Herbert Marcuse

A Study on Authority

Page references are to the Verso edition.

Background:

- Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979) was a German philosopher and sociologist from the Frankfurt School of Social Research. He worked in several fields, completing his PhD dissertation in Literature, and his Habilitation (a post-doctoral dissertation) in Philosophy under Martin Heidegger and Martin Husserl (on Georg Hegel).
  - Marcuse’s work on Hegel led him to Karl Marx’s writings. Hegel was a major influence on Marx, and one of Marx’s major innovations was the reconceive Hegel’s dialectics as a philosophy of history (the topic of Marcuse’s habilitation).
  - Marcuse first wrote on Marx in 1933 (based on Marx’s manuscripts) and significantly redirected the interpretation of Marxism away from that developed by the “East” and the Soviets. He also joined the Frankfurt School in 1933, which used non-Soviet conceptions of Marxism in its social research.
  - On 30 January 1933, Adolf Hitler formally became Chancellor of Germany. As part of the Frankfurt School, Marcuse worked on critiques of Fascism. He fled Nazi Germany later in the year and worked at the Institut de Recherches Sociales in Geneva then in 1934 the Social Research at Columbia University. He remained an American professor for most of the rest of his life.
  - *A Study on Authority* was published in 1936 but had been conceived from 1933 onward. It critiques the philosophical, political, and social basis for the crisis of “authority” facing Europe immediately prior to the outbreak of World War II.

- Marcuse’s *A Study on Authority* is a critique of Enlightenment philosophy, such that the Enlightenment comes to be seen as an agent of social control (or an agent of *authority*) rather than an agent of liberation, as it claims. This posits Nazi Fascism as one possible development from Enlightenment philosophy, though the book does not discuss Nazism directly.

- Apart from *A Study on Authority* being a critique of the development of “authority” in Enlightenment philosophy, it’s also the inspiration for later Frankfurt School analyses of the Enlightenment and the concomitant rise of modern Capitalism that de-particularlizes items and people for the sake of
equivalences in exchange (and the Frankfurt School has been very influential in this respect).

- Marcuse was also a major figure in the New Left: the leftist politics that developed after WWII that rejected Stalinist and Maoist politics but retained a belief in Marxian modes of analysis and collaborative solidarity as well as the socialization of the economy and social institutions. He was already active in this area from the early 1930s.

- For Marcuse, The Enlightenment was superseded by Romanticism and then Hegelian philosophy and thence Marxist social analysis. However, the Enlightenment still dominates our social world, governments, religious faiths, and civil society, despite being long-since intellectually superseded by approaches that integration the non-rational and new notions of “authority” that he saw as the self-contradiction of the Enlightenment.

The Enlightenment (Age of Reason):

- The Enlightenment flourished to 1800 and then conflicted with the emotional and instinctual Romanticism that followed after it (think of our 18th century studies versus Romanticism, and then a return to rationalism in Victorian studies, then a move away from this via Modernism and Postmodernism).

- Enlightenment philosophy (and Liberalism) permeate most modern politics. The USA Constitution even quotes from John Locke (a classical Enlightenment figure), and it enshrined Enlightenment philosophy in American Law (as also happened in Canadian, French, British, European, and generally “Western” nations as well as those built around Napoleonic Law).

- Marcuse was particularly interested in the conflict between the “irrational” and the “rational” in the Romantic vs. the Enlightenment.

- The Enlightenment assumes that you are all rational, self-reflective creatures capable of self-determination through rational choice and self-interest.
  - The Enlightenment philosophy assumes rationality in all subjects. We are not irrational nor are we unaware of our own motivations
  - Romanticism assumes irrationality in all subjects with an emphasis on strong emotions, instinct, the unconscious, and the supernatural.
  - QUERY: if you are a rational, autonomous subject capable of self-determining choice based on self-consciousness, to what degree can “authority” even exist? If authority is the just obedience of the authority figure (and his just expectation of obedience), doesn’t this reject the autonomous, rational capacity for self-determination? If you’re convinced of the correctness of the authority figure’s
expectations, you’re still not obeying out of the *justness* of his expectations but rather by the determination of your own reason...

- Hence, the Enlightenment finds its own contradiction in the notion of authority (and hence Marcuse’s particular interest)
- Immanuel Kant’s standard (and famous) definition of “Enlightenment” from “What is Enlightenment?” (1784):
  - “Enlightenment is man’s release from his self-incurred tutelage. Tutelage is man’s inability to make use of his reason without direction from another [ie: “tutelage” for Kant is submission to authority rather than ‘learning’ or rational self-development]. Self-incurred is this tutelage when its cause lies not in lack of reason but in lack of resolution and courage to use it without direction from another. *Sapere aude!* [Dare to know!] ‘Have courage to use your own reason!’ – that is the motto of enlightenment.” (Kant, Immanuel. *Practical Philosophy*. ed. and trans. Mary J. Gregor. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. p. 7.)
  - For Kant, then, we find a need to obey civil society but a correlating imperative to obey one’s own reason in ethical and matters and all decision making activities (compare this to Thoreau, for example). We’re back to Marcuse’s anti-authoritarian vision of Authority as the end point of Enlightenment philosophy (despite the role of the Enlightenment in the founding of the USA, modern France, etc... The USA Constitution is a *classic* text of Enlightenment philosophy and Liberalism)
- Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (Frankfurt School) extend this definition of “Enlightenment,” and further developments can be found through Jürgen Habermas. They are all part of the “Frankfurt School,” and Marcuse’s *A Study on Authority* was a major influence on Adorno, Horkheimer, and Habermas’s later works. Marcuse worked with Horkheimer (Director of the Frankfurt School for Social Research while Marcuse was there in 1933) as well as Adorno while he was conceiving of *A Study on Authority*.
- Adorno and Horkheimer offer a critique of Enlightenment as a system of social control that may lean via Liberalism toward authoritarian exercises of power and “Enlightened Despotism”.
  - “Concept of Enlightenment” is the first chapter in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (the last chapter, depending on the edition, 1944 revised in 1947, is “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” which is the most frequently assigned reading due to the prevalence of popular culture studies).
Dialectic of Enlightenment was 8 years after A Study on Authority and clarifies what Marcuse’s aims had been in this earlier book.

“while trying to abolish superstition and myths by ‘foundationalist’ philosophy [think of deconstruction & Derrida as anti-foundationalist], it [The Enlightenment] ignored its own ‘mythical’ [i.e.: ideological] basis. Its strivings towards totality and certainty led to an increasing instrumentalization of reason.” (Dialectic of Enlightenment). In their view (Adorno and Horkheimer), the enlightenment itself should be enlightened and not posed as a ‘myth-free’ view of the world.

Hence, the enlightening of the Enlightenment is the continuation of the Enlightenment Project proposed by Habermas.

Consider the assumptions in Enlightenment and its own myths:

- The rational individual (what of the irrational, instinctual, and unconscious)?
- The rational function of language as an unbiased medium (for Derrida, logocentrism). Does language also embody the irrational as well, or does it present itself as the transparent communication of logical reality?

From the Columbia Encyclopedia of Philosophy, there’s a very adept summary and quotation:

- “Enlightenment embodies the promise of human beings finally taking individual and collective control over the destiny of the species. Adorno and Horkheimer [following in Marcuse’s path] refused to endorse such a wholly optimistic reading of the effects of the rationalization of society. They stated, ‘in the most general sense of progressive thought, the Enlightenment has always aimed at liberating men from fear and establishing their sovereignty. Yet the fully enlightened earth radiates disaster triumphant.’” (n.pag; quoting opening page of Dialectic of Enlightenment) → bear in mind they’re saying this just after Hiroshima, the Holocaust, and WWII (all the culmination of differing Enlightenment projects, modern Capitalism, and scientific rationalism).

- “Adorno and Horkheimer conceive of enlightenment as principally a demythologizing mode of apprehending reality. For them, the fundamental aim of enlightenment is the establishment of human sovereignty over material reality, over nature: enlightenment is founded upon the drive to master and control nature [Science]. The realization of this aim requires the ability to cognitively and practically manipulate the material
environment in accordance with our will. In order to be said to
dominate nature, nature must become an object of our will.”
(n.pag). This is again referring to the opening few pages of
_Dialectic of Enlightenment._

- This implies becoming a stable and cohesive willing subject (not
a shifting or altering Romantic subject), the _instrumentalization_
of nature, and alienation of the individual from the natural
world (humans are _not_ natural)

- “instrumentalization of reason” is a notion Adorno and Horkheimer
take from Friedrich Nietzsche:
  - Total rejection of philosophy or reason as a means of accessing
“reality” or pure thought. Philosophy is useful, but it doesn’t
offer any special access to “reality” that is denied to the peons of
less philosophical ambitions...
  - Like Marx, they felt that philosophy reflects material conditions
and the social circumstances of its production. That is,
philosophy never escapes its place and time – the conclusions of
philosophy, instead, _reflect_ its place and time and are a product
of these material conditions.
  - “the value of nature is necessarily conceived of in primarily
instrumental terms: nature is thought of as an object for, and
instrument of, human will. This conception of nature
necessitates drawing a distinction between this realm and those
beings for whom it is an object. Thus, the instrumentalist
conception of nature entails a conception of human beings as
categorically distinct entities, capable of becoming subjects
through the exercise of reason upon nature. The very category of
subject thus has inscribed within it a particular conception of
nature as that which is to be subordinated to one’s will: subject
and object are hierarchically juxtaposed, just as they are in the
works of, for example, Descartes and Kant. For nature to be
considered amenable to such subordination requires that it be
conceived of as synonymous with the objectified models through
which human subjects represent nature to themselves. To be
wholly conceivable in these terms requires the exclusion of any
properties that cannot be subsumed within this representational
understanding of nature, this particular form of identity
thinking. Adorno and Horkheimer state, “the concordance
between the mind of man and the nature of things that he had
in mind is patriarchal: the human mind, which overcomes
superstition, is to hold sway over a disenchanted nature.” (1979:4)” (again, Columbia Encycl.)

- For Adorno and Horkheimer, building on Marcuse, then, “myth turns into enlightenment, and nature into mere objectivity. Men pay for the increase of their power with alienation from that over which they exercise their power. Enlightenment behaves towards things as a dictator toward men. He knows them in so far as he can manipulate them. The man of science knows things in so far as he can make them. In this way, their potentiality is turned to his own ends.” (Adorno and Horkheimer, Dialectic of Enlightenment p. 9)

Consider the relationship between the Enlightenment and Protestantism as well:

- Protestantism – 16th century in Northern Europe and Scandinavia (largest development and rise to prominence, though obviously earlier as well)
- Rejects apostolic succession and sacraments in favour of an individual revelation and direct reading of scripture in the vernacular tongue (how is this akin to Enlightenment thought on the individual and the individual’s inalienable rights under Liberalism)?
- Emphasizes personal responsibility (no confession, etc...)
- Puritans and Cathars (16th and 17th century Britain and Europe in general) flee to North America. Charles I married Henrietta-Marie de Bourbon (devout Catholic) leading to the Oliver Cromwell’s revolution and the interregnum (1649-1660) and the regicide of Charles. The Restoration of the Monarchy (Protestantism, despite conflicts with Catholicism in the monarchy) was then rapidly followed by the founding of the Royal Society of London (Science and Reason) and the Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London.

- Think of the The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism by Max Weber (1864-1920, 1904-5 for the book)
- Anti-positivist, hence in line with the Frankfurt School and against the likes of Bertrand Russell and the logical positivists (whom Marcuse, Adorno and Horkheimer saw as exercising instrumentalist reason)
- Retraces how Puritan values influenced the development of modern Capitalism.
- Weber directly draws on Benjamin Franklin (most famously the following):
  - “Remember, that time is money. He that can earn ten shillings a day by his labor, and goes abroad, or sits idle, one half of that
day, though he spends but sixpence during his diversion or idleness, ought not to reckon that the only expense; he has really spent, or rather thrown away, five shillings besides.[...]

Remember, that money is the prolific, generating nature. Money can beget money, and its offspring can beget more, and so on. Five shillings turned is six, turned again is seven and threepence, and so on, till it becomes a hundred pounds. The more there is of it, the more it produces every turning, so that the profits rise quicker and quicker. He that kills a breeding sow, destroys all her offspring to the thousandth generation. He that murders a crown, destroys all that it might have produced, even scores of pounds.” (brilliant, eh?)

- Does Capitalism assume rational subjects?

Consider Tom Morris’ argument in *Breaking the Foundations* (a book of critical theory written here in Vancouver that continually returns to images of Crescent Beach...):

- “Authority and power typically shade off into one another. They are familiars. Here one can distinguish three experiential contexts in which power and authority are manifest: the cultural or institutional context, the interpersonal context (especially family forms), and the inner or psychological context. If power is initially external coercion, authority’s adult pre-history is based in what psychoanalysis calls the ego and superego: the ego in its practical engagement of external reality and the superego in its relationship with ambivalently experienced authority/love figures in early life and, later, with tacitly accepted sanctions originating outside the self. The genesis of the superego includes the experience of objective power directed against the self (early chapters of Marcuse’s *Eros and Civilization*, Goodman’s “Freud’s Theory of Mind” in *Nature Heals*, Efron’s “Freud’s Self-Analysis”). Not least of all, this is suggested by the fact that behind many experiences apparently determined by authority is the sensation that power is not far away.” (58)

- How then can we deal with the irrational? Again, Morris offers a good commentary:

  - “If the repressive tampering with the body leads back through the core of civilization and beyond, it finds its modern rationalizing theory in the idea that men and women are interminably malleable. Modern social scientific discourse is filled with the language of ‘conditioning,’ ‘shaping,’ ‘controlling’ the individual. Without significant qualification, one argues from Marx that ‘social being... determines consciousness.’
One expresses the wish, on behalf of the ‘nature of scientific progress,’ that the ‘functions of the autonomous man be taken over one by one’ by a ‘better understood’ ‘controlling environment’.... In all this the body seems to have become or remained a non-entity: endlessly pliable, docile, radically without its own claims, a vehicle of either domination or despair.” (Morris 52)

Close readings and Passages
- Chapter Summaries and Constitutive passages
- “Introduction”
  - Take seriously the opening limitations and claims as well as the definitions given.
  - “The authority relationship” (7) immediately questions social and political organization predicated on authority, but the term is distinct from “power.”
  - The authority relationship “assumed two essential elements”: freedom and submission (7).
  - A classical restatement would be that authority, unlike power, implies the justness of obeying another person without exercising one’s autonomy or rational capacity for self-determination in decision making. In other words, we must attend to the traditional definition in this field of “authority.” A thief may demand my wallet or purse in Holland Park, and if he takes it, that’s an exercise of power. If I choose to give it to him, that’s a free choice made out of my rational sense of self-preservation based on this power relationship to the thief. I am not, in either situation, encountering an authority that I justly obey without exercising my critical reason. “Authority” unlike power, can assume obedience as the “just” response.
  - Authority, in enlightenment philosophy, then assumes a problematic relationship between “two essential elements”: freedom (for rational thought and choice, even if limited) and submission (to the just authority that I needn’t choose nor exercise reason in order to agree with).
  - If I am asked to obey authority, and I rationally determine that my obedience is the best course of action, I have not obeyed authority – I have (1) followed my independent, rational (reason) decision making faculties or (2) obeyed the power of the authority figure (not the justness of his expectation of obedience).
  - These terminological and limiting factors are essential to the rest of the text
  - Note how the “Introduction” circles back to the same problem articulated by Adorno and Horkheimer (the function of Enlightenment
philosophy to alienate Mankind from the Natural World – by making the natural world amenable to rational explanation and understanding, the irrational is excluded and the reasoning individual is excluded from that which does not exercise the faculty of reason: nature, which is reasoned about...).

- For these reasons, Marcuse then analyses “authority” from a variety of philosophical perspectives moving from the early Enlightenment forward (from Protestantism, which values the reason of the individual over obedience to Church authority, to Kant and Hegel as the epitome of Enlightenment Philosophy, Liberalism in the Conter-revolution and Restoration, and finally Marx, Sorel, and Pareto). Marcuse is ultimately planning to move beyond them, but he only hints at his own propositions here.

- CONSTITUTIVE PASSAGE: page 7, par. 1

- “Luther and Calvin”

  - Martin Luther (1483-1546) and John Calvin (1509-1564) are both central figures in the Protestant Reformation, which is a precursor to Enlightenment philosophy. The translation of the Bible into the vernacular (the language of the people) is a central tenet – in the Catholic Church of the time, the priest would read the Bible in Latin, and the congregation would not understand. The priest might even read the Bible silently on behalf of the congregation...

  - Note how both Luther and Calvin develop complicated notions of freedom (the exercise of reason, free choice, the personal reading of scripture in order to attain personal revelation, and personal salvation that cannot be granted by subservience or donation to a church authority) and submission (total submission to God who grants salvation only through faith and not through “earned” redemption).

  - Both Luther and Calving distinguish between subjugation to an earthly power, such as a church, in contrast to subjugation to Divine authority. The former is “very repugnant to the perversity of the human mind” (34) to Calvin, whereas the latter is “legitimate subjection” (34). This leads us back to the distinction between power and authority as seen in the “Introduction.”

- CONSTITUTIVE PASSAGE: page 34, final par.

- “Kant”

  - Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) was a major figure in the Enlightenment. His major work, The Critique of Pure Reason, ties together the Enlightenment exercise of rational reason (as seen in the developing science of the period) with a non-metaphysical explanation of existence in the world (which he termed “experience”). In other words, how can the individual be in the world yet exercise reason upon the world? Critique of Pure Reason is, therefore, deeply concerned with freedom as both an experience and as a metaphysical concept.
CONSTITUTIVE PASSAGES:

☐ page 41, par. 2 through to the end of page 43, par. 1.
  • Think carefully about Marcuse’s summary of Kant’s ethics when he writes “Thus in the *origins of bourgeois society* the private and general interest, will and coercion, freedom and subordination, are meant to be united. The bourgeois individual’s *lack of freedom* under the legal authority of the *rulers* of his society is meant to be reconciled with the basic conception of the *essentially free person*” which allows for the existence of individuals in a community (43).

☐ Page 45, par. 2 to the end of the par. on page 46
  • Note how Marcuse identifies Kant’s insistence on “authority” as predicated on the “united will” of the community. Submission to the community is, again, the only way of attaining personal freedom... The potential for *reason* exists only in the limitation of reason to question just authority (on which Kant predicates reason).
    • Is this different from power?

☐ Page 50, par. 2
  • Although it’s only one sentence, note the crucial issue identified in the final sentence: “The law remains an authority which right back to its origins cannot be rationally justified without going beyond the limits of precisely that society for whose existence it is necessary” (50), which is to say, it is a logical tautology (not “real”).
    • Marcuse, again, confounds “authority” as being “real” instead of simply a disguised form of *power*.

☐ “Hegel”
  o Georg Hegel (1770-1831) was a major figure in overturning the Kantian ideal of the Enlightenment and preparing the groundwork for what we now call Continental Philosophy, Marxism, and Critical Theory. Nevertheless, he is closer to the Enlightenment “clique” than he is to our modern theoretical views (despite being the pivot between the two).
  o One of Hegel’s major innovations was to introduce dialectical analysis or thought.
  o Marcuse is particularly interested in Hegel’s notion of freedom, in which “freedom” or self-determination through the exercise of reason (Enlightenment ideals) is the predicate for ethics, self-identity, and the human relationship to the divine. Through dialectical thinking, Hegel proposed that binary opposites (in a dialectical relation to each other) were not opposites but rather one is the self-transcendence of the other
(such as the “particular” vs. the “universals” for which the universal is the self-transcendence of the particular).

- Marcuse is interested in this point since it is what Marx subverted in order to make his own intervention into the philosophy of history...
- CONSTITUTIVE PASSAGE:
  - page 53, par. 1 (line 5 of the page) to page 54, par. 1 (end of the paragraph).
    - Note how this passage shows Marcuse moving from the problems of freedom and submission to authority in Luther and Calvin to the tautology of authority in Kant (we exist as free individuals only via the submission to the authority of the civil society) and thence to the relationship between the individual to civil society in the form of the state.
    - “The idea of civil society itself constituting itself as a state is rejected [by Hegel]; society and state are separated according to their ‘principle’. This is a decisive step for the development of the problem of authority: civil society, now seen almost in its full problematic, can no longer in itself provide the basis for the social system of authority; it ceases to be the real basis for freedom” (53).
  - Page 59, par. 2
    - Note the emerging concern over the relationship between the autonomous, rational, and reasoning individual capable of decision-making with regard to self-direction in contrast to the State.
    - “State authority” is increasingly Marcuse’s concern, for obvious reasons in 1936 after his 1933 flight from Nazi Germany and witnessing the increasingly industrialized production of culture in the USA.
- “Counter-revolution and Restoration”
  - Marcuse is concerned with reactionary or conservative philosophical trends that emerged in response to the French Revolution, which was predicated intellectually on Enlightenment philosophy. Hence, he considers Edmund Burke (1729-1797) and others. Burke was a conservative Whig MP (Member of Parliament) in Britain and a political philosopher as well as a historian of the French Revolution.
- CONSTITUTIVE PASSAGES
  - page 70, par. 2
    - Note how Marcuse focuses on Burke’s insistence on an essentialist and assumed human nature in order to contend “Man, in his quality of being at once moral and corrupted, pure in his understanding and perverse in his wishes, much necessarily be subject to government.” (70).
Notice how Marcuse takes the same problems as above in order to discuss the function of authority in property rights, the family structure, and all in relation to the State.

“Marx”

Karl Marx (1818-1883) was a tremendously influential philosopher who remains clouded by his social reputation and the adaptation of his ideas by later socialist and communist groups or states.

Marx used Hegel’s notion of dialectics to “invert” Hegelianism and develop the form of conflict- and change-oriented social analysis that now dominates the social sciences. Marx was the first to propose theories of social organization that could be tested through empirical study.

CONSTITUTIVE PASSAGES:

Notice how Marcuse directs attention to “freedom” in Marx as tied to the recognition of “necessity” (or power).

Marcuse is particularly drawn to the “productive” tensions between Capital (“Capital” is “money” invested into its own growth at the expense of the value of labour’s productivity, but not all “money” is capital if it’s used in the exchange of commodities of equivalence).

Terms such as “dialectical,” “surplus value,” “social formation,” and “superstructure” should have definitions in order for this to make sense. All are easily defined through dictionaries or encyclopedias, but do notice that Marcuse assumes his reader is already familiar. Hence the chapter on Marx is a rehearsal of information his readers already know in order for this to push this knowledge further in another direction.

Through Marx, Marcuse turns to social structure and organization in relation to the question of Authority already developed by his Enlightenment thinkers.

Notice the discussion of “naturalization” of power relationships, especially in relation to social institutions (in the literal sense of institutionalized groups of social bodies) and concepts of authority.

“The Transformation of the Bourgeois Theory of Authority Into the Totalitarian State (Sorel and Pareto)”
Georges Sorel (1847-1922) was an anarcho-syndicalist (anarchist) who defined the notion of “myth” in relation to the Enlightenment in the sense later adopted by the Frankfurt School.

Vilfredo Pareto (1848-1923) was an Italian economist and philosopher who is often tied to anarchism.

Note that in this area, “Anarchism” signifies the recognition of power, ethics, social relations, imperatives, and so forth without the acknowledgement of just authority that precedes reason and the rational exercise of the individual’s self-determination.

CONSTITUTIVE PASSAGE

page 102, par. 3 to page 103, par. 1 & half of par. 2.

- The appearance of Marcuse’s analysis of the “authoritarian state” (102).

The most striking event to notice is that Marcuse reaches the end of his analysis on the final page of the book without every having revealed his own assertions with regard to authority. He has, instead, summarized the various approaches to the concept of “authority” (as distinct from power) without presenting his own conceptualization of it.

In what role does this cast the reader?

How could someone write a study of Authority in 1936 without taking a stance? Is this principled or an escape?

Have you come to distinguish between “authority” and “power” by the end of the book, and if so, how is “authority” natural or contrived, based on Marcuse’s unstated position?