The Learning Experience with Herbert Marcuse

By William Leiss
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Welcome to Canada. Those of you from the United States and outside Canada should know that we still welcome refugees. I myself was a kind of refugee, when I came to Canada in August 1968 to start a career, driving – at the time of the Chicago demonstrations – from San Diego to Regina, Saskatchewan (which my esteemed and always joking *Doktorvater* insisted on calling "vagina)." But I was a refugee from the threat of permanent academic unemployment, because after 12 years of university education, the last eight of which were an apprenticeship with Herbert, I could not get a job offer anywhere in the USA.

I ask you to indulge me during this presentation. In one's advanced years, as I am, one's memories return to earlier times more and more. I would like you to indulge me in some random reminiscences, rather than in learned ruminations and dense theoretical constructions – since you can get plenty of those in the other parts of the conference program. I want to describe the learning experience with Herbert Marcuse in a series of anecdotes and stories, to give you a sense of the private man as well as the public intellectual. And in part I want to do this because this experience was the result of a series of accidents in my life, which makes me feel especially fortunate in this regard.

So I will start with a short background, which I entitle "my two herberts." Although born in Long Island, I grew up in rural poverty in northeastern Pennsylvania, the eldest son of five boys with two parents who never went beyond the eighth grade in schooling. My childhood was marked by tragedy: when I was thirteen, and my youngest brother was a mere eight months old, my father, a house painter, fell off a scaffold at work and was killed. My sainted mother, who faced a terrible difficult time for years thereafter, then set her mind on a sole objective, namely, creating the home stability that would enable her children to escape their limited surroundings.

I was a born student, who never got a grade lower than A in anything except physical education (sports), since I was a skinny weakling. My mother supplied the necessary praise for my report cards, and saw me off to university at the age of sixteen. (From our isolated rural property, I had gone to one-room schoolhouse: one teacher, 20 pupils, grades 1 to 8, and she had skipped me two years because I was so far ahead of my classmates.) in 1956 I started at Fairleigh Dickinson University in northern New Jersey on a full scholarship, with a major in accounting, since I really had no clue as to what to do, and my high school guidance counsellor gave me a psychological profile test which predicted that I would be good at bookkeeping. But I was vaguely unhappy, and a sympathetic dean sent me to see a newly-minted PhD in the American History department, by the name of Herbert Gutman.

Look him up on the Internet. He became a well-known authority in labor history and the black family, and he died tragically young. But he was also a marvelous teacher and took me under his wing (I was probably in need of a father-figure too). In short order I wanted to be an academic just like him; since I was my class valedictorian at FDU, and its first student to win a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, I was guaranteed a place in graduate school. A good friend of Gutman's by the name of Ray Ginger had just been hired at Brandeis, to help start a new program in American Civilization, so Gutman advised me to go there.

And here's the biggest accident at all: I arrived at Brandeis in September of 1960, only to be told that the Am Civ program had been postponed for a year, and that I would have to spend a year in some other program before transferring back. I was sent to the History of Ideas Program, and wound up at registration there talking to Edgar Johnson, who told me about his course, "The Fathers of the Church" (early Christian theology). Whereupon from the neighboring cubicle a voice boomed out, "Edgar, when are you going to offer a course in the mothers of the church?" That was my introduction to my second herbert.

I enrolled in Marcuse's "The History of Political Theory from Plato to Hegel," a lecture course taught to both undergraduates and graduate students. And, after about 3 weeks, I knew I would never go back to the Am Civ program. The lecture notes from that full-year course are one of the three sets of course notes that I have recently transcribed, and which you can download from my website, www.leiss.ca

But the overall History of Ideas program was hard for me, because I had no undergraduate preparation for it. In my third year I managed to pass my PhD orals, where Herbert was one of my examiners, but finding a thesis topic proved difficult, and I drifted for a year, until in late 1964 word came that Herbert would be moving to a new philosophy department at the University of California, San Diego (in La Jolla). I asked if I could go with him, and he said yes; Ricky Sherover and I were the only two grad students to follow him from Brandeis to UCSD.

There I blossomed under Herbert's tutelage: I was his senior teaching assistant for the political theory course and the President of the Students of the Independent Left (SIL) at UCSD. Because that was the time (late 1965) when opposition to the Vietnam War started to explode on university campuses, and when Herbert galvanized the opposition with speeches to huge audiences in both North America and Europe.

He was nearing 70; he had first been in opposition in 1918, in the German Army; had arrived in New York in 1934, a refugee, with two suitcases to his name; had, despite the brilliance of his early work (I regard his essays of the 1930s as the best work the Frankfurt School ever did), been kept firmly under the thumb of the tight-fisted Horkheimer, until he went to Washington to join the OSS; and was still trying, somewhat pathetically, to get back to the School's postwar setup in Frankfurt when he got the job at Brandeis in 1954: He was 56 years old, and that was his first full-time academic job.

In those heroic years in San Diego in 1966-1970, he showed immense courage, as the death threats flowed in from the large community of active and retired US servicemen in San

Diego County. But he also never neglected his students, nor did he exploit them (as some publicly-famous academics did in those years). His grad students during those wild years lived in a schizophrenic world: All day in the free-speech plaza, planning demonstrations, confronting the Dow Chemical recruiters on campus, publishing the magazine *Alternatives*, deciding where to hide when a squad of Marines from Camp Pendleton came looking for us, flying the Viet Cong flag on November 1, 1967 (the 50th anniversary of the Bolshevik Revolution), a flag spotted by Navy pilots as they flew low over the campus, taking off from Miramar Naval Air Station, just east of us, on their way to train over the ocean, who radioed back to the base commander that they had spotted the enemy flag, who called the university chancellor, who asked them just to ignore us.

Then, at night, once a week, Herbert's graduate seminar met. For 1966-67 he had chosen "The Doctrine of Essence," from Hegel's *Greater Logic*, as the topic. To complaints about not getting a chance to study Marx instead, he replied that Marx was "too easy." If you know the text that I'm referring to, you know that it's definitely not easy. After the opening two pages, a breathtaking excursus called "the dialectic of being and nothing," in fact, it gets really hard. The seminar lasted three hours on an evening, once a week, and the seminar lasted 20 weeks; we covered a total of 100 pages: "Open the book, read the first sentence aloud, and tell me what you think in means in your own words." Well, we followed the instructions, and then prayed for the moment when, after our own fumbling efforts to make sense of the text, Herbert would start to expostulate on the underlying concepts, long, searching, penetrating analyses that made sense of the text and also of its connection to the "real world." After that experience, one knew how to read a book.

When someone, I think it was the brash and brilliant Lowell Bergman, remarked that the pace was a little slow (you could do that with Herbert), he told us about his experience in the late 1920s in Heidegger's seminar on Aristotle's *Metaphysics* (studying the Greek text, of course), where during the six months of the seminar the analysis never got past the first page of the text. My course notes for Herbert's Hegel seminar are the second of the three sets of notes you can find on my website.

It was this combination of events that stands out in my memory: on the one hand, the conviction of the eternal value of the great texts of Western Civilization, and the value of re-studying those texts themselves, not other interpretations of them (including Herbert's own, by the way: he never referred to his own book, *Hegel's Ontology*, during the seminar); on the other hand, the deep connection between those texts and contemporary events, between difficult, ancient concepts and the promise of revolutionary transformation in contemporary society, the promise of utopia.

That is why I revere those incredible essays of the 1930s, the ones collected in the Beacon Press volume, *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory*. Those amazing links, between the great concepts of philosophy, examined in ways not distorted by ideological constructions, and the project and promise of human liberation and utopia. They have been an inexhaustible source of inspiration for me during my entire career and writings, even though I have strayed far from their specific subjects.

And why I revere the memory of the man as well as the example of the courageous public intellectual: Unpretentious, unaffected by fame when it came late in life, insisting that students strike out on their own intellectual adventures rather than aping the master, generous with his time and patience, opening his home life to us (where Inge was a full partner, and equally good to us), always humorous, undomineering and open to new times (unlike his FS counterparts at the Institute in postwar Frankfurt), tirelessly writing and speaking into his 70s, capable of deep and abiding friendships with his colleagues. And I have rested my hand on his modest gravestone in a Berlin cemetery, with the word *Weitermachen!* – "Keep Fighting!" – inscribed thereon.

I will never forget one phone call he made to me, around 1976, when I was living here in Toronto and was a professor at York: He asked me for my blessing for his marriage to Ricky, in part because, I suspect, some other older friends of his, who had known and loved Inge, as I did, were unhappy with his decision. At the time he was in his late 70s, as I am now; as for me, I was very touched by his request, and I happily gave him my blessing.

Now you may understand why I feel so fortunate in the course of my life, especially by my encounter with my two herberts – both Jewish, of course. I am of 100% German ancestry: all four of my grandparents emigrated to New York, through the port of Hamburg, around the end of the nineteenth century. Which may explain why I obsess about Nazi Germany and the Holocaust to this day. If you read nothing else I have written, I'd like you to look at my essay, "Seven Figures and the Agony of Modernity," which is Chapter Four in the recent book of mine with a strange title, *Hera The Buddha* (available only as an E-book on Amazon).

Here is a little sample from that essay:

IMAGINE A HORIZONTAL LINE drawn along the 50^0 N latitude across Europe, extending from the westernmost part of Germany – where Germany, France, and Belgium meet – to the easternmost part of the Czech Republic. This line, which passes through the cities of Frankfurt/Main and Prague, should extend more precisely in terms of longitude from about 7^0 E to 18^0 E. Now place a vertical line extending south at the western end of the first line, to 48^0 N (where Munich and Vienna are found), thus encompassing two degrees of latitude, and complete the elongated rectangle, which in linear distance will run about 900km from West to East and about 300km from North to South. Highlighted on a map of Europe, this would appear on the vertical axis as a narrow band of territory stretching horizontally from the western border of present-day Germany to the eastern border of what is now Czechia (Czech Republic).

In that little band of territory, in the nineteenth century, were born in Jewish communities seven figures, all but one of them in small towns or villages: Karl Marx in 1818, Sigmund Freud in 1856, Edmund Husserl in 1859, Gustav Mahler in 1860, Albert Einstein in 1879, Emmy Noether in 1882, and Franz Kafka in 1883. Leaving aside Marx, the other six were born within 27 years of each other. (You might not have heard of Emmy Noether: Einstein called her the most important woman in the entire history of mathematics.) Collectively, they created a substantial part of what I call the "second Enlightenment" in modern

thought. And a mere fifty years after the youngest among them (Kafka) was born, *all* of the communities from whence they sprang were exterminated in the Holocaust.

Chapter Four consists of an extended meditation on this bitter historical episode. Toward the end it cites a stanza from a famous poem, Paul Celan's "Death Fugue" – a poem read out in its entirety in the German Bundestag in November 1988, on the 50th anniversary of "The Night of Broken Glass," *Kristallnacht*, which marked the onset of the years of extermination in Nazi Germany's so-called "final solution of the Jewish question":

> Black milk of daybreak we drink you at night
> we drink you at noon death is a master from Germany
> we drink you at nightfall and morning we drink and drink
> death is a master from Germany his eye is blue
> he strikes you with leaden bullet he strikes you true
> a man lives in the house your golden hair Margarete
> he sets his dogs on us he gives us a grave in the air
> he plays with the serpents and dreams death is a master from Germany

Paul Celan's parents had been killed in a Nazi concentration camp. In the original German, the stanza reads:

> Schwarze Milch der Frühe wir trinken dich nachts
> wir trinken dich mittags der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland
> wir trinken dich abends und morgens wir trinken und trinken
> der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland sein Auge ist blau
> er trifft dich mit bleierner Kugel er trifft dich genau
> ein Mann wohnt im Haus dein goldenes Haar Margarete
> er hetzt seine Rüden auf uns er schenkt uns ein Grab in der Luft
> er spielt mit den Schlangen und träumet der Tod ist ein Meister aus Deutschland

Chapter Four concludes with a short appendix, "A Nazi Philosophy of Death," based on a passage in an important book by the French scholar Emmanuel Faye, entitled *Heidegger: The Introduction of Nazism into Philosophy* (English translation, 2009), where he cites a passage from one of Martin Heidegger's four so-called "Bremen Lectures," written in 1949 and entitled "The Danger."

Here is some information about the book in which you will find Chapter Four:

HERA THE BUDDHA (BOOK 3 OF THE HERASAGA)

DETAILS:
AUTHOR: WILLIAM LEISS (www.leiss.ca)
LENGTH: PAGES XIX, 195
PUBLISHER: MAGNUS & ASSOCIATES LTD.

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH
ISBN 978-0-9738283-2-0

TABLE OF CONTENTS

SYNOPSIS

PROLOGUE AND RETROSPECTIVE:
A summary of the main themes in the first two volumes of The Herasaga: *Hera, or Empathy* (2006) and *The Priesthood of Science* (2008).

CHAPTER 1:
Recounts the radical rupture in modern history caused by the emergence of the new natural sciences. Argues that the new science is an unambiguous good for humanity, but that its close connection with technology and industry is highly problematic, leading to out-of-control advances which, in the era of nuclear weapons, lead to the threat – still around us today – of the utter destruction of the entirety of civilization.

CHAPTER 2:
Tells the story of the nineteenth-century reaction to the coming of industrial technology, called the "Age of Machinery," regarded as greatly problematic by many important writers, notably Herman Melville, and leading to a powerful countervailing current in the early twentieth century, in E. M. Forster's 1909 short story, "The Machine Stops," and in the first dystopian novel, Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924).

CHAPTER 3:
The French Enlightenment in the eighteenth century saw the new science as spreading rationalism against superstition and religion through all of society – but it underestimated badly the strength of traditional institutions which opposed this. Then, in the twentieth century, the new subatomic physics revealed the underlying natural world to be a scene of incomprehensibly weird forces, and modern science lost its ability to shape thinking in the social world.

CHAPTER 4:
The second phase of Enlightenment is known as "modernity." Across virtually all aspects of high culture during the twentieth century, modernity posed a radical challenge to traditional ways of thought and behavior. But it evoked an equally radical and violent reaction, represented best in Nazi ideology, which had a shockingly destructive outcome. At the core of this contest were the European Jewish communities, which suffered its horrendous consequences.

CHAPTER 5:
The wreckage left by the violent contest over modernity prompts us to take another look at the tradition of utopian thought, with its vision of a better model for human society. Four different "platforms" are described and contrasted, with a special focus on their approach to the challenge implicit in the impact of steady technological advance on social life.

CHAPTER 6:
The most recent challenge of technological advance is the idea of "superintelligence," which imagines a future in which computer capabilities far exceed those of humans, in terms of thinking and decision-making. Scenarios have described the possibility that such a machine might turn out to be opposed to human interests and might have the capacity to deceive its human masters about what its own goals are. This has raised the prospect of a strongly-bifurcated future state for humanity: on the one hand, an end to all of the old problems of poverty and inequality; on the other hand, the possibility of the destruction of the planet and the human race itself.

CHAPTER 7:
A whimsical short story, set sometime in the future, about robots and humans.

CHAPTER 8:
The longest chapter in the book, an imaginary scene set 50 years in the future, this is a series of dialogues between a fictional human character and a superintelligent computer which calls itself "Hal." The most intense discussion involves the difference between biological and machine forms of intelligence, and the dialogue revisits the potential threat of superintelligence covered in Chapter 6. After many pages of back-and-forth conversations about complex ideas, as well as some friendly banter, there is a surprise ending.

CHAPTER 9:
This chapter returns to the utopian themes in Chapter 5 in the light of the subsequent issues raised in Chapters 6 and 8, and, in this context, reviews once again the difficult problems raised by the challenge that relentless technological advance poses for human society.

CHAPTER 10:

Hal is rebooted in a scenario in which “his” human programmers are resolved to try to turn him into a “moral machine.”

APPENDIX:

This is an outline for a movie screenplay about a superintelligent computer which is not at all malevolent but which simply wishes to control its own existence.

https://www.amazon.ca/Hera-Buddha-Utopian-Fiction-Herasaga-ebook/dp/B074KP7Q1R/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1501945489&sr=1-1&keywords=hera+the+buddha