

Herbert Marcuse Denounces the Vietnam War (May 22, 1966)

Abstract

The social philosopher and German émigré Herbert Marcuse denounces U.S. military involvement in Vietnam with a mixture of unorthodox Marxism, emotional anti-imperialism, and social psychology, appealing to youths to join the liberation movement of the developing countries.

Source

Vietnam—Analysis of an Example

All economy is political economy in the broadest sense, and the system of advanced industrial society is global, also in the sense that it hands over all dimensions of human existence, private and public, to the ruling societal powers. The system is also global in the sense that there are no longer any external factors for this system, that the forces furthest removed, geographically and otherwise, become forces within the system. Domestic policy, which is extended into international policy, mobilizes and controls people's inner lives, the structure of their drives, their thoughts and feelings; it controls spontaneity itself—and, corresponding to this global and total character of the system, the opposition, of which I will now speak, is not only and not primarily political, ideological, and socialist; but rather, also an instinctively moral or, if you will, an immoral, cynical, existential opposition. It is above all the spontaneous refusal of oppositional youth to participate, to play along, [out of] disgust with the lifestyle of the “affluent society” that is at work here. Only this negation is articulated, this negation alone is the basis of solidarity, but it is not the goal: it is the negation of the total negativity that rules the system of the “affluent society.”

The global campaign against communism must be understood as part of this total negativity, and the economic analysis of the reasons must include an analysis of the other social dimensions. The traditional distinction between base and superstructure becomes questionable. Just as expenses for sociology and psychology in the service of “scientific management,” “human relations,” market research, advertising, and propaganda have long since ceased being mere business expenditures, and have in part become necessary costs of reproduction, psychological factors are today part of the necessary reproduction of the existing social apparatus. As elements of the permanent mobilization of the populace, they reproduce the global campaign against communism in the psychological structure of the individual. This society needs an enemy whose threatening power justifies the repressive and destructive exploitation of all physical and intellectual resources. Social wealth, technological progress, the domination of nature, on the one hand, contrasts with the use of all these forces to perpetuate the struggle for survival on a national and global basis by creating unnecessarily parasitic labor, by methodical waste and destruction in the face of poverty and need, by subjugating the human being to the enormous apparatus of total bureaucracy. This entire fateful unity of productivity and destruction, of prosperity and misery, of normalcy and war impacts man as constant repression, and these administered people, the objects of this repression, respond to it with a diffused aggression. This aggressiveness, which accumulates in excess in society, must be triggered and made useful in a way that is tolerable and profitable for society. Otherwise, it could threaten the unity of the system itself. I see this growing aggressiveness, this instinctive aggressiveness in overdeveloped industrial societies, as one of the most dangerous factors for future developments.

The same aggressive forces, in my opinion, lead from death on the highways and streets [in the U.S.] to

bombings, torture, and burnings in Vietnam. There are 49,000 highway deaths and more than four million injuries caused by traffic accidents in the United States every year. Compare that with the casualty figures in Vietnam and you might understand why this war has not elicited a mass response. As an expression of the aggression, let me further mention the commercial rape of nature, the invasion of privacy—which creates “captive audiences” everywhere—and an atrocious brutalization of the language, to which the people are gradually becoming accustomed. I personally did not see such open brutality during the Second World War, even in the Nazi press, as that which is spread daily in American newspapers—in the headlines announcing triumphantly the number of (alleged or actual) deaths and corpses recovered. And from warfare and its language, brutalization enters the sphere of entertainment and amusement.

Here we have an effective acclimatization and dehumanization, and this in turn leads to a kind of mass hysteria. The image of the enemy is blown completely out of proportion, and the insensitivity, the inability to distinguish between propaganda, advertising, and truth is becoming ever clearer. The organs for this discernment seem to be atrophying. You cannot even say that everyone believes what is placed in front of him; the mood instead is: I cannot judge that, the government knows better than I do, and you can't do anything about it anyway.

Now a few words about the opposing forces; in contrast to the opposition “from above,” now [I want to discuss] the opposition that represents a more radical potential. I repeat: The opposition, too, must be viewed on a global scale, but for the sake of clarity I will divide up these opposing forces, first as regards the United States itself.

Four groups can be identified:

1. intellectuals and young people
2. “underprivileged” groups in the population, i.e., Puerto Ricans, Negroes, etc.
3. a religious, radical movement
4. women

In all of these groups the opposition makes up only a minority; that needs to be kept in mind.

The opposition among intellectuals and the younger generation, especially at the universities, is probably the most vocal, visible, and effective opposition in this category. As I have already mentioned, even the radical opposition among college students and young people is not a socialist or a communist opposition. Mistrust of ideologies of all kinds (and these young men and women regard communism, socialism, and Marxism as ideologies) is a critical factor in this movement. The slogan “We don't trust anyone over thirty” is characteristic of the situation. One can often hear: “These older generations got us into the mess we're in today. What they have to say to us can no longer mean anything to us.”

It is remarkable what a spontaneous unity has formed from political, intellectual, and instinctive sexual rebellion—a rebellion in behavior, in language, in sexual mores, in dress. It is of course nonsense when the press constantly reports that the student demonstrations are dominated by “bearded advocates of sexual freedom.” That is an example of the press's typically discriminatory use of language. But, after all, one can sense something that goes beyond political opposition, representing a new unity: a unity of politics and eros. [...]

I might be totally romantic in this regard, I have to admit, but I see this unity as a sign that the political opposition is becoming more intense and profound.

The second group, the so-called underprivileged, the civil rights movement and the struggle against poverty. Is that a true counterforce? These groups, especially among the Negroes, have a leadership that tries to create a link between the civil rights movement in the United States and the war in

Vietnam—with minimal success. We cannot forget that a large portion of the underprivileged in the United States live in such conditions that being drafted to go to Vietnam seems like an improvement. Also, there is a widespread expectation that these lower classes could themselves move up within the system and that the existing society can make these options materialize.

Briefly on the third and fourth groups:

The radical religious protest movement has its martyrs: The number is small, and its effects are not visible. The category “women” might seem strange in this political context. I have mentioned it only to do justice to the fact that the people going door to door collecting signatures for petitions against the war have found the greatest amount of support among housewives. Have women remained relatively spared from the aggressiveness of male society?

You have probably noticed one group that is missing from this list of oppositional forces in the United States, namely, the working class.

This was not an oversight. We cannot say that the working class is part of the opposition to the war. You will have read that declarations have been made by the trade union leadership in America that are unusually approving of the war in Vietnam. [...] The working class in the United States is not part of the opposition; it is an integrated part of the system—integrated not only ideologically, but also on the material basis of increased productivity and a rising standard of living. Of course, America is a class society, and the real difference between those who determine our lives and those whose lives are determined by others, is much greater than ever before: Decision-making is restricted to a small group that is less controlled “from below” than ever before. But this class society is no longer a society of a class struggle in a traditional sense. The class struggle still exists of course, but it is a purely economic struggle for higher wages, shorter hours, better working conditions. The union politics are purely economic, not political.

Now to the opposing forces outside the United States. In my opinion, in Europe this presents a major problem, namely: Can American society serve as a model of what can be expected in the capitalist countries of Western Europe? Is an independent path still open here, the path of planned capitalism and worker self-administration, as is presented, especially in France, as the new strategy of the workers’ movement? [...]

The final and, in my opinion, the crucial counterforce is the opposition in developing countries. Here, objectively if not also subjectively, the classical conditions for the transition to socialism exist. These are:

1. the misery of the direct producers as a class, as the agrarian, nonindustrial proletariat
2. the vital need for radical change of intolerable living conditions
3. the inability of the ruling class to develop the productive forces
4. the militant organization of the national liberation front, which represents a unity of national and social revolution

All of these forces work within the global system of imperial capitalism. The victory of these forces would, in fact, as I have indicated, shake up the economics of the metropolis. [...]

I am not speaking of the communist world as a counterforce opposing the capitalist world, since I am convinced that this configuration is still very much in flux. The important thing here is the trend towards convergence between Soviet society and American society and towards the division of the peoples of the communist world into “haves” and “have nots,” which would greatly facilitate such assimilation.

In closing, I would like to answer a question you asked me: Is there any real basis of solidarity for all these socially and geographically so distinct and isolated counterforces? Is there a basis for a concrete form of

solidarity?

My answer is: *none* besides the solidarity of reason and sentiment. This instinctive and intellectual solidarity is today perhaps the most powerful radical force we have. Such solidarity should not be underestimated, especially not the instinctive, spontaneous solidarity of sentiment. It goes deeper than organized solidarity, without which it cannot become effective. It is part of the power of negation that initiates the upheaval.

[...]

The question remains whether the university should have something to do with politics, if one should engage in politics at the university. To be sure, political science is an established discipline at the university, but it is supposed to have as little as possible to do with politics. Ethics certainly has a legitimate place at the university, and one of the things that I learned, and that many of my friends, socialists, Marxists, have learned, is that morality and ethics are not merely superstructure and not merely ideology. In history there is something like guilt, and there is no necessity—not strategic, not technological, not national—that could justify what is going on in Vietnam: the slaughter of the civilian population, of women and children, the systematic destruction of foodstuffs, carpet bombing of one of the poorest and most defenseless countries in the world—that is guilt and we must protest against it even if we believe that it is hopeless, simply in order to survive as human beings and perhaps to make a dignified existence possible for others, perhaps only because it could possibly shorten the terror and the horror, and today that is already a great deal.

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