

The Fire, the Fire Is Falling! *

The Buggers

Column – May 1, 2006

With the formulation of his concept of 'repressive tolerance' Herbert Marcuse uncovered a key strategy of manipulation and control in our consumer societies. Repressive tolerance, Marcuse states in his controversial analysis from 1965,¹ is sham tolerance that only serves to maintain the status quo. A perversion of genuine tolerance. Its purpose is to draw the teeth of opposition by capturing it into political, economical, and cultural systems that are already fully controlled by the establishment. Democracy, free market, freedom of speech, and tolerance – once revolutionary goals themselves but now fronts for repressive, exploitative, and totalitarian systems – are the false denominators under which opposition is annexed and neutralized. And once absorbed by systems that are really run by large corporations, banks, investment companies, the military industrial complex, and their secret services, all opposition is rendered toothless and turns into a caricature of itself. In that way our democracies are no more than staged media spectacles that conceal and maintain true power relations, the free market principle serves as an excuse for monopolistic concentrations, and even the word 'revolutionary' has been adopted by the world of advertising to such an extent that it has become powerless and should be replaced by 'fuck' (at least, according to revolutionary Jerry Rubin² before he fell victim to repressive tolerance himself).

With his analysis, Marcuse outlined implicitly how the counterculture,³ of which he was one of the leading figures and which still seemed very much alive in 1965, would come to its end. He was not thanked for that at the time. 'We didn't care for Marcuse's lectures on how the revolution was going to be co-opted,' remembers John Sinclair, former leader of the radical White Panther Party, 'We were too deeply involved in what we were doing and having a lot of fun doing it.' But Marcuse was proved right in his lifetime. At the time of his death in 1979 the counterculture had been absorbed almost fully by established culture through a process of repressive tolerance. A subjugated Iggy Pop sang in that year: 'O baby, what a place to be, in the service of the bourgeoisie. Where can my believers be? I want to jump into the endless sea'⁴ Twenty-five years later this process was so complete that another prominent member of the counterculture, French artist and activist Jean-Jacques Lebel, observed: 'In the worst cases, all that is left is rotting cultural merchandise, as for all the productions and superproductions that enjoyed a certain success in the nineteen tens, twenties, thirties, fifties or sixties and which today have evaporated.'⁵

William Blake, Robert Desnos, William Burroughs, Sun Ra, The MC5 – rotting merchandise? Certainly, works, life, and thought of visionaries and revolutionaries are being sold as consumer goods. Plenty of examples. On the other hand, hardly anybody could have got acquainted with the works of William Blake or Sun Ra if their distribution had remained limited to the original small and handmade editions. So, it works both ways: with the incorporation and commercialization of countercultural works material is spread on a large scale that carries the germs of subversion and attacks the system from within. After all, not everything will be incorporated. That goes for the obstinate core of truly visionary or revolutionary work, but, of course, in the first place for violence.

Repressive tolerance – in the guises of historicizing, aestheticizing, and romanticizing – may have incorporated revolutionaries like The Weather Underground, the Rote Armee Fraktion, and The Black Panthers in academic and artistic circles (which often perform

pioneering work in that respect), the violence that they employed remains indigestible for the establishment. Violence is a radical break with any order. A trauma that refuses to be denied or converted and that will only be repeated until the underlying conflict has been settled. According to Andreas Baader, one of the revolutionaries who drew inspiration from Marcuse, breaking a state's monopoly of violence will expose the 'fascist-repressive' character of the legal order. Violence disrupts and unmasks. Let all who want to use it fill their bottles with gasoline and the others let their hands be sniffed at by policemen and security officers.⁶

'Remembrance of the past may give rise to dangerous insights, and the established society seems to be apprehensive of the subversive contents of memory', writes Marcuse in *One Dimensional Man*.⁷ Consequently, a first step in the repositioning of the counterculture is to inventory and analyse revolutionary and visionary works from the past. From that it will soon follow that the counterculture can only be viable if it contains both violent and non-violent elements: no revolution without violence and no alternative society without visionaries. From those elements only naked violence and visionary works that are truly capable of evoking other worlds have proved insensitive to repressive tolerance. The choice then to bring the establishment to its knees is that between a Molotov cocktail and Sun Ra's 'living blazing fire, so vital and alive'.⁸

* From *A Song of Liberty* by William Blake, 1792–1793.

The Buggers are a collective that makes itself known via occasional pamphlets in which it sets out to reposition the revolutionary thought of the twentieth-century avant-garde and counterculture.

Footnotes

1. Herbert Marcuse, "Repressive Tolerance" (1965), in: Robert Paul Wolff, Barrington Moore, jr. and Herbert Marcuse, *A Critique of Pure Tolerance* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1969).
2. Jerry Rubin, *Do it! Scenarios of the Revolution* (New York, Simon & Schuster, 1970).
3. The term 'counterculture' was first used by the American historian Theodore Roszak in *The Making of a Counter Culture* (1968), but is used in a broader, less academic and less pacifist sense here, and also includes the twentieth-century avant-garde and its predecessors.
5. Jean-Jacques Lebel, "Tempo van de oneindige onrust", published as a postface to *Beroofd door de ruimte* by Henri Michaux (Rotterdam, Sea Urchin, 2004).
4. Iggy Pop, "The Endless Sea", released on the album *New Values* (Arista, 1979).
6. This advanced investigation technique was used by the French police and secret service during the disturbances in the banlieues of October 2005.
7. Herbert Marcuse, *One Dimensional Man* (London, Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd, 1964).
8. From Sun Ra's poem "There", printed on the sleeve of the album *The Heliocentric Worlds of Sun Ra II* (ESP, 1966).

Tags

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