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## A Note on Dialectic

By Herbert Marcuse

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*While Marcuse's early essays on dialectic bristle with phenomenological categories (he had been an assistant to Heidegger), they already embody the crucial shift from ontology to history, from Being to concrete being-in-the-world, as Adorno remarked with cautious praise in a contemporary review. The essay reproduced here, written in 1960 as a new preface to his Reason and Revolution, retains few traces of this heritage. Marcuse's condensed exposé shows that dialectic, in the Hegelian sense used by the critical theorists, is neither an abstract method nor an ideology. An important feature of the essay is the relation Marcuse establishes to the esthetic mode (more systematically and historically grounded in Eros and Civilization) as an alternative, non-instrumental perception and thus an aspect of autonomous reason. This essay goes a long way to explain the interdisciplinary orientation of many of the older Frankfurtians.*

This book was written in the hope that it would make a small contribution to the revival, not of Hegel, but of a mental faculty which is in danger of being obliterated: the power of negative thinking. As Hegel defines it: "Thinking is, indeed, essentially the negation of that which is immediately before us." What does he mean by "negation," the central category of dialectic?

Even Hegel's most abstract and metaphysical concepts are

saturated with experience—experience of a world in which the unreasonable becomes reasonable and, as such, determines the facts; in which unfreedom is the condition of freedom, and war the guarantor of peace. This world contradicts itself. Common sense and science purge themselves from this contradiction; but philosophical thought begins with the recognition that the facts do not correspond to the concepts imposed by common sense and scientific reason—in short, with the refusal to accept them. To the extent that these concepts disregard the fatal contradictions which make up reality, they abstract from the very process of reality. The negation which dialectic applies to them is not only a critique of a conformistic logic, which denies the reality of contradictions; it is also a critique of the given state of affairs on its own grounds—of the established system of life, which denies its own promises and potentialities.

Today, this dialectical mode of thought is alien to the whole established universe of discourse and action. It seems to belong to the past and to be rebutted by the achievements of technological civilization. The established reality seems promising and productive enough to repel or absorb all alternatives. Thus acceptance—and even affirmation—of this reality appears to be the only reasonable methodological principle. Moreover, it precludes neither criticism nor change; on the contrary, insistence on the dynamic character of the status quo, on its constant "revolutions," is one of the strongest props for this attitude. Yet this dynamic seems to operate endlessly within the same framework of life: streamlining rather than abolishing the domination of man, both by man and by the products of his labor. Progress becomes quantitative and tends to delay indefinitely the turn from quantity to quality—that is, the emergence of new modes of existence with new forms of reason and freedom.

The power of negative thinking is the driving power of dialectical thought, used as a tool for analyzing the world of facts in terms of its internal inadequacy. I choose this vague and unscientific formulation in order to sharpen the contrast between dialectical and undialectical thinking. "Inadequacy" implies a value judgment. Dialectical thought invalidates the a priori opposition of value and fact by understanding all facts as stages of a single process—a process in which subject and object are so joined that truth can be determined only within the subject-object totality. All facts embody the knower as well as the doer; they continuously translate the past into the present. The objects thus "contain" subjectivity in their very structure.

Now what (or who) is this subjectivity that, in a literal sense,

constitutes the objective world? Hegel answers with a series of terms denoting the subject in its various manifestations: Thought, Reason, Spirit, Idea. Since we no longer have that fluent access to these concepts which the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries still had, I shall try to sketch Hegel's conception in more familiar terms:

Nothing is "real" which does not sustain itself in existence, in a life-and-death struggle with the situations and conditions of its existence. The struggle may be blind or even unconscious, as in inorganic matter; it may be conscious and concerted, such as the struggle of mankind with its own conditions and with those of nature. *Reality* is the constantly renewed result of the process of existence—the process, conscious or unconscious in which "that which is" becomes "other than itself"; and *identity* is only the continuous negation of inadequate existence, the subject maintaining itself in being other than itself. Each reality, therefore, is a *realization*—a development of "subjectivity." The latter "comes to itself" in history, where the development has a rational content; Hegel defines it as "progress in the consciousness of freedom."

Again a value judgment—and this time a value judgment imposed upon the world as a whole. But freedom is for Hegel an ontological category: it means being not a mere object, but the subject of one's existence; not succumbing to external conditions, but transforming factuality into realization. This transformation is, according to Hegel, the energy of nature and history, the inner structure of all being! One may be tempted to scoff at this idea, but one should be aware of its implications.

Dialectical thought starts with the experience that the world is unfree; that is to say, man and nature exist in conditions of alienation, exist as "other than they are." Any mode of thought which excludes this contradiction from its logic is a faulty logic. Thought "corresponds" to reality only as it transforms reality by comprehending its contradictory structure. Here the principle of dialectic drives thought beyond the limits of philosophy. For to comprehend reality means to comprehend what things really are, and this in turn means rejecting their mere factuality. Rejection is the process of thought as well as of action. While the scientific method leads from the immediate experience of *things* to their mathematical-logical structure, philosophical thought leads from the immediate experience of *existence* to its historical structure: the principle of freedom.

Freedom is the innermost dynamic of existence, and the very process of existence in an unfree world is "the continuous negation of

that which threatens to deny (*aufheben*) freedom." Thus freedom is essentially negative: existence is both alienation and the process by which the subject comes to itself in comprehending and mastering alienation. For the history of mankind, this means attainment of a "state of the world" in which the individual persists in inseparable harmony with the whole, and in which the conditions and relations of his world "possess no essential objectivity independent of the individual". As to the prospect of attaining such a state, Hegel was pessimistic: the element of reconciliation with the established state of affairs, so strong in his work, seems to a great extent due to this pessimism—or, if one prefers, this realism. Freedom is relegated to the realm of pure thought, to the Absolute Idea. Idealism by default: Hegel shares this fate with the main philosophical tradition.

Dialectical thought thus becomes negative in itself. Its function is to break down the self-assurance and self-contentment of common sense, to undermine the sinister confidence in the power and language of facts, to demonstrate that unfreedom is so much at the core of things that the development of their internal contradictions leads necessarily to qualitative change: the explosion and catastrophe of the established state of affairs. Hegel sees the task of knowledge as that of recognizing the world as Reason by understanding all objects of thought as elements and aspects of a totality which becomes a conscious world in the history of mankind. Dialectical analysis ultimately tends to become historical analysis, in which nature itself appears as part and stage in its own history and in the history of man. The progress of cognition from common sense to knowledge arrives at a world which is negative in its very structure because that which is real opposes and denies the potentialities inherent in itself—potentialities which themselves strive for realization. Reason is the negation of the negative.

Interpretation of that-which-is in terms of that-which-is-not, confrontation of the given facts with that which they exclude—this has been the concern of philosophy wherever philosophy was more than a matter of ideological justification or mental exercise. The liberating function of negation in philosophical thought depends upon the recognition that the negation is a positive act: that-which-is *repels* that-which-is-not and, in doing so, repels its own real possibilities. Consequently, to express and define that-which-is on its own terms is to distort and falsify reality. Reality is other and more than that codified in the logic and language of facts. Here is the inner link between dialectical thought and the effort of avant-garde literature: the effort to break the power of facts over the word, and to speak a language which

is not the language of those who establish, enforce and benefit from the facts. As the power of the given facts tends to become totalitarian, to absorb all opposition and to define the entire universe of discourse, the effort to speak the language of contradiction appears increasingly irrational, obscure, artificial. The question is not that of a direct or indirect influence of Hegel on the genuine avant-garde, though this is evident in Mallarmé and Villiers de l'Isle-Adam, in surrealism, in Brecht. Dialectic and poetic language meet, rather, on common ground.

The common element is the search for an "authentic language"—the language of negation as the Great Refusal to accept the rules of a game in which the dice are loaded. The absent must be made present because the greater part of the truth is in that which is absent. This is Mallarmé's classical statement:

Je dis: une fleur! et, hors de l'oubli où ma voix relègue aucun contour, en tant que quelque chose d'autre que les calices sus, musicalement se lève, idée même et suave, l'absente de tous bouquets.

*I say: a flower! and, out of the oblivion where my voice banishes all contours, musically rises, different from every known blossom, the one absent from all bouquets—Idea itself and delicate.*

In the authentic language, the word

n'est pas l'expression d'une chose, mais l'absence de cette chose. . . . Le mot fait disparaître les choses et nous impose le sentiment d'un manque universel et même de son propre manque.<sup>1</sup>

*is not the expression of a thing, but rather the absence of this thing. . . . The word makes the things disappear and imposes upon us the feeling of a universal want and even of its own want.*

Poetry is thus the power "de nier les choses" (to deny the things)—the power which Hegel claims, paradoxically, for all authentic thought. Valéry asserts:

La pensée est, en somme, le travail qui fait vivre en nous ce qui n'existe pas.<sup>2</sup>

*In short, thought is the labor which brings to life in us that which does not exist.*

He asks the rhetorical question: "que sommes-nous donc sans le

secours de ce qui n'existe pas?"<sup>3</sup> (*What are we without the help of that which does not exist?*)

This is not "existentialism." It is something more vital and more desperate: the effort to contradict a reality in which all logic and all speech are false to the extent that they are part of a mutilated whole. The vocabulary and grammar of the language of contradiction are still those of the game (there are no others), but the concepts codified in the language of the games are redefined by relating them to their "determinate negation". This term, which denotes the governing principle of dialectical thought, can be explained only in a textual interpretation of Hegel's *Logic*. Here it must suffice to emphasize that, by virtue of this principle, the dialectical contradiction is distinguished from all pseudo- and crackpot opposition, beatnik and hipsterism. The negation is determinate if it refers the established state of affairs to the basic factors and forces which make for its destructiveness, as well as for the possible alternatives beyond the status quo. In the human reality, they are *historical* factors and forces, and the determinate negation is ultimately a *political* negation. As such, it may well find authentic expression in nonpolitical language, and the more so as the entire dimension of politics becomes an integral part of the status quo.

Dialectical logic is critical logic: it reveals modes and contents of thought which transcend the codified pattern of use and validation. Dialectical thought does not invent these contents; they have accrued to the notions in the long tradition of thought and action. Dialectical analysis merely assembles and reactivates them; it recovers tabooed meanings and thus appears almost as a return, or rather a conscious liberation, of the repressed! Since the established universe of discourse is that of an unfree world, dialectical thought is necessarily destructive, and whatever liberation it may bring is a liberation in thought, in theory. However, the divorce of thought from action, of theory from practice, is itself part of the unfree world. No thought and no theory can undo it; but theory may help to prepare the ground for their possible reunion, and the ability of thought to develop a logic and language of contradiction is a prerequisite for this task.

In what, then, lies the power of negative thinking? Dialectical thought has not hindered Hegel from developing his philosophy into a neat and comprehensive system which, in the end, accentuates the positive emphatically. I believe it is the idea of Reason itself which is the undialectical element in Hegel's philosophy. This idea of Reason comprehends everything and ultimately absolves everything, because it has its place and function in the whole, and the whole is beyond good

and evil, truth and falsehood. It may even be justifiable, logically as well as historically, to define Reason in terms which include slavery, the Inquisition, child labor, concentration camps, gas chambers and nuclear preparedness. These may well have been integral parts of that rationality which has governed the recorded history of mankind. If so, the idea of Reason itself is at stake; it reveals itself as a part rather than as the whole. This does not mean that Reason abdicates its claim to confront reality with the truth about reality. On the contrary, when Marxian theory takes shape as a critique of Hegel's philosophy, it does so in the name of Reason. It is consonant with the innermost effort of Hegel's thought if his own philosophy is "cancelled," not by substituting for Reason some extrarational standards, but by driving Reason itself to recognize the extent to which it is still unreasonable, blind, the victim of unmastered forces. Reason, as the developing and applied knowledge of man—as "free thought"—was instrumental in creating the world we live in. It was also instrumental in sustaining injustice, toil, and suffering. But Reason, and Reason alone, contains its own corrective.

In the *Logic*, which forms the first part of his *System of Philosophy*, Hegel anticipates almost literally Wagner's Parsifal message: "the hand that inflicts the wound is also the hand that heals it."<sup>4</sup> The context is the biblical story of the Fall of Man. Knowledge may have caused the wound in the existence of man, the crime and the guilt; but the second innocence, the "second harmony," can be gained only from knowledge. Redemption can never be the work of a "guileless fool." Against the various obscurantists who insist on the right of the irrational versus Reason, on the truth of the natural versus the intellect, Hegel inseparably links progress in freedom to progress in thought, action to theory. Since he accepted the specific historical form of Reason reached at his time as *the* reality of Reason, the advance beyond this form of Reason must be an advance of Reason itself; and since the adjustment of Reason to oppressive social institutions perpetuated unfreedom, progress in freedom depends on thought becoming political, in the shape of a theory which demonstrates negation as a political alternative implicit in the historical situation. Marx's materialistic "subversion" of Hegel, therefore, was not a shift from one philosophical position to another nor from philosophy to social theory, but rather a recognition that the established forms of life were reaching the stage of their historical negation.

This historical stage has changed the situation of philosophy and of all cognitive thought. From this stage on, all thinking that does not

testify to an awareness of the radical falsity of the established forms of life is faulty thinking. Abstraction from this all-pervasive condition is not merely immoral; it is false. For reality has become technological reality, and the subject is now joined with the object so closely that the notion of object necessarily includes the subject. Abstraction from their interrelation no longer leads to a more genuine reality but to deception, because even in this sphere the subject itself is apparently a constitutive part of the object as scientifically determined. The observing, measuring, calculating subject of scientific method, and the subject of the daily business of life—both are expressions of the same subjectivity: man. One did not have to wait for Hiroshima in order to have one's eyes opened to this identity. And as always before, the subject that has conquered matter suffers under the dead weight of his conquest. Those who enforce and direct this conquest have used it to create a world in which the increasing comforts of life and the ubiquitous power of the productive apparatus keep man enslaved to the prevailing state of affairs. Those social groups which dialectical theory identified as the forces of negation are either defeated or reconciled with the established system. Before the power of the given facts, the power of negative thinking stands condemned.

This power of facts is an oppressive power; it is the power of man over man, appearing as objective and rational condition. Against this appearance, thought continues to protest in the name of truth. And in the name of fact: for it is the supreme and universal fact that the status quo perpetuates itself through the constant threat of atomic destruction, through the unprecedented waste of resources, through mental impoverishment, and—last but not least—through brute force. These are the unresolved contradictions. They define every single fact and every single event; they permeate the entire universe of discourse and action. Thus they define also the logic of things: that is, the mode of thought capable of piercing the ideology and of comprehending reality whole. No method can claim a monopoly of cognition, but no method seems authentic which does not recognize that these two propositions are meaningful descriptions of our situation: "The whole is the truth," and the whole is false.