



THE GREAT REFUSAL: LIBERATION FROM THE FACTS OF LIFE

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ABSTRACT

Following the rise of fascism in the mid-20th century, the Frankfurt School began developing theories to explain how individuals become susceptible to authoritative domination. Herbert Marcuse provided the New Left with a “Great Refusal” of the status quo. This concept first found meaningful expression during the 1968 May events in Paris. The Great Refusal has since been absorbed by the technological administration of false needs and the rational instrumentalization of culture. New media such as the popular Internet forum Reddit has the double function of entertainment and communication, thereby ensnaring the individual in the passive consent and enjoyment of self-domination. Cultural form develops habits of thought that tend toward conformity and powerful assumptions about ultimacy. Science and technology could be used to develop solutions to global problems, but instead we are framed in a modality of life that produces material and ideological waste to satisfy the false needs created by the established culture. The liberation of consciousness is therefore dependent on the liberation of science and technology. The 2011 Occupy Wall Street movement demonstrates that technology can be harnessed to cultivate new values that aim to liberate consciousness. The Great Refusal has become the negation of the material and ideological conditions that confirm objective reality—a refusal to be subordinate to a world of facts.

Keywords: ideology, Great Refusal, Marcuse, Reddit, Occupy Wall Street

Refusing the “Facts of Life”

The individual has disintegrated into a productive society. Although members of the Frankfurt School held diverse views on why the proletariat never came into class consciousness, there is a consensus among the school that it was a problem of culture. As advanced technological society pursued an abstract notion of progress, the development of the individual became subordinate to “the facts of life.” This essay draws from the Frankfurt School to examine how culture has become a means for mediating the individual’s consciousness. Our advanced technological society has redefined culture as a form, as opposed to a genuine cultivation of values. From the perspective of a nation-state, cultural form can be understood as the broad and dynamic configuration of mass culture that integrates individuals into the prevailing economic system. Through the process of social and economic integration, culture becomes a stable and calculable mechanism that may act to advance the objective goals of society’s abstract progress. This emergence of a mass culture calls for a massification of thought and action. Massification can be understood as the process by which conformity replaces consciousness and culture becomes form. Through cultural form, “facts of life” become ideological standards that maintain the established direction of society.

The instrumentalization of consciousness is concealed by universal “truth.” Truth is the order of facts to which the individual grounds reality. The individual’s consciousness orients the self in relation to universal truth and finds expression in culture. Social theorist Herbert Marcuse offered a historical and dialectical critique of mass culture and conformity. As father of the New Left, he placed great emphasis on identity politics beyond the Marxist class struggle. He successfully developed theories of negation into what would become the Great Refusal; however, the Great Refusal as a revolutionary praxis is limited by his failure to identify the universalities that maintain identity, and therefore the status quo. He strategically avoided defining the Great Refusal to allow a multitude of identities to form larger movements of solidarity. The Great Refusal is the rejection of unnecessary repression—the liberation of consciousness from the imposed “facts of life.” To strengthen Marcuse’s Great Refusal, this paper uses Peyman Vahabzadeh’s concept of ultimate referentiality to provide structural grounding for transgressive categories of identity. By establishing concepts of ultimacy, one is then able to use negation, not as a broad refusal of the status quo, but as a strategy for subverting particular universal “truths” that maintain a set of values. By directing opposition at ultimate referents such as patriarchy or climate change, the established system becomes destabilized, allowing for new cultural values to be realized. If liberated from abstract administration, science and technology could help society realize these new values. In the productive society, science is pursued and technology is developed to serve the economic interests of the state. Science and technology, thus, maintain the values of the status quo to ensure social and economic stability.

The Objective (False) Consciousness

In his *Philosophic-Economic manuscripts* written in 1844, Karl Marx praised Hegel for recognizing man as a historical process of self-development. He also endorsed Hegel’s “dialectic of

negativity as [a] moving and productive principle.”¹ The dialectics of negativity would become the logic of negation that powers Marcuse’s concept of the Great Refusal. Another important concept that Marcuse borrowed from Marx was the idea of self-alienation – that is, an objective essence by which the individual learns to mediate consciousness.² For Marx, the externalization of one’s consciousness becomes an objective reality that abstracts from the conscious awareness of Self. Although individuals instinctually sense immediate needs such as hunger, access to these needs has become mediated through an objective process of exchange. Consequently, the individual must orient social behavior toward an objective method of self-preservation. Food becomes obtainable by successfully negotiating the market economy. This transforms self-alienation into a necessary form of existence. The consciousness of the individual internalizes this established fact and structures reality in accordance with universalizing principles that guide the social process. For the individual to have “success” in such an environment, self-alienated consciousness must appeal to the ultimate referents that structure experience.

With self-alienation established as a necessary form of existence in an advanced technological society, the next step is to grasp the social orientation of consciousness. An individual in an objective, rationally organized society must act in accordance with universal assumptions. Peyman Vahabzadeh used the term “ultimate referentiality” to describe how assumptions converge and become universal “fact.” He distinguished this term from poststructural essentialism as ultimate referentiality does not “merely identify assumptions about an essence or a ground that elevate phenomenon to the center. Rather, it also constructs and legitimizes itself through assumptions about ultimacy.”³ This process is the individual’s involuntary consent to become subordinate to hegemonic notions of social and political progress. Progress exists on the individual level as well as the universal. The individual is socialized to pursue self-preservation, but only within the realm of ultimate referentiality. The efficacy of the objective social system does not require the individual to develop self-consciousness; instead, the individual is rewarded for suppressing such development to fill the objective roles of society. The progress of the individual’s development is therefore subordinate to the progress of society.

The individual’s self-alienated consciousness consequently constructs experience in accordance with ultimate referents. As assumptions establish themselves as fact, the individual looks to ultimate referentiality to find truth in Being. For this reason, the environmental activist will locate truth in climate change, the feminist in patriarchy, and the communist in relations of property. All of these political ideologies seek to negate the ultimate referent they view as impeding the progress of the species as a whole. By unconsciously complying with universal concepts, self-alienated existence is normalized. Concepts that are reinforced by hegemonic practice develop historically and manifest culturally. Culture is thus not a cultivation of values but rather powerful assumptions that consoli-

1. Karl Marx, “Philosophic-Economic Manuscripts, 1844,” in *Writings of the Young Marx on Philosophy and Society*, ed. Loyd D. Easton and Kurt H. Guddat (New York: Doubleday, 1967), 321.

2. *Ibid.*, 324.

3. Peyman Vahabzadeh, *Articulated Experiences: Toward a Radical Phenomenology of Contemporary Social Movements* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2003), 14.

date into Shape. Ideologies⁴ such as patriarchy develop social tendencies that absorb the individual into its logic. These preexisting concepts indoctrinate the individual with self-alienating concepts before they recognize that they exist, thus creating a false consciousness.

False consciousness is sustained by the happy consciousness. In *One Dimensional Man*, Marcuse described the happy consciousness as “the belief that the real is rational and that the system delivers the goods.”⁵ This myth helps the individual rationalize the system as the best means for satisfying needs. Through the use of rational systems, the individual becomes susceptible to accepting society as a neutral entity that strives for the common good. As long as the system delivers the goods, the individual will not question the system. This logic tends to form patterns of thought that repel alternatives, thus allowing ultimate referents to consolidate and become the status quo. The happy consciousness is content with its false consciousness and refuses to be critical of its master: the “facts.” Happy consciousness is a slave to the facts and reduces the individual to an instrumental existence.

As the instrumental role of the individual increases, individuality declines. Individuals do not have infinite psychic and physical energy. The longer they labor throughout the day, the less time or energy remains for reflective leisure time. Instead, the individual revels in the opportunity to passively consume images, television, and music that do not challenge the existing assumptions of the mind. Through the anesthetic of entertainment, the individual consumes culture rather than actively creating it. For culture to develop, a certain degree of repression is necessary. This is best explained by Sigmund Freud’s concept of sublimation: the displacement of instinctual drives, which allows the individual to participate in higher psychic activities.⁶ Sublimation represses the drives of the individual, allowing them to project self-essence onto objects (such as tools) or ideas (such as religion). Civilization requires repression, but the individual longs for liberation. To accommodate this tension, the mediatory process of culture emerges.

A civilization becomes more than a mass of sublimated individuals: It becomes an organized society. Culture is the force of moderation that binds the masses together. Civilization represents the operational goals of society, and culture mediates the values and spiritual needs of the individual. The cultivation of higher mental activity creates a realm of discourse in which experience can be generated and shared. The advanced technological society uses culture to drive its operational goals, transforming culture into an objective method. As an objective method of values, culture turns individuals into instruments of their own reason. Although they are free to Reason, they can do so only within the rationality of the system. For the individual, self-progress becomes a concept that depends on success in the market economy. In Marcuse’s words, “Progress turns reason into submission to

4. Louis Althusser recognized that through ideology individuals represent themselves through their imaginary relation to the real conditions of existence. He posited that ideology has no history and is socially constructed through what he called “ideological state apparatuses.” He distinguished among many ideological categories such as communications, politics, religion, and family, but concluded that “all ideological state apparatuses, whatever they are, contribute to the same result: the reproduction of the relations of production, i.e. of capitalist relations of exploitation.” Louis Althusser, “Ideology and the State,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), 105–07.

5. Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1991), 84.

6. Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and Its Discontents*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 34.

the facts of life, and to the dynamic capability of producing more and bigger facts of the same sort of life.”⁷ As the individual strives for a bigger house, a better automobile, a newer smartphone, personal progress becomes measurable in relation to the commodity. Through this prism, “quality of life” becomes associated with one’s possessions. This “fact” of life turns personal progress into a marketable concept and ignites the spirit of capitalism.

“Facts” of life become ultimate referents for the individual’s reason. Ultimate referents such as patriarchy, science, race, and nationalism are universal concepts that hegemonically influence culture. These concepts are historically produced and maintain the status quo. They all contribute to ideas that form the mass culture. When the individual is born into the world, the consciousness is socialized by these a priori concepts. The conditions of existence are contained within the framework of past (historical) values. The happy consciousness accepts these values as real and rational because they structure experience in a way that successfully fulfills needs. Cultural form becomes a cathartic force that the happy consciousness refuses to contest.

Culture and Identity in an Advanced Technological Society

Culture has become entrenched in ideology. Advanced technological society has mastered the consciousness of its human instruments. The emergence of the consumer culture has turned individuality into a marketable concept. Rather than merely helping to fulfill needs, mass culture seeks to create false needs, manufactured needs beyond the realm of necessity. It uses entertainment to create a realm of utopia and pleasure that seems obtainable through the market economy. This mentality is not new; it is an idea that emerged from bourgeois enlightenment. What is new is that entertainment and culture are now available to the masses, rather than to an elite few. Adorno and Horkheimer worried that this new form of culture standardizes individuality. They used the example of improvisation in jazz music to explain this standardization of identity. For them, the improvisation of jazz can only occur within the standards of the form. If the musician deviates from the constraints of the time signature or key, the content of the notes will be rejected by the form. The authors considered syncopation, placing rhythmic stress on the offbeat of an arrangement. Rather than disrupting the arrangement, syncopation is included in the jazz form and complements the overall sound. Adorno and Horkheimer acknowledged the paradox of syncopation: Although the style attempts to deviate from the norm, the musicians are still identifying “wholeheartedly with the power which beats them.”⁸ The style is included in the overall arrangement and becomes a tool for many. Culture is the beat that regulates individuality.

The identity of the individual represents itself as whole, but it is fragmented by consciously relating to the universal. Individuals tend to conform to the power that beats them, manifesting in what Adorno and Horkheimer referred to as pseudo-individuality. Pseudo-individuality is the means by which the individual attaches the self to mass culture. The individual finds expression in relating his or her consciousness to the individuality of another. Through the massification of culture, locating

7. Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 11.

8. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of the Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2002), 124.

one's self in a universal context becomes effortless. Culture becomes a cathartic source of energy for the individual to recognize self-consciousness. For Freud, "a feeling can be a source of energy only if it is itself an expression of a strong need."⁹ The oceanic feeling that is felt in a moment of catharsis is the individual aligning the self to the universal. Mass culture objectifies the self as a need. The celebrities, actors, musicians, and politicians that permeate mass media act as models of success for the individual to strive toward. The individual departs from the self and locates identity in these cultural models. Cultural models are used to sell an identity and manufacture consumers. According to Adorno and Horkheimer, paradoxically celebrities "come to fulfill the very individuality they destroy."¹⁰ The culture industry recognizes the power of the individual's sublimated need to locate a higher identity, and exploits it to create needs that are false.

The technological world has intensified the creation of false needs. An individual embraces a pseudo-identity, leaving him or her with a longing that can only be satisfied temporarily. Marcuse suggested that "the concept of alienation seems to become questionable when the individuals identify themselves with the existence which is imposed upon them."¹¹ But the system is imposed upon the false consciousness rationally. The individual absorbs the objective world into the self and becomes the ideology of mass culture. Reason can thus be repressive. Rather than being dominated by an external force, the individual learns to self-dominate. For this to be sustainable, the onslaught of false needs must never cease. The consciousness must remain happy, or it will consider itself a fraud. The culture industry advertises false needs as necessities by appealing to one's alienated conception of self. Adorno stressed that the ideology of mass culture is so powerful that "conformity has replaced consciousness."¹² The technology of the 20th and 21st centuries has produced new mediums that have the double function of entertainment and communication, ensnaring the individual in the enjoyment of self-domination.

False consciousness allows culture to manipulate the individual's happiness. False needs are the life support of false consciousness. They give the individual a feeling of euphoria that the consciousness reacts to positively. The false consciousness is liberated when it escapes from the real world. The mass media (and its owners) is empowered by this false sense of liberation. The technological reality of the mediated message escapes the reason of the individual, and the content of the source appears to be neutral. The sense of liberation and individuality offered by advertisements appeal to true human needs. Advertisements appeal to a true need and then present a false solution; the appeal is to a feeling, and the solution is a commodity. This process transforms culture into a means for controlling human emotion. If the masses become politically dissatisfied, culture can manage feelings and attitudes to suppress revolt.

The increasing instrumentalization of the individual as a productive force gives rise to the dissatisfaction of lived experience. This problem is contained by the established powers through what

9. Freud, 10.

10. Horkheimer and Adorno, 16.

11. Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 11.

12. Theodor W. Adorno, *Culture Industry Reconsidered, Media Studies: A Reader*, ed. Paul Marris and Sue Thornham (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 31-37.

Marcuse called desublimation. Desublimation gives elements of sublimated energy back to the individual to create feelings of immediate gratification. The individual's needs and consciousness become manageable. According to Marcuse, "Satisfaction in a way generates submission and weakens the rationality of protest."¹³ The individual becomes not only comfortable in self-alienation, but satisfied and content. Culture administers the needs of the individual to suppress opposition to the status quo, diffusing the logic of protest and fostering a society of individuals who are complicit in their own repression.

Culture integrates the individual into the rationality of the system and limits reason to established facts. Mass media has become a source of culture that can promote one's repression as liberation. Mass media presents culture as an objective reality to be consumed rather than as the cultivation of values that occurs through the exchange of experience. The massification of culture is the ideal way to administer an objective agenda. Information can be presented such that the audience can draw a conclusion without having to reflect. The audience's thoughts or attitudes can be influenced by the form of language, thus becoming what Marcuse referred to as habits of thought.

Habits of thought develop from concepts that are contained within reason. These concepts have universal meaning but are subject to a formal bias that develops historically. Concepts such as culture, progress, and democracy evoke a feeling that is generally agreed upon; however, historical, material, and ideological conditions shape the reality of their practice. Marcuse recognized that the reality imposed by these concepts "contribut[es] to a false order of facts." The individual's false consciousness "become[s] embodied in the prevailing technical apparatus which in turn reproduces it."¹⁴ Alternatives are negated by the false consciousness of the individual and the system's rationale. False consciousness locks itself into a mind frame of domination and accepts the "facts of life." Thus, mass culture and its promotion of the "facts of life" are a mechanism for controlling, manipulating, and administering the real conditions of living with the imaginary relations created by cultural form. The individual is reproduced by the cultural form to pursue life within the parameters of the objective facts produced by the ideological state apparatuses.

Administration as Domination: A Rational System of "Progress"

The shared commitment of the individual and society to the abstract notion of "progress" confirms an objective mode of life.¹⁵ Technology's ability to organize human beings and nature gives unprecedented power to the organizer. The liberal democratic society relies on habits of thought to maintain control over public discourse and labor power. We embody the system wholly and learn that the "price of progress is destruction."¹⁶ In an advanced technological society, progress is a highly acclaimed value. Progress needs no justification because it is promoted as beneficial to the species. If progress is to obtain a high standard of living, then rationally the order of an advanced industrial society is progressive. However, the destruction of nature, the domination of workers, and the multi-

13. Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 75.

14. Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 145.

15. By, 'objective,' I mean the actions of humans become predictable and they are therefore become subject to administration (state/cultural/economic).

16. Althusser, "Ideological State Apparatus," 105-07.

lation of experience all challenge the merit of this progress. Progress is not cumulative. To view it as such would require mistakenly accepting every negative condition of history as a condition of today. That is not possible because values shift over time and depend on the individual's relation to the natural and physical world.

The scientific method has become a standard of progress for the technological age. Marcuse problematized this notion of progress by pointing out that "the domination of nature has remained linked to the domination of man—a link which tends to be fatal to the universe as a whole."¹⁷ Technological rationality organizes the individual and nature toward ends that fulfill the prophecy of progress. For the individual to be integrated into the labor process, she must become an instrument that is objectively administrated. It is through administration that self-alienation is rationalized, and it is through rationalization that nature, man, and consciousness are dominated.

The administration of progress is the administration of domination. In a culturally and politically administrated society, progress is domination. The three relational categories of subordination, oppression, and domination are not synonymous, for they all have different metaphysical qualities. Vahabzadeh used Laclau and Mouffe's distinctions among these three concepts to understand the preconditions of resistance. When a being is subordinated, it does not and cannot acknowledge the uneven dynamic of power, leading to an absence of antagonism. Subordination becomes oppression when the subordinate subject creates grounds of antagonism by realizing her rights. The category of domination "designates those relations of subordination that are considered to be oppressive, unjust or illegitimate from the perspective of a third (observing) subject."¹⁸ Thus, domination is a systemic concept that can only be confronted through reflective experience.

The realm of discourse and rights provides tools for understanding the metaphysical relations among these concepts. The divine right of the king exemplifies subordination. This concept of rights applies only to the king, and therefore establishes a logical order of subordinate subjects. In contrast, the "rights of man" negates the logic of a divine right (subordination) and demands the recognition of universal man. The creation of new rights provides man with new categorical imaginaries that complicate the logical order of affairs.

In the advanced technological society, rights are administrated by a central apparatus. In the discourse of democratic liberalism, oppression and rights are bound to the same laws and become what Vahabzadeh called "systemic oppression." Because the rights of the individual are universally recognized by the liberal constitution, the individual becomes a third-party observer of domination.¹⁹ Rights then are affirmed or denied to all subjects based on their categorical relation to the central apparatus. Domination can therefore be conceived as systemic subordination: a society that cannot articulate or recognize the systemic disadvantages built into the system.

How it is possible to prevent "business as usual" from absorbing the individual into the cultural form of domination? For a societal transformation to occur, consciousness must be liberated

17. Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 166.

18. Vahabzadeh, 105.

19. Vahabzadeh, 109.

from the established world of facts. Mass culture has become an ideological means of absorbing or repelling any alternatives²⁰ that threaten the establishment. Ideology is consumed by the individual as identity, turning reason into a mechanism that can no longer distinguish between true and false. For reason to become an accurate faculty, consciousness must be liberated from its own ideology. When the concepts that maintain reality are falsified, the logical order of things can be disrupted, allowing new values to be realized.

To transform society into a qualitatively different order of affairs, we must aim critical energy at concepts of ultimacy. Ultimate referents structure experience in accordance with assumptions that restrict reflective thought. In *An Essay on Liberation*, Marcuse said that by using “new language to define and communicate new values,” we can work toward a “qualitatively different society.”²¹ Domination has always employed patriarchal qualities. The capitalist economic system promotes hegemonic masculine traits such as competition, violence, and aggressiveness. People reproduce these traits to be successful in capitalism and give value to the notion of progress. Capitalism, therefore, depends on maintaining the gender binary of male and female and organizing personality traits into these neat categories of containment. By challenging ultimates such as patriarchy, a new realm of values could be liberated from the established reality that suppresses them.

Feminist movements seek to challenge the ultimate referent of patriarchy. Hegemonically feminine qualities such as compassion, tenderness, and nurturing are treated as valueless in the capitalist labor market. Women have long struggled to be accepted into positions of power; however, their success often remains dependent on their ability to reproduce “masculine” values. To demonstrate “strong leadership,” women must fulfill the historical conception of a leader and reproduce the rationality of the existing system. Regardless of gender, leaders must demonstrate that they are assertive, competitive, and strong.

The liberal feminist movement “Ban Bossy” strives to bring recognition to the limitations that language discourse places on women in the workplace. The campaign points out that “when a boy asserts himself, he’s called a ‘leader.’ Yet when a little girl does the same, she risks being branded bossy.”²² The campaign acknowledges the repressive nature of language discourse, only to proceed to commit to the values of a “man’s” world. The result is not emancipation but inclusion in the existing form, preserving the legitimacy of patriarchal values. As a leader, the woman must accept existing values to be respected; they are therefore unable to change. This movement is positive for social equality, but ineffective at realizing new values that create new occasions for innovative discourses.

The Containment of Values in a Technologically Administrated Society

The potential for a liberated consciousness is contained within the potentialities of technology. A radical change of consciousness can be only realized through an experience that is not mutilated by objective goals. Technology has liberating features that fulfill human needs; it can also be applied repressively to

20. New information, concepts, technology, or ways of doing things that threaten the established power structure.

21. Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 33.

22. “Lean In,” *Ban Bossy*, accessed December 3, 2014, <http://banbossy.com/>.

create them. The liberation of consciousness depends on the liberation of technology, a neutral technology that does not shape culture toward particular ends. Marcuse claimed that a “liberated consciousness would promote the development of a science and technology free to discover and realize the possibilities of things and men in the protection and gratification of life, playing with the potentialities of form and matter for the attainment of this goal.”²³ Contrary to this view, industrial capitalism has embraced science and technology to exploit the productive force of labor. To enhance the human experience, technology must shape a modality of life that fosters the autonomous development of consciousness.

The autonomous development of consciousness is a matter of administration and consciousness. History has many examples of technology that had emancipatory potential but was administered for the goals of a central apparatus. The administration of technology prevents the human consciousness from approaching it autonomously. The popular Internet forum *Reddit* is a contemporary example of this problem. The site is divided into many subforums where users can post topics or contribute to an existing discussion. When a comment is made by a user, other contributors may “up vote” or “down vote” the comment. If the comment receives an up vote, it will move to the top of the discussion page; if it is down voted, it will sink to the bottom. This mechanism presents a problem: The up and down vote feature favors popular opinion and excludes unpopular contributions that may be valid, and tends to shape discussions toward a consensus that excludes views of opposition. Although it is a democratic value that popular opinion prevails, critical discussion is curtailed, preventing opinions from transgressing their ideological categories. This brings to question the value of democracy itself within the capitalist system.

For technology to liberate the consciousness, it must not be a mechanism of convergent thought. In the *Reddit* example, the conversation is altered before the reader can exercise the capacity to reason. The up vote and down vote feature of *Reddit* reveals a human value that prevents consciousness from evolving: the value of convenience. This liberal value embeds itself in the use of the technology. As noted by Vahabzadeh, “It is through the administrative, regulative ‘management’ of the social that reductive rationalism links liberalism to technology.”²⁴ Rather than allowing conflicting values to synthesize and resolve themselves, opinions are funneled down particular channels where they are harmless. The management of content creates affirmative subcultures that self-contain. Although new values may arise within these subcultures, they are unable to transcend and be realized in practice.

Science and technology are the dominant ultimate referents of an advanced technological society. For consciousness to emancipate itself from rational containment, it must be free to imagine potentials beyond their operational function. When the world becomes a reality of facts, experience is reduced to what is, or what is not possible—all else is utopian. For science and technology to assist culture in cultivating values, the desire to dominate would have to subside. The economic goals of an advanced technological society require abstract administration. Vahabzadeh borrowed the concept of technological enframing from Heidegger to explore the metaphysical problem with this arrangement. He described technological enframing as a force that “comes to impose upon us a certain modality of

23. Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 24.

24. Vahabzadeh, 124.

being.”²⁵ Because the form of technology is administrated to us, we are forced to adapt to the arrangement of its goals, which are primarily economic.

An individual’s metaphysical relationship to the world remains instrumental as long as she is dominated by the powers that be. Although science and technology could reduce the amount of necessary repression in society, it is employed by the objective arrangement of things. For science and technology to help people realize new values, it must be removed from the context of capitalist progress. A “higher standard of living” must be redefined to release humanity from the self-perpetuating cycle of false needs and domination. Marcuse recognized that “in order to become vehicles of freedom, science and technology would have to change their present direction and goals; they would have to be reconstructed in accord with a new sensibility – the demands of life instincts.”²⁶ Technology could be harnessed to create clean energy alternatives or solve the problem of food scarcity; instead, it is employed for the wasteful goals of capital gain. Technology could be used to develop solutions to global problems, but instead we are enframed in a modality that produces waste through false needs. It is therefore important that we distinguish scientific and technological progress from the “progress” of capitalism.

The individual can only be liberated from false consciousness when it is realized as such. When the individual can distinguish between needs that are instinctual and those that are administrated, new values can be cultivated. When science and technology can assist society in pursuing needs, domination will be replaced by freedom. When culture can define itself through the exchange of experience as opposed to the exchange of commodities, consciousness can be liberated. The liberation of consciousness prepares the soil for a human experience that refuses to be mutilated by the objective goals of capital.

Marcuse did not define the Great Refusal because he wants us to live it. Emancipation depends on problematizing ultimate referents that prevent society from realizing concealed potential. Ultimate concepts such as patriarchy, climate change, and private property provide ultimate grounds for the oppressed society to create antagonism. In his *Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, Karl Marx famously said that “to be radical is to grasp things by the root. But for man the root is man himself.”²⁷ Marx understood that emancipation must begin at human consciousness, and for it to be free, it must be shown to be false. Politically motivated acts of revolt must take this into account. New values and methods of social organization must not emerge from utopian ideals, but rather through material conditions that require new modes of thought.

Occupy Wall Street is a global movement that provided conditions to live the Great Refusal. The movement aimed its negation at the ultimate referent of capitalism and provided a worldwide stage for critical debate. More importantly, the 2011 uprising allowed creative action to reveal social potentials that were previously concealed – most notably the method of “mic check.” This method of protest shed light on the relationship between culture, technology of the state, and capitalism. When

25. Ibid., 126

26. Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 19.

27. Karl Marx, “The Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right,” in *Karl Marx: Selected Readings*, ed. Lawrence H. Simon (Indianapolis, IN: Hacklet Publishing, 1994), 34.

the movement became a threat to the established social order, sound amplification was banned from public spaces. This ban did not discourage rallies. To amplify the voice of a speaker without technology, the crowd unified to repeat each line, becoming the “peoples’ mic.”²⁸ Although the demonstrators were denied technology, they employed the logic of the microphone socially. This example demonstrates how technology can unconceal new streams of consciousness. Despite the state’s administration of technology, it could not prevent demonstrators from re-creating its function. The liberation of technology can therefore be seen as imperative to the liberation of consciousness.

The Occupy demonstrators refused to be administrated. Technology provided a social function as opposed to a mechanical function, creating a new sensibility that could become a social and political force in the evolution of society. In 1969, Marcuse had already recognized this potential in what he called the aesthetic ethos. He described this new ethos as an emerging reality that would “translate subjective sensibility into objective form, into reality.”²⁹ The “mic check” fused creativity and technology together to create a realm of practicality in the realm of beauty. It expressed the true needs of society – an authentic cultivation of values that is impossible to administrate. It provided a form in which the consciousness could be liberated from domination and reflective experience could prevail.

The movement was cathartic but took root in the true needs of society, the distribution of resources. In this context, consciousness could not be manipulated by market value and could therefore develop autonomously. It was a Great Refusal of capital’s material and ideological goals and its (false) reality of facts. For a moment, experience was not mutilated by objectivity and could emerge from free individuals. Although the Occupy movement eclipsed reality, it demonstrated the potential of an ethos that refused to be instrumentalized for the ends of abstract goals.

Conclusion

For science and technology to assist society in the realization of new goals and values, it must be liberated from abstract administration. Mass culture has unified culture and identity, thus allowing individuals to become calculable parts of a rational system. Liberation from the facts of life begins with a Great Refusal of the status quo – a refusal to accept only the values promoted by productive capitalism. Movements such as feminism and environmentalism provide structural grounds of solidarity beyond the traditional Marxist critiques of class struggle. Marcuse’s analysis that “progress turns reason into submission to the facts of life” acknowledges not only the economic and cultural aspects of identity, but the psychological and existential as well.³⁰ In his work with the Frankfurt School, Marcuse emphasized the decline of authentic individuality and society’s trajectory toward a closed system of rigid values. This essay used contemporary movements to demonstrate the role of mass culture in limiting critical discussion and instead promoting liberal democratic principles. The “facts of life” can now be understood as the individual’s acceptance of a scientifically, technologically, and culturally administrated society. Beyond analysis and critique, there is a possibility for art, urban planning, and existential thought to redeem the progress of an advanced technological society.

28. Sasha Costanza-Chock, “Mic Check! Media Cultures and the Occupy Movement,” *Social Movement Studies* 11, no.3 (2012): 381.

29. Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 24.

30. Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man*, 11.

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