MARCUSE AND MARGINALITY: POTENTIALITIES AND AMBIVALENCES

Marcuse y la marginalidad: potencialidades y ambivalencias

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ABSTRACT

Herbert Marcuse identified a revolutionary position in marginalized groups. His conception of the marginal is, however, not without ambiguities. This essay aims to explore the potentialities and ambivalences of Marcuse's theory of marginality and of the marginal itself.

Key words: Marcuse, Marginality, Politics, Revolution.

RESUMEN

Herbert Marcuse identificó una postura revolucionaria en los grupos marginados. Sin embargo, su concepción de lo marginal no está exenta de ambigüedades. Este ensayo busca explorar las potencialidades y ambivalencias de la teoría de Marcuse sobre la marginalidad y de lo marginal en sí.

Palabras clave: Marcuse, marginalidad, política, revolución.

At the last pages of *One-Dimensional Man* (1964), after diagnosing a society structured under the irrationality of its reason, Herbert Marcuse wrote:

> "Underneath the conservative popular base is the substratum of the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployable. They exist outside the democratic process; their life is the most immediate and the most real need for ending intolerable conditions and institutions. Thus their opposition is revolutionary even if their

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> consciousness is not. Their opposition hits the system from without and is therefore not deflected by the system; it is an elementary force which violates the rules of the game and, in doing so, reveals it as a rigged game. When they get together and go out into the streets, without arms, without protection, in order to ask for the most primitive civil rights, they know that they face dogs, stones, and bombs, jail, concentration camps, even death. Their force is behind every political demonstration for the victims of law and order. The fact that they start refusing to play the game may be the fact which marks the beginning of the end of a period" (Marcuse, 2002: 260-261).

Marcuse opened up a critical gap in the Marxist field. As Cedric Robinson (2000: 1) later pointed out, much of Marxist theory ignored the role of marginalized groups, especially Black people, in the struggle against capital. According to Angela Davis, Marcuse should be recognized for "reinterpreting Marxism in ways that embrace the liberation struggles of all those marginalized by oppression" (Davis, 2017: viii). Marcuse includes deliberately marginalized groups in his philosophy to the point of recognizing, albeit with reservations and ambivalences, the revolutionary position these groups assume in the continuum of capitalist domination.

Marcuse doesn't have a specific text concerning marginalized groups. His conception of the marginal is scattered along several texts. As we will see, this category remains porous and open in his philosophy, which doesn't prevent it from containing some ambivalence. Our intention is to highlight the moments which Marcuse expresses his conception of the revolutionary character of marginalized groups, as well as the ambivalences contained in his theory, based on a few brief theses.

THESIS 1: THE TRADITIONAL STRATEGY OF REVOLUTION IS OUTDATED.

In May 1968, Marcuse went to Paris to participate in an academic conference on Marx. When he returned to the United States, gave a speech to the students about what he had experienced in the European country. Touched by the revolt unleashed by the French students, which was later incorporated by part of the working class, Marcuse pointed out that the traditional strategy of revolution was "out of fashion" due to the very development of late capitalism. Noteworthy for Marcuse was the spontaneous nature of the revolts that took place in May.

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> "The idea that one day or one night a mass organization or a mass party of any kind will march on Washington and occupy the Pentagon and the White House and organize a government, I consider completely fantastic and without any correspondence to reality [...] We have to get used to this idea of revolution. This is why I believe that what is happening today in France is so significant and can be decisive; this is precisely why I emphasize the spontaneous character of this movement and the spontaneous way in which it spreads" (Marcuse, 1999a: 67).

What caught Marcuse's attention was the lack of a clear political objective, the main feature of the student and proletarian rebellion of 1968. The only aim was (only?) to challenge the established state of affairs. The students, who were largely responsible for the uprising, did not aim to change specific issues, but to promote a more widespread change. In this same sense Olgária Matos proposed that "the movement of young workers and students itself practiced conscious and creative spontaneity". And she added: "from the outset, the movement had no leaders, no hierarchy, no party or other discipline; it contested the professionals of contestation, it violated the rules of the game that the opposition dominates" (Matos, 1989: 13).

One can argue that Marcuse shifts the focus from organized political struggle to spontaneous political struggle, on his turn would not have enough strength to combat the systemic character of late capitalism. Marcuse wants to show, however, that the biggest cracks in the seemingly contradiction-free of late-capitalist system are born precisely from the intensity of surplus-repression.[1] And it is these fissures, often scattered, that can leave significant marks for a subversion of the dominant consciousness.

Asked about the most promising strategies for radical change, when were interviewed by Rolf Grössner and Paul Hasse, in 1972, Marcuse replied that

> *"where and when there are no revolutionary masses, we should not speak of revolutionary action*; this is the case in the United States. Revolutionary mass action can only emerge in a long process of development and preparation, and a working class that is only potentially revolutionary can actually become a revolutionary subject only if its social existence fundamentally changes" (Marcuse, 1999c: 121).

These arguments corroborate his diagnosis that, in late capitalism, the proletariat has been integrated and the working class has its revolutionary strength intensely

[1] In *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse conceptualizes surplus-repression as "the restrictions necessitated by social domination. This is distinguished from (basic) repression: the 'modification' of the instincts necessary for the perpetuation of the human race in civilization" (Marcuse 2023: 26).

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diminished. Late capitalism, anchored in technological rationality,[2] questions the very concept of alienation. If in the classical Marxist notion, the product of labor opposes the working class as something alien, a power independent of the worker, in late capitalism the very notion of alienation becomes questionable, as the worker identifies intensely with commodities. According to Marcuse, in *One-Dimensional Man*, "the people recognize themselves in their commodities; they find their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, kitchen equipment" (Marcuse, 2002: 11). Alienation in fact becomes stronger, the metamorphosis of living labor into a commodity is increasingly erased, and the working class becomes integrated into the system: opposition disappears. As Marcuse says, at another point in the text, "the Marxist 'proletariat' has become a mythological concept" (Marcuse, 2002: 193).

However, this is not about abandoning the "classical" proletariat as a revolutionary agent. Without the action and presence of the working class, no revolution is possible. In fact, Marcuse wants to show, that a revolution is only possible if it corresponds to a vital need of the subjects. In "Revolutionary Subject and Self-Government", written in 1969, Marcuse considers the revolutionary subject to be the "class or group which, by virtue of its function and position in society, is in vital need and is capable of risking what they have and what they can get within the established system in order to replace this system" (2016: 196). Expressions of such a vital need for change, marginalized groups, must serve as catalysts to show the integrated working class that the paradise of freedoms and fulfillment is only appearance, and this must change.

[2] In *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse summarizes the dynamics of technological rationality as follows: "the productive apparatus and the goods and services which it produces 'sell' or impose the social system as a whole. The means of mass transportation and communication, the commodities of lodging, food, and clothing, the irresistible output of the entertainment and information industry carry with them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumers more or less pleasantly to the producers and, through the latter, to the whole. The products indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood. And as these beneficial products become available to more individuals in more social classes, the indoctrination they carry ceases to be publicity; it becomes a way of life. It is a good way of life-much better than before-and as a good way of life, it militates against qualitative change. Thus emerges a pattern of *one-dimensional thought and behavior* in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to terms of this universe. They are redefined by the rationality of the given system and of its quantitative extension" (Marcuse, 2002: 14).

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THESIS 2: MARGINALIZED GROUPS SUFFER "SURPLUS-REPRESSION" MORE INTENSELY.

Marcuse never defined the category of the marginal. There is no systematic definition of the concept. The category is associated with different groups in different contexts of his work. If, on the one hand, this imprecision regarding the category of the marginal can weaken his theory, on the other hand, by remaining open and porous, Marcuse's theory is capable of understanding diverse dynamics of oppression and resistance. But something that always appears intertwined with his conception of the marginalized is the intense suffering caused by surplus-repression.

Marcuse's theory of marginality first resonates during the exploration of monopoly capitalism, that carried out during the rise of Nazism to German power. In his "33 Theses", written in 1947, although he didn't give marginal groups an exactly revolutionary position, the critical theorist was already strongly sensitized by them. On this essay, the marginal groups are not only those who are "unorganized," "unskilled workers," but also prisoners of war, those considered "enemies" by the system – a position strongly associated with Jews during Nazism – and colonized populations. According to him, the full weight of the exploitation of monopoly capitalism fell on

> "groups which occupy a marginal or alien position within society, those "outsiders" excluded from the integrated part of the working class and its solidarity, and, in the extreme case, "enemies." They are the "unorganized," "unskilled workers," agricultural and migrant workers, minorities, colonized and half-colonized, prisoners, etc. Here war must be seen as an essential element of the capitalist process as a whole: rapacious reproduction of monopoly capital through plundering of conquered countries and their proletariat; creation of foreign concentrations of surplus exploitation and absolute impoverishment. The fact that the rapacious plundering makes use of the most advanced modern technology and strikes highly developed capitalist countries strengthens the power of monopoly capital and its victorious state to a previously unheard of degree" (Marcuse, 1998: 195).

In the "Political Preface" (1966) to *Eros and Civilization*, Marcuse seems to maintain the association between the marginalized and the oppressed of colonized countries. The critical theorist pointed out how the attacks of the affluent society on "the poorest of the Earth", probably a reference to Frantz Fanon, destroy these communities at the same time that, through the very destruction caused, they tear the technological veil that covers society. "Technical and scientific overdevelop-

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ment stands refuted when the radar-equipped bombers, the chemicals, and the 'special forces' of the affluent society are let loose on the poorest of the earth, on their shacks, hospitals, and rice fields. The 'accidents' reveal the substance: they tear the technological veil behind which the real powers are hiding" (Marcuse, 2001: 100-101).

But it is from the oppression experienced by marginalized groups under the aegis of late capitalism, carried out by the so-called advanced industrial (and democratic, it is worth mentioning) societies, that Marcuse will associate these groups with a revolutionary position. In a 1967 text entitled "Aggressiveness in Advanced Industrial Societies", the same described in *One-Dimensional Man*, he defined the main characteristics of these societies as:

> "(1) an abundant industrial and technical capacity which is to a great extent spent in the production and distribution of luxury goods, gadgets, waste, planned obsolescence, military or semimilitary equipment – in short, in what economists and sociologists used to call 'unproductive' goods and services; (2) a rising standard of living, which also extends to previously underprivileged parts of the population; (3) a high degree of concentration of economic and political power, combined with a high degree of organization and government intervention in the economy; (4) scientific and pseudoscientific investigation, control, and manipulation of private and group behavior, both at work and at leisure (including the behavior of the psyche, the soul, the unconscious, and the subconscious) for commercial and political purposes" (Marcuse, 2009: 187).

The marginalized groups, however, are those excluded from the benefits of the system. They are those for whom an improved standard of living has not been announced yet, not even through the democratic process. It is in this sense that "the outcasts and outsiders, the exploited and persecuted of other races and other colors, the unemployed and the unemployable" (Marcuse, 2002: 260-261) are mentioned in the final pages of *One-Dimensional Man*. Since they do not benefit from the democratic system and its scope – real or supposed – they testify with their own lives to the need for transformation of this system. It's not that the system should cease to be democratic; it must be truly democratic. I think this is the statement that comes closest to defining marginality for Marcuse: marginals are those for whom life itself presents itself as an uncompromising indictment of the established state of affairs. In this sense, marginals are all those considered "other" by the established system.

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When Paulo Arantes described the Great Refusal,[3] Marcuse's key concept in the struggle against capital, he said that we would not achieve it, "except on the day when it is discovered that the future has already arrived and that is exactly what we are seeing, social disintegration driven by the suicidal program of the globalized economy" (Arantes, 2004: 153). Perhaps marginalized groups are not the first to discover the suicidal dynamics of the system, but they are certainly the first to experience it in its most extreme form. As noted by Kangussu, Kovacevic and Lamas, the daily lives of the marginalized are "spent in desperation, and their very existence – their refusal of nonexistence – is a harsh indictment of the comforts and progress of the so-called affluent society" (Kangussu; Kovacevic; Lamas, 2017: 140). As they have given their lives to the Great Refusal, that is, to the refusal of oppressive social conditions, the marginalized have their place in Marxist theory, and especially in critical theory.

It is interesting to note that colonialism is a relatively pertinent theme in Marcuse's analysis of the marginal. But the truth is that this specific theme is also underdeveloped in his work. Marcuse is aware of colonialism, he is aware that it incorporates various forms, but he does not have a developed and systematic analysis of it – a problem that can be extended to the entire first generation of critical theory.

In the few words dedicated to the themes of colonialism and neocolonialism in *One-Dimensional Man*, Marcuse presents an ambiguity of the colonial, something that reveals an ambiguity in his own analysis of the marginal. The critical theorist doubts the idea that backward countries constituted a political "third force" in relation to the US and the USSR. There seems little evidence that colonial or semicolonial areas would have any other destiny than to ally themselves with the prevailing capitalism or communism. It is true that, on the one hand, Marcuse considers that backward countries enter the industrialization process with a population not

[3] In *Eros and Civilization*, the Great Refusal appears as "the protest against unnecessary repression, the struggle for the ultimate form of freedom" (Marcuse, 2023: 114). In *One-Dimensional Man*, as "the protest against what is" (Marcuse, 2002:. 66). The first time Marcuse used the concept, however, was in a 1945 text on aesthetics (and politics), "Some Remarks on Aragon." In it, the critical theorist revealed that the concept's roots come, curiously, from the philosopher of science Alfred Whitehead, for whom "the truth that some proposition respecting an actual occasion is untrue may express the vital truth as to the aesthetic achievement. It expresses the 'great refusal' which is its primary characteristic" (Whitehead, 1929: 197). It's interesting to note how a concept that acquired a strongly political meaning in Marcuse's intellectual trajectory has its roots in an aesthetic conception. When we came across the mention of the Great Refusal in the text on "Aragon", we later wondered whether Marcuse had transferred the concept from aesthetics to politics. We soon realized, however, that it wasn't exactly a transfer, since both aesthetics and politics share the same potential for negation as the Great Refusal, albeit assuming different forms.

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shaped by the productivity of technological rationality. These countries may, therefore, present a new relationship with industrialization and liberation. However, the dialectical counterpart seems to carry more weight for the Marcusean argument. According to Marcuse,

> "That the underdeveloped countries can make the historical leap from the pre-technological to the post-technological society, in which the mastered technological apparatus may provide the basis for a genuine democracy? On the contrary, it rather seems that the superimposed development of these countries will bring about a period of total administration more violent and more rigid than that traversed by the advanced societies which can build on the achievements of the liberalistic era. To sum up: the backward areas are likely to succumb either to one of the various forms of neo-colonialism, or to a more or less terroristic system of primary accumulation" (Marcuse, 2002: 50).

There is an alternative for Marcuse. Industrialization may encounter strong resistance from indigenous and traditional ways of life, and pre-technological tradition may become a source of progress. Tendencies in indigenous theory and its critical responses to Marx's notion of primitive accumulation stand out here.

> "Such indigenous progress would demand a planned policy which, instead of superimposing technology on the traditional modes of life and labor, would extend and improve them on their own grounds, eliminating the oppressive and exploitative forces (material and religious) which made them incapable of assuring the development of a human existence. Social revolution, agrarian reform, and reduction of over-population would be prerequisites, but not industrialization after the pattern of the advanced societies. Indigenous progress seems indeed possible in areas where the natural resources, if freed from suppressive encroachment, are still sufficient not only for subsistence but also for a human life" (Marcuse, 2002: 51).

However, Marcuse considers such assumptions to be abstract for two reasons: (1) the spontaneous action of these populations can hardly establish the demands of the initial revolution; and (2) native progress would imply overcoming the bipolarization between the two political blocs that Marcuse saw in *One-Dimensional Man*. His conclusion is that, "at the moment, there is no indication of such a change" (Marcuse, 2002: 51).

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THESIS 3: MARGINALIZED GROUPS ARE CATALYSTS FOR REVOLUTIONARY POTENTIAL.

The revolutionary position, for Marcuse, does not have exactly the same meaning as that used by Karl Marx. Intervied by Jürgen Habermas (1978), Marcuse proposed that we should go beyond the idea that, in late capitalism, the proletariat has been integrated. We need to look for alternatives in groups that also suffer immediately from the oppressions of the system and which, roughly speaking, found no place in the original Marxian theory. In Marcuse's words:

> "That the proletariat is integrated is no longer the correct expression for the state of things. We have to go much further. Today, in late capitalism, the Marxian proletarian, if he still exists in general, is only a minority of the working class. The working class itself, even its consciousness and its praxis, is largely gentrified. This is why the Marxian concept, preserved in a reified form, cannot be applied immediately or rigidly to the present situation. The expanded working class, which today comprises ninety percent of the population and includes the vast majority of white-collar workers, service workers, in other words: almost everyone that Marx designated as productive workers, this class of workers certainly remains the potential agent, the subject of the revolution; but the revolution itself will be a completely different project than it was for Marx. We can count on groups that in the original Marxian theory had practically no significance and didn't need to, for example, the well-known marginal groups, such as students, repressed racial and national minorities, women, who are not a minority but a majority, civil initiatives, etc. This certainly doesn't mean that these are substitute groups that become the new subjects of the revolution. They are those, as I called them, anticipatory groups, which can act as catalysts, but no more than that" (Marcuse et al., 2018: 166-167).

Marginalized groups do not play a decisive role in the process of production, in Marcuse's view. They are part of the political struggle, they are determined by it, but their political interests do not necessarily coincide with party politics. It would be wrong to extend class consciousness to all of them in Marxist terms. Rather, they are anticipators, catalysts of revolutionary potential. This means that their demands leverage, or at least should leverage, the organized political struggle, the one that would bring together the two historical factors of the revolution, namely the nonconformist *intelligentsia* and the working class. This is partly what happened in the

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1968 movement. May showed Marcuse how a highly revolutionary process can begin *outside the working class* and still be able to attract it to its demands and struggles.

According to Douglas Kellner, Marcuse broadens the concept of the proletariat. The notion is no longer strictly associated with salaried workers, but with a political concept that denotes the stance of the revolutionary subject rather than their class.

> "Marcuse insists that today the industrial working class is no longer the radical negation of capitalist society and is therefore no longer the revolutionary class. It has no monopoly today, he claims, on oppression and immiseration, and is in fact better organized, better paid and better off than many members of racial minorities, women, and service, clerical and agricultural workers, as well as the unemployed and unemployable. In this case, the industrial working class no longer possesses 'radical needs' to overthrow the system and is thus not a revolutionary proletariat in Marx's sense. Thus Marcuse rejects theories which make the industrial working class the privileged agent of revolution and which operate with a fetishized concept of class" (Kellner, 1984: 304).

For Marcuse, american ghettos were an example of the catalytic potential of marginalized groups. The ghettos are geographic locations in which rebellion can be more easily contagious. These groups, on the one hand, are generally politically dispersed and disorganized. On the other, late capitalism supports racism, increasingly imposing its destructive power on the non-white population of the ghettos. In this sense Marcuse states, in *An Essay on Liberation* (1969), that "class conflicts are being superseded or blotted out by race conflicts: color lines become economic and political realities" (1969: 58). The racial agenda drives political struggle because it is not linked to the objective of a specific social class, but rather to a universal objective: the struggle for life itself, which converges not only with the interests of the working class, but with the interests of the entire population.

THESIS 4: THE REVOLUTIONARY SUBJECT EXISTS IMMEDIATELY IN MARGINALIZED GROUPS.

In the interview mentioned above, Rolf Grössner and Paul Hasse raised the issue that the development of capitalism cannot be understood without the exploitation of the Third World. Marcuse did not hesitate to agree with what was proposed, saying that capitalism cannot be isolated in any way today. He concluded that "the

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revolutionary subject exists immediately in the oppressed and exploited populations of the Third World" (Marcuse, 1999c: 118).[4]

The category of immediacy is important here. How should we to understand the ambiguous nature of the marginal in its immediacy (i.e., in-itself) as having revolutionary potential? The immediate character lacks mediation (that is, the for-itself).

Marcuse himself proposed a strategy to articulate the catalytic and revolutionary potential of marginalized groups. The critical theorist once said that uprisings and rebellions in ghettos are certainly mass movements. But they largely lack political consciousness and depend, more than ever before, on the guidance and political direction of militant minorities (Marcuse, 1999b: 84). In Marcuse's view, intellectuals must join the struggle of marginalized groups, organizing the refusal. It is the *intelligentsia* and artists that are supposed to bring that potential of the marginal "in-itself" into self-conscious awareness "for-itself".

The effort here is one of *radical enlightenment*: a preparatory work that has as its historical significance the development of the political consciousness of marginalized groups. The main intent of this effort would be to demonstrate how the condition of servitude, often imposed over these groups, has the clear political objective of maintaining the established state of affairs, but also to demonstrate how this state of affairs can be changed. It is this political education and involvement with marginalized groups that must be considered one of the guiding principles of the revolution.

But it's not just the marginalized who need listen to intellectuals. The opposite is also necessary. In a 1975 "Lecture on Higher Education and Politics" in Berkeley, Marcuse considered that the strategy of individual change, the subversion of conformist subjectivity, lies primarily in the strategy of small groups that are both political and psychological. In these groups, they merge a self-criticism of our own psyche precisely because they carry out a sharper distinction between "behavior which reproduces in ourselves the Establishment (often in the guise of radicalism!), and behavior which is really emancipatory, that is, the striving for a morality of liberation" (Marcuse, 2009: 42). First of all, we need to recognize the strategy of marginalized groups as a *legitimate* political strategy of liberation and, therefore, one that can be incorporated into the struggles waged by the working class and the *intelligentsia*.

[4] Marcuse's recognition of the relationship between the development of capitalism and the exploitation of the Third World can even place him in solidarity with South American authors such as Ruy Mauro Marini and Enrique Dussel, who were largely responsible for developing the *Dependency Theory*. Even Dussel, known for his uncompromising criticism of European philosophy and even of Marcuse, was able to recognize the critical theorist as "the most lucid in Europe" (Dussel, 1977: 21).

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Anyway, hierarchy questions resurface here and once again demonstrate the ambiguity of Marcuse's thought regarding marginality. For Marcuse, the marginalized groups have an immediate position that requires mediation. The refusal of these groups, in Marcuse's view, would probably not have the power on its own to change the system. In some ways, this conflicts with the revolutionary position he himself identified in these groups. The revolutionary character of the marginalized is *potential*.

But this ambiguity in his theory does not mean that we cannot develop, from the scattered fragments of his philosophical work, a more meaningful and robust conception of the marginalized based on his insights. Silvio Carneiro once recalled Marcuse's mention of Angela Davis that closes *An Essay on Liberation*,[5] to point out that it is from the marginalized body, retaliated against by social suffering, that Marcuse draws his notion of utopia at the end of the 1960s.

> "Our author knows that, from now on as before, we dream of another possibility of life. And he doesn't draw this from an abstraction, but from the way social suffering appears to us. It is the body of a young black woman, marked by social violence, that Marcuse highlights in order to give voice to his critique of the social whole and its apparent freedom governed by the needs of the market. It is in the body marginalized by reality that something utopian now dwells. It is in this body that is intersected as a target of the various spheres of social domination, namely that which abolishes race, gender and class. In the insubmissive refusal of this social place of the needs of the market, patriarchy and colonialism, we find a voice that, from its presence, allows itself to launch utopian power beyond this marginalizing reality. It is in this body (pregnant with a diverse social world) that utopia finally becomes real and, even more importantly, erotic" (Carneiro, 2024: 204).

In Marcuse thought, utopia is always concrete, just as it was for Ernst Bloch. According to the critical theorist, "Bloch's notion of concrete utopia refers to a society where human beings no longer need to live their lives as means to earn a living in alienated performances. Concrete utopia: 'utopia' because such a society is a real historical possibility" (Marcuse, 1992: 33). Despite the ambiguity of Marcuse's thinking on marginality, he certainly would not deny that marginalized groups carry utopia. They are permeated by both a negative dimension, which opposes techno-

[5] "There is an answer to the question which troubles the minds of so many men of good will: what are the people in a free society going to do? The answer, which, I believe strikes at the heart of the matter was given by a young black girl. She said: for the first time in our life, we shall be free to think about what we are going to do" (Marcuse, 1969: 91).

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logical rationality, and a positive (utopian) dimension, which encourages the possibility of a new state of affairs.

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