, understood as the capacity to generate, to begin anew, and to create something entirely unique. They are individualists who stand against mass society. They wish to teach people to rationally apprehend the world through their senses, through Eros and Logos. Confronted with abundant evidence of human cruelty, they would be excused for becoming cynical and misanthropic. Instead, they remain humanists—skeptical humanists, perhaps, but still dedicated to human emancipation and the realization of human potential.

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