

The crux of our controversy

**Letter from Herbert Marcuse to Theodor W. Adorno,
dated 21 July 1969**

With this I reach what you call 'the crux of our controversy'. I certainly do believe that the student movement does have the prospect of 'effecting a social intervention'. I am thinking here mainly of the United States, but also France (my stay in Paris reinforced that once again) and South America. Of course, the causes that set off the process are all very different, but, unlike Habermas, it seems to me that, despite all the differences, the driving motivation aims for the same goal. And this goal is now a protest against capitalism, which cuts to the roots of its existence, against its henchmen in the Third World, its culture, its morality. Of course, I never voiced the nonsensical opinion that the student movement is itself revolutionary. But it is the strongest, perhaps the only, catalyst for the internal collapse of the system of domination today. The student movement in the United States has indeed intervened effectively as just such a catalyst: in the development of political consciousness, in the agitation in the ghettos, in the radical alienation from the system of layers who were formerly integrated, and, most importantly, in the mobilization of further circles of the populace against American imperialism (I really can see no reason to be allergic to the use of this concept). All that may not amount to very much, but there is no revolutionary situation in the most advanced industrialized countries, and the degree of integration simply delimits new, very unorthodox forms of radical opposition. As is almost always the case, the rulers have a more accurate assessment of the meaning of the student opposition than it has itself: in the United States repression is most urgently organized against schools and universities—when co-optation does not help, the police do.

The student movement today is desperately seeking a theory and a practice. It is searching for forms of organization that can correspond to and contradict late capitalist society. It is torn in itself, infiltrated by provocateurs or by those who objectively promote the cause of provocation. I find some stunts, such as those that I hear word of from Frankfurt and Hamburg, as reproachable as you do. I have fought publicly enough against the slogan 'destroy the university', which I regard as a suicidal act. I believe that it is precisely in a situation such as this that it is our task to help the movement, theoretically, as well as in defending it against repression and denunciation.

[...] Double isolation: neo-fascism and this democracy are not alternatives: this democracy, as a capitalist one, drives, in line with its inherent dynamic, towards a régime of force? And why must its collapse bring about a dictatorship that is worse than what exists? Is it not precisely the task of today's protest movement, especially the student one, to prevent such a development? And must one denounce this movement from the outset as a 'powerless force'—when, for a start, it is more than questionable whether one can speak of force at all with a clear conscience—when it is compared to that over which the rulers dispose? What 'serves' the opponents better: the authoritative assurance of the powerlessness of this movement, or the strengthening of the movement? The students know all too well the objective limits of their protest—they do not need us to point it out to them, but perhaps they need us to help them get beyond these limits. The use of force, the 'practitioners of violence', all that is on the other side, in the opponents' camp, and we should be wary of taking over its categories and using them to

label the protest movement. And the dictatorship after the collapse? We should have the theoretical courage not to identify the violence of liberation with the violence of repression, all subsumed under the general category of dictatorship. Terrible as it is, the Vietnamese peasant who shoots his landlord who has tortured and exploited him for decades is not doing the same thing as the landlord who shoots the rebelling slaves.

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