

FÜNFZIG JAHRE FLASCHENPOST

Walter Famler

Unter dem Titel *Dialectics of Liberation* wurde von den Antipsy-
chiatern Ronald D. Laing und David Cooper 1967 in London ein
internationaler Kongress organisiert, bei dem unter anderem
der Black-Panther-Führer Stockeley Carmichael, der Neostruk-
turalist Lucien Goldman, der Gestalttherapeut Paul Goodman,
Paul M. Sweezy (Herausgeber des einflussreichen Organs der
Neuen Linken *Monthly Review*) und Herbert Marcuse auftraten.
Marcuses Kongressbeitrag ist mir als Abdruck in der von Hans
Magnus Enzensberger herausgegebenen Zeitschrift *Kursbuch* im
Herbst 1979 in die Hände gefallen. Die *Kursbuch*-Ausgabe
stammte aus dem Jahr 1969, Marcuse selbst war, als ich seine da-
mals zwölf Jahre alte Rede erstmals las, bereits einige Monate tot.

Es hatte mich eine Flaschenpost aus einer anderen Zeit erreicht.
Ihr Inhalt war für einen einundzwanzigjährigen Philosophiestu-
denten und Politaktivisten, der ich 1979 war, aber von größter
Aktualität. Marcuse, Bloch, Adorno waren magische Namen,
ihre Bücher jedoch wurden im damaligen studentischen Links-
milieu sehr eklektizistisch rezipiert. Befreiung von der Über-
flussgesellschaft war für mich der Einstieg in die Lektüre von
Marcuses Büchern Der eindimensionale Mensch und Eros und
Zivilisation.

Die Erkenntnis, dass der kapitalistische Wohlfahrtsstaat in sei-
nem Kern ein Rüstungsstaat ist, der einen Außenfeind kon-
struieren muss, um die Fortsetzung von Knechtschaft gerade an-
gesichts überbordender Möglichkeiten von simulierter Freiheit
durch Konsum und Unterhaltung aufrechtzuerhalten, ist in un-
seren digitalisierten Hochleistungsgesellschaften aktueller denn
je – paradoxerweise sowohl für den kleinen Teil derer, die zu den
Profiteuren des kapitalistischen Systems gehören, als auch für
die längst wieder wachsende Anzahl der von diesem nicht nur
ausgebeuteten sondern ausgeschlossenen Menschen. Marcuses
optimistische Erwartung des Hervortretens „eines neuen
Menschtyps mit vitalen, biologischen Antrieben in Richtung auf
die Freiheit und mit einem Bewusstsein, dass in der Lage ist, den
materiellen wie den ideologischen Schein der Überflussgesell-
schaft zu durchstoßen“ hat sich nicht erfüllt. Seine pessimistische



Einschätzung, dass je besser der Repressionsapparat der Überflusgesellschaft funktioniert umso weniger Wahrscheinlichkeit für einen Übergang von der Knechtschaft zur Freiheit bestünde, leider sehr wohl. Die Hoffnung aber, dass die Flaschenpost aus dem Jahre 1967 auch bald fünfzig Jahre nach ihrer Aufgabe noch vereinzelt Adressaten erreichen könnte, möchte ich trotzdem nicht aufgeben.

LIBERATION FROM THE AFFLUENT SOCIETY

Herbert Marcuse

I am very happy to see so many flowers here and that is why I want to remind you that flowers, by themselves, have no power whatsoever, other than the power of men and women who protect them and take care of them against aggression and destruction.

As a hopeless philosopher for whom philosophy has become inseparable from politics, I am afraid I have to give here today a rather philosophical speech, and I must ask your indulgence. We are dealing with the dialectics of liberation (actually a redundant phrase, because I believe that all dialectic is liberation) and not only liberation in an intellectual sense, but liberation involving the mind and the body, liberation involving entire human existence. Think of Plato: the liberation from the existence in the cave. Think of Hegel: liberation in the sense of progress and freedom on the historical scale. Think of Marx. Now in what sense is all dialectic liberation? It is liberation from the repressive, from a bad, a false system—be it an organic system, be it a social system, be it a mental or intellectual system: liberation by forces developing within such a system. That is a decisive point. And liberation by virtue of the contradiction generated by the system, precisely because it is a bad, a false system.

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Now as to today and our own situation. I think we are faced with a novel situation in history, because today we have to be liberated from a relatively well-functioning, rich, powerful society. I am speaking here about liberation from the affluent society, that is to say, the advanced industrial societies. The problem we are facing is the need for liberation not from a poor society, not from a disintegrating society, not even in most cases from a terroristic society, but from a society which develops to a great extent the material and even cultural needs of man—a society which, to use a slogan, delivers the goods to an ever larger part of the population. And that implies, we are facing liberation from a society where liberation is apparently without a mass basis. We know very well the social mechanisms of manipulation, indoctrination, repression which are responsible for this lack of a mass basis, for the integration of the majority of the oppositional forces into the established social system. But I must emphasize again that this is not merely an ideological integration; that it is not merely a social integration; that it takes place precisely on the strong and rich basis which enables the society to develop and satisfy material and cultural needs better than before.

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What is the dialectic of liberation with which we here are concerned? It is the construction of a free society, a construction which depends in the first place on the prevalence of the vital need for abolishing the established systems of servitude; and secondly, and this is decisive, it depends on the vital commitment, the striving, conscious as well as sub- and un-conscious, for the qualitatively different values of a free human existence. Without the emergence of such new needs and satisfactions, the needs and satisfactions of free men, all change in the social institutions, no matter how great, would only replace one system of servitude by another system of servitude. Nor can the emergence—and I should like to emphasize this—nor can the emergence of such new needs and satisfactions be envisaged as a mere by-product, the mere result, of changed social institutions. We have seen this, it is a fact of experience. The development of the new institutions must already be carried out and carried through by men with the new needs.

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Before I go on, let me give a brief definition of what I mean by an affluent society. A model, of course, is American society today, although even in the US it is more a tendency, not yet entirely translated into reality. In the first place, it is a capitalist society. It seems to be necessary to remind ourselves of this because there are some people, even on the left, who believe that American society is no longer a class society. I can assure you that it is a class society. It is a capitalist society with a high concentration of economic and political power; with an enlarged and enlarging sector of automation and coordination of production, distribution and communication; with private ownership in the means of production which however depends increasingly on ever more active and wide intervention by the government. It is a society in which, as I mentioned, the material as well as cultural needs of the underlying population are satisfied on a scale larger than ever before—but they are satisfied in line with the requirements and interests of the apparatus and of the powers which control the apparatus. And it is a society growing on the condition of accelerating waste, planned obsolescence, and destruction, while the substratum of the population continues to live in poverty and misery.

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Now the question we must raise is: why do we need liberation from such a society if it is capable—perhaps in the distant future, but apparently capable—of conquering poverty to a greater degree than ever before, of reducing the toil of labour and the time of labour, and of raising the standard of living? If the price for all goods delivered, the price for this comfortable servitude, for all these achievements, is exacted from people far away from the metropolis and far away from its affluence? If the affluent society itself hardly notices what it is doing, how it is spreading terror and enslavement, how it is fighting liberation in all corners of the globe?

We know the traditional weakness of emotional, moral, and humanitarian arguments in the face of such technological achievement, in the face of the irrational rationality of such a power. These arguments do not seem to carry any weight against the brute facts—we might say brutal facts of the society and its productivity. And yet, it is only the insistence on the real possibilities of a free society, which is blocked by the affluent society—it is only this insistence in practice as well as in theory, in demonstration as well as in discussion, which still stands in the way of the complete degradation of man to an object, or rather subject/object, of total administration. It is

only this insistence which still stands in the way of the progressive brutalization and moronization of man. For—and I should like to emphasize this—the capitalist Welfare State is a Warfare State. It must have an Enemy, with a capital E, a total Enemy; because the perpetuation of servitude, the perpetuation of the miserable struggle for existence in the very face of the new possibilities of freedom, activates and intensifies in this society a primary aggressiveness to a degree, I think, hitherto unknown in history. And this primary aggressiveness must be mobilized in socially useful ways, lest it explode the system itself. Therefore the need for an Enemy, who must be there, and who must be created if he does not exist. Fortunately, I dare say, the Enemy does exist. But his image and his power must, in this society, be inflated beyond all proportions in order to be able to mobilize this aggressiveness of the affluent society in socially useful ways.

The result is a mutilated, crippled and frustrated human existence: a human existence that is violently defending its own servitude.

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Before I conclude I would like to say my bit about the Hippies. It seems to me a serious phenomenon. If we are talking of the emergence of an instinctual revulsion against the values of the affluent society, I think here is a place where we should look for it. It seems to me that the Hippies, like any non-conformist movement on the left, are split. That there are two parts, or parties, or tendencies. Much of it is mere masquerade and clownery on the private level, and therefore indeed, as Gerassi suggested, completely harmless, very nice and charming in many cases, but that is all there is to it. But that is not the whole story. There is in the Hippies, and especially in such tendencies in the Hippies as the Diggers and the Provos, an inherent political element—perhaps even more so in the US than here. It is the appearance indeed of new instinctual needs and values. This experience is there. There is a new sensibility against efficient and insane reasonableness. There is the refusal to play the rules of a rigid game, a game which one knows is rigid from the beginning, and the revolt against the compulsive cleanliness of puritan morality and the aggression bred by this puritan morality as we see it today in Vietnam among other things.

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Our role as intellectuals is a limited role. On no account should we succumb to any illusions. But even worse than this is to succumb to the widespread defeatism which we witness. The preparatory role today is an indispensable role. I believe I am not being too optimistic—I have not in general the reputation of being too optimistic—when I say that we can already see the signs, not only that They are getting frightened and worried but that there are far more concrete, far more tangible manifestations of the essential weakness of the system. Therefore, let us continue with whatever we can—no illusions, but even more, no defeatism.

Excerpts from a lecture in London (1967). The lecture was published in: David Cooper (ed.): The Dialectics of Liberation (Harmondsworth/Baltimore: Penguin, 1968), pp. 175-192.